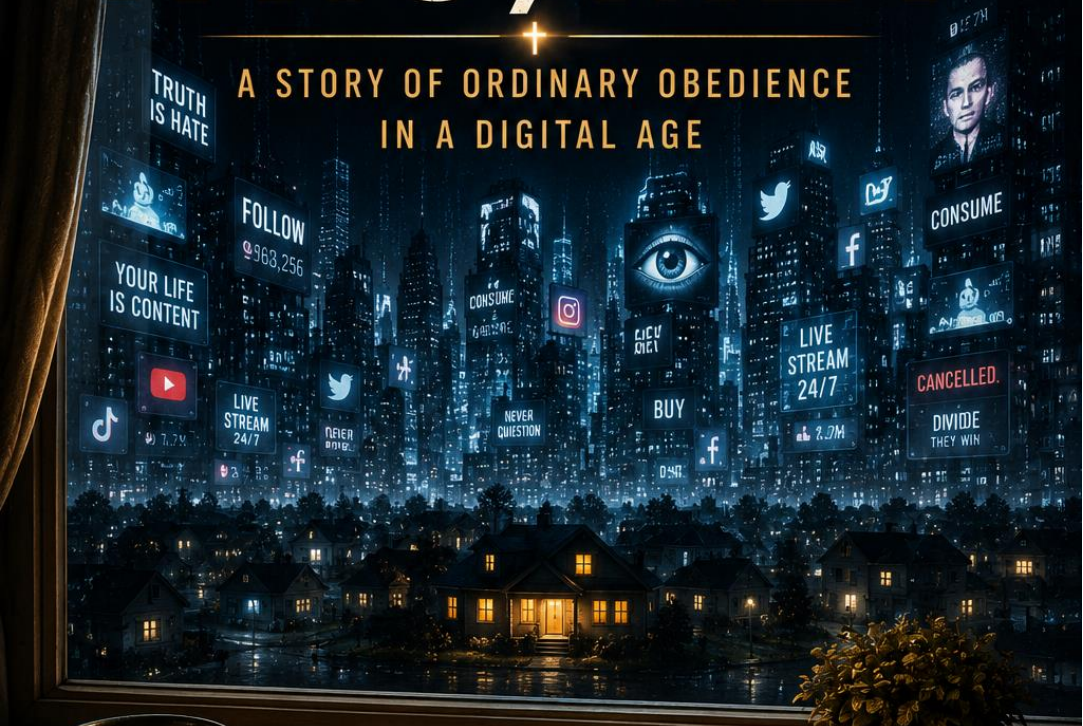


WHO, ME?

A STORY OF ORDINARY OBEDIENCE
IN A DIGITAL AGE



ROOSTER

Who, Me?

A story of ordinary obedience in a digital age

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Who, Me?

A story of ordinary obedience in a digital age

Eli Carter never set out to lead anything.

He was a husband, a father, and an ordinary man trying to stay faithful in a noisy world. But when one simple post about God, repentance, and the condition of the home begins to spread, Eli finds himself pulled into something larger than he expected.

Parents begin praying.

Families begin repenting.

Churches begin opening their doors.

Strangers begin taking one faithful step.

But as the message spreads, Eli must face the same question again and again:

Who, me?

The answer is not found in fame, confidence, or qualification.

It is found in surrender.

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PART ONE
The Question

Chapter One

The Noise

Eli Carter woke up to the sound of his youngest child crying through the baby monitor.

For a few seconds, he did not move. He stared at the ceiling in the dark and listened. The house was quiet except for the soft hum of the furnace, the faint creak of old floorboards, and the small, tired cry coming from the other room.

Then his phone lit up on the nightstand.

Another headline.

Another scandal.

Another war rumor.

Another video of people screaming at each other like the whole country had forgotten how to speak.

Eli closed his eyes.

“Lord,” he whispered, “what is happening to us?”

He reached for the phone, then stopped. He already knew what he would find. More outrage. More lies. More fear. More people pretending darkness was light and light was hatred.

The baby cried again.

Beside him, Grace shifted under the blanket.

“I’ve got him,” Eli said softly.

She opened her eyes halfway. “You sure?”

“Yeah. Go back to sleep.”

Grace nodded, already drifting. She was exhausted too. Maybe more exhausted than he was. She carried the kind of tired that did not show up all at once. It lived in the eyes, the shoulders, the way she sometimes stood still in the kitchen with one hand on the counter, trying to remember what she had walked in there to do.

Eli swung his feet onto the cold floor and sat there for a moment, rubbing his face with both hands. His back hurt. His mind was tired. His spirit felt heavier than it should have at thirty-four years old.

He was not a pastor.

He was not a leader.

He was not some great man of faith.

He was a husband with a mortgage, a father with three children, and a job that barely left enough of him for the people he loved most.

Still, something had been pressing on him for weeks.

Not a voice. Not exactly.

More like a weight.

A burden.

A sense that silence was becoming disobedience.

He walked down the hall and stepped into the nursery. His son stood in the crib with wet cheeks and sleepy eyes, holding the rail like the world had personally betrayed him.

“Come here, buddy,” Eli said.

He lifted the child into his arms and held him close. The boy’s crying slowed almost immediately. Eli rested his cheek against his son’s hair and looked out the window.

The street outside was dark. Porch lights glowed across the neighborhood. Everything looked peaceful from a distance.

That was the part that bothered him most.

From a distance, things still looked normal.

The lawns were cut. The flags still moved in the wind. Families still drove to work, school, church, and ball practice. People still waved from driveways. They still posted birthday pictures and dinner plates and vacation smiles.

But Eli could feel it.

Something was breaking.

It was not only politics. It was not only crime. It was not only corruption or the things powerful people did behind closed doors.

It was deeper than that.

It was the way people lied without shame.

The way children were confused before they were old enough to understand the questions.

The way men seemed either angry or absent.

The way women carried burdens they were never meant to carry alone.

The way churches sometimes looked more afraid of offending people than offending God.

The way everyone had a screen in their hand and almost no peace in their soul.

Eli carried his son to the chair in the corner and sat down. The boy curled against his chest, breathing in small uneven waves.

For a while, Eli just rocked him.

The old wooden chair made a gentle sound against the floor. Back and forth. Back and forth.

On the dresser sat a small lamp shaped like a bear, a stack of diapers, and a children's Bible with a torn corner. One of the older kids had colored on the first page with a blue crayon. Grace had wanted to be upset about it, but Eli had laughed when he saw it.

"They're adding commentary," he had said.

Grace had rolled her eyes, but she smiled.

Now the memory made his chest ache.

He loved this house.

He loved the little shoes by the door, the fingerprints on the windows, the toys under the couch, and the constant evidence that his life did not belong only to him anymore.

That was what made the burden harder.

When he was younger, Eli thought courage meant running toward danger with no fear. Now he knew better. Courage was looking at your wife and children and knowing that every choice had a cost.

His phone lit up again in his hand.

He looked down.

A new notification sat at the top of the screen. He had forgotten to turn them off before bed.

The headline was exactly the kind that made his jaw tighten.

A public official caught in another lie.

Another agency denying what documents clearly showed.

Another group of important people explaining why ordinary people should stop asking questions.

Eli stared at it for a moment, then locked the screen.

His son shifted against him.

"Not now," Eli whispered.

But the thought would not leave.

Not now had become his answer for years.

When he noticed something wrong, he told himself it was not his place.

When he wanted to speak, he told himself someone smarter should say it.

When he saw evil gaining ground, he told himself he had a family to protect.

All of that sounded wise.

Some of it probably was.

But lately, another thought had started pushing back.

What if protecting his family meant speaking?

What if silence was not safety?

What if the danger was not that people like him would say too much?

What if the danger was that people like him would say nothing at all?

Eli looked again at the phone.

A blank post waited on the screen from the night before. He had opened it, typed half a sentence, then deleted everything. He had done that three times in one week.

He did not know why it felt so serious. People posted online all day about everything. They posted complaints about fast food orders, pictures of dogs, arguments about sports, opinions about things they had barely read.

But this felt different.

This was not a rant.

At least, he did not want it to be.

He did not want to add more noise to the noise.

He wanted to tell the truth.

That was the problem.

Truth had become expensive.

He opened the blank post again.

The empty box stared back at him.

“What am I supposed to say?” he whispered.

His son breathed softly against his chest.

Eli typed one sentence.

Then deleted it.

He typed another.

Deleted that too.

For ten minutes, he typed and deleted. Every sentence sounded too harsh, too weak, too dramatic, or too strange. Who was he to say anything? Who would listen? Who would care?

Finally, he wrote:

Maybe the problem is not that God has stopped speaking. Maybe the problem is that we have trained ourselves not to hear Him.

He stared at the words.

His heart beat harder than it should have.

It was only one sentence.
Still, it felt like stepping into the open.
Eli almost deleted it.
Instead, he posted it.
Then he turned the phone face down and held his son tighter.
“Lord,” he whispered, “I don’t know what You’re doing.”
The house stayed quiet.
But somewhere in the dark, something had begun.

By six-thirty, the house was awake.
Not peacefully awake. Not the kind of awake shown in coffee commercials where sunlight pours through clean windows and everyone smiles at pancakes.

The Carter house woke up like a small emergency.

Their oldest, Noah, could not find his shoes even though one was in the hallway and the other was under the dining room table. Their daughter, Lily, cried because her cereal had become “too wet.” The baby, whom everyone still called “the baby” even though his name was Owen and he was nearly two, had removed one sock and thrown it into the laundry basket, which Eli considered impressive aim for his age.

Grace stood at the stove, making eggs while also packing lunches and reminding Noah that brushing his teeth was not optional.

Eli moved through the kitchen with Owen on one hip and a coffee mug in his free hand. He opened the fridge, forgot what he needed, closed it, opened it again, and found the milk.

“You look tired,” Grace said.

“I am tired.”

“You were up with Owen?”

“Yeah.”

“For a while?”

“A little while.”

Grace looked at him more closely. “You okay?”

Eli nodded too quickly. “Yeah.”

She did not believe him. He could tell.

Grace had a way of seeing through his short answers. It was one of the things he loved about her and one of the things that annoyed him when he wanted to hide.

Noah ran into the kitchen holding one shoe. “Dad, I only have one.”

“That’s because you only brought me one.”

“I can’t find the other.”

“It’s under the table.”

Noah looked under the table, then looked back at Eli with surprise.

“How did you know?”

“Dad powers.”

Lily stopped crying long enough to ask, “Do dads have powers?”

“Only before eight in the morning,” Eli said.

Grace smiled at that.

For a moment, the heaviness lifted.

This was the good part of life. The loud part, yes. The messy part. The part where every surface needed wiped and someone always needed socks. But good. Deeply good.

Eli wanted to stay in that goodness and shut the rest of the world out.

But the world did not stay out.

It came through screens. It came through classrooms. It came through laws, entertainment, advertisements, school policies, search results, newsfeeds, and neighbors who no longer knew what they believed but knew exactly what they hated.

After breakfast, Grace took the children to the living room to get them ready. Eli stood alone in the kitchen, rinsing plates.

His phone buzzed on the counter.

He glanced at it.

A notification from the post.

Then another.

Then another.

He dried his hands and picked it up.

At first, he expected the usual. A few likes from people who liked everything. Maybe one comment from his aunt with praying hands.

But there were more responses than he expected.

Some were simple.

Amen.

Needed this.

That hit me hard.

One message came from a man Eli had not spoken to since high school.

Brother, I don't know why, but I read this sitting in my truck before work and started crying. I think I've been running from God for a long time.

Eli read it twice.

Then a third time.

He sat down slowly at the kitchen table.

The message was not dramatic. It was not long. But it hit him harder than the headline had.

A man sitting in his truck before work.

Crying.

Thinking about God.

Because of one sentence Eli had almost deleted.

Grace stepped into the kitchen holding Lily's backpack. "What is it?"

Eli handed her the phone.

She read the message quietly.

Her expression changed, but she did not speak right away.

Finally, she said, "That matters."

Eli took the phone back. "It was just a post."

"Maybe to you."

He looked down at the table.

Grace sat across from him. "Eli."

He looked up.

"I know something has been bothering you," she said.

He let out a slow breath. "I don't know how to explain it."

"Try."

He leaned back in the chair and rubbed his hands together. "I feel like everything is getting worse, but everyone keeps pretending it's normal. I feel like people are asleep. Not just politically. Spiritually. Morally. Like they've been trained to laugh at what should make them grieve."

Grace listened without interrupting.

"And I keep thinking someone needs to say something," Eli continued. "Someone needs to tell the truth without trying to sell something, win something, or build a name off it. But then I think, who am I to talk? I'm not a pastor. I'm not educated enough. I'm not clean enough. I get angry. I doubt. I lose patience with the kids. Half the time I can barely keep up with my own responsibilities."

Grace's face softened.

“That sounds like Moses,” she said.

Eli almost laughed. “I am definitely not Moses.”

“I didn’t say you were. I said it sounds like him.”

“That makes me feel worse.”

“Good,” she said. “Maybe it should.”

He looked at her, confused.

Grace folded her hands on the table. “Maybe being scared is not the same thing as being disobedient. But using fear as an excuse probably is.”

That one landed.

Eli looked away.

From the living room, Noah shouted, “Mom! Owen has my toothbrush!”

Grace closed her eyes for half a second. “Of course he does.”

She stood, then looked back at Eli.

“I’m not telling you to go start a movement,” she said. “I’m not telling you to chase attention. I don’t want that for you. I don’t want that for us.”

“I don’t either.”

“I know. But if God is telling you to speak, then speak. Just make sure you stay humble. And make sure your family does not become the sacrifice on the altar of your mission.”

Eli nodded.

That warning had weight because it was true.

Grace left the kitchen, and Eli sat alone again.

He looked down at the message from his old classmate.

Then he looked at his own post.

One sentence.

That was all.

Still, something inside him felt different.

Not proud.

Not excited.

More like responsible.

The rest of the morning moved fast.

Eli dropped Noah off at school, helped Grace get Lily and Owen settled, then drove to work with coffee that had gone lukewarm in the cupholder.

The sky was gray. The kind of gray that made the whole town look tired.

He passed the gas station, the old hardware store, the church with the white steeple, and the empty lot where a grocery store used to be. A faded sign still promised something new was coming.

It had been there for three years.

At a red light, Eli glanced at the cars around him.

Every driver was looking down.

Phones in laps.

Phones near steering wheels.

Phones glowing in the dim morning.

It bothered him more than usual.

Not because he was better. He had done the same thing too many times to count.

That was the point.

Everyone was connected, and everyone looked alone.

His phone buzzed again.

He ignored it.

Then it buzzed twice more.

At work, Eli tried to focus. He answered emails, returned calls, fixed a mistake in a report, and sat through a meeting where three people used the word “alignment” so many times he stopped listening.

But the burden stayed.

By lunch, the post had been shared more than a dozen times. That was not much by internet standards. It was nothing compared to the loud voices who lived online and fed on attention.

But to Eli, it felt impossible.

People he did not know were commenting.

Some were sincere.

Some were angry.

One person wrote, Keep your religion to yourself.

Another wrote, This is why Christians are dangerous.

Eli stared at that one.

Dangerous.

For saying people had trained themselves not to hear God.

He felt heat rise in his chest. His fingers moved toward the keyboard.

A dozen replies came to mind.

Sharp ones.

True ones, maybe.

But not useful ones.

He could win the argument and still lose the spirit.

Eli set the phone down and looked out the breakroom window.

A few men from another department sat at the next table talking about weekend plans. Someone laughed loudly. A vending machine hummed against the wall. A television in the corner played the news with the sound off, showing another panel of experts arguing over words no one at the table could hear.

Eli bowed his head.

Not dramatically. Not enough for anyone to notice.

Just slightly.

“Lord, keep me from making this about me.”

The words surprised him.

He had not planned to pray them.

But once he did, he knew they were the right ones.

Keep me from making this about me.

That was the danger.

Not criticism.

Not mockery.

Not even being misunderstood.

The real danger was pride wearing the clothes of obedience.

Eli knew himself well enough to fear that.

He knew how easy it was to enjoy being right. He knew how anger could feel like courage. He knew how applause could sound like confirmation from God when it was really just people feeding the ego.

He picked up his phone again.

Instead of replying to the angry comment, he wrote a new post.

Truth without love becomes a weapon. Love without truth becomes a lie. We need both.

This time he did not hesitate as long.

He posted it, put the phone away, and went back to work.

That evening, Eli came home to the smell of spaghetti sauce and garlic bread.

Owen ran to him first, shouting something that sounded like “Dada” but included too many syllables. Lily followed close behind, wearing a princess dress over pajamas. Noah sat at the table doing

homework with the same expression Eli probably had during the work meeting.

Grace stood at the stove stirring sauce.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

“How was work?”

“Fine.”

“That means bad or boring.”

“Both.”

She smiled.

Eli kissed her on the cheek, then washed his hands at the sink.

At dinner, Noah talked about a boy at school who claimed he could run faster than a car. Lily said she wanted to be a veterinarian, a ballerina, and a firefighter. Owen put noodles in his hair.

For twenty minutes, Eli forgot about the internet.

He forgot about the comments.

He forgot about the burden.

He was just Dad.

After dinner, they cleaned the kitchen, gave baths, found pajamas, read stories, and prayed with the kids. Noah prayed for his spelling test. Lily prayed for a cat they did not own. Owen clapped at the end because he thought every prayer deserved applause.

Later, when the house was finally quiet, Eli and Grace sat in the living room.

The only light came from a lamp in the corner.

Grace curled under a blanket on the couch. Eli sat beside her, phone in hand, not looking at it.

“You’re thinking loud,” she said.

He looked over. “What?”

“You’re thinking loud.”

“That a real thing?”

“With you? Yes.”

He leaned back and sighed.

Grace waited.

He unlocked the phone and showed her the second post.

She read it.

“This is good,” she said.

“Some people are already mad.”

“People get mad at weather reports.”

“That’s true.”

She handed the phone back. “What are you afraid of?”

Eli looked at the screen.

That question had too many answers.

“I’m afraid of being wrong,” he said. “I’m afraid of becoming arrogant. I’m afraid of saying something that hurts you or the kids. I’m afraid people will think I’m crazy.”

Grace tilted her head. “Do you think you’re crazy?”

“Some days.”

“That makes two of us.”

He laughed quietly.

Then he grew serious again.

“I’m afraid God might actually be asking something of me.”

Grace did not answer right away.

Outside, wind moved against the windows.

Finally, she said, “He is always asking something of us.”

Eli nodded.

“I know.”

“No,” she said gently. “I mean that is normal. Following Jesus was never supposed to be a private hobby.”

The words settled between them.

Eli looked around the living room. Toys in the corner. Folded laundry on the chair. A Bible on the side table. A family photo on the wall from two summers earlier, when Owen was still small enough to sleep through anything and Lily had refused to smile unless they let her hold a stuffed rabbit.

This was his life.

Not a stage.

Not a platform.

Not a brand.

A life.

And if God wanted to use it, Eli knew he would have to offer the real thing, not some polished version created for strangers.

“I don’t know where to start,” he said.

Grace reached for his hand. “You already did.”

Eli could not sleep that night.

Grace fell asleep quickly, but he stayed awake, staring into the dark.

At 11:47, he got up.

He moved quietly down the hall, careful to avoid the board that creaked outside Lily's room. In the kitchen, he poured a glass of water and stood by the sink.

The neighborhood was still.

He could see his reflection in the window.

He looked older than he felt.

Or maybe he felt older than he was.

He opened his Bible on the kitchen table. He did not have a plan. He just opened it.

His eyes fell on a passage he had underlined years before.

Here am I. Send me.

Eli stared at the words.

He had always liked that verse. It sounded brave when someone else said it. It sounded clean and noble from a pulpit.

At midnight, in a quiet kitchen, with bills on the counter and children asleep down the hall, it felt different.

It felt costly.

He sat down.

"Lord," he said quietly, "I don't know how to do this."

The furnace kicked on.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say. I don't know who is supposed to hear it. I don't know if this is going to matter."

He swallowed.

"And I don't want to become the kind of man who chases attention and calls it ministry."

His voice broke slightly at that.

He was not sure why.

Maybe because he had seen it happen too many times. Men who started with conviction and ended with performance. Men who spoke about truth but stopped telling it when it cost them followers. Men who claimed to fight darkness while secretly feeding on it.

Eli did not trust himself enough to assume he was immune.

He lowered his head.

"If this is You, keep me obedient. If it is not, stop me."

Silence.

Not empty silence.

Still silence.

The kind that made him aware of his own breathing.

Then a thought came to him. Plain and simple.

Start with repentance.

Eli opened his eyes.

Repentance.

That was not the word he wanted.

He wanted courage. Clarity. Strategy. Maybe even confirmation.

But repentance was what came.

He sat with it.

If there was going to be any kind of awakening, it could not begin with Eli pointing at everyone else. Not really. Not honestly.

It had to begin with him.

He pulled his notebook from the counter drawer. It was one of three notebooks in the house that had been started and abandoned after twenty pages. He found a blank page and wrote at the top:

Things I need to repent of.

He stared at the line.

Then he started writing.

Pride.

Anger.

Cowardice.

Wasting time.

Using truth as an excuse to be harsh.

Ignoring Grace when she needed help.

Being present in the room but absent in my mind.

Wanting God to fix the world without asking Him to fix me.

The list grew longer than he expected.

By the end, Eli was crying.

Not loudly.

Not in a way anyone else would hear.

But honestly.

He had asked God what was happening to the world.

God had answered by showing Eli what was happening in him.

That did not make the world less broken.

It made the burden cleaner.

Eli tore the page from the notebook, folded it once, and placed it inside his Bible.

Then he opened a blank post.

This time, his hands did not shake.

He wrote:

Awakening does not begin when we finally see what is wrong with everyone else. It begins when we let God show us what is wrong in us.

He paused.

Read it once.

Then posted it.

Within seconds, the screen showed one like.

Then another.

Then a comment.

Then a private message.

Eli did not open them.

Not yet.

He turned the phone face down.

He bowed his head over the kitchen table.

“Who, me?” he whispered.

The words sounded almost foolish in the quiet room.

But for the first time, he was not asking them as an excuse.

He was asking them as a surrender.

Outside, the first thin edge of morning waited beyond the dark.

Inside, Eli Carter sat alone at the kitchen table, unaware that the smallest spark is often the one God chooses to breathe on first.

Chapter Two

Not Someone Else's Fight

Eli woke up the next morning with his face pressed against his forearm on the kitchen table.

For a moment, he did not know where he was.

The house was dim. The furnace hummed. His Bible lay open in front of him, and his notebook sat beside it with the pen still resting across the page. A thin line of daylight pushed through the curtains over the sink.

His neck hurt.

His coffee mug from the night before sat cold and untouched near his elbow.

He lifted his head slowly and blinked at the clock on the microwave. 5:42.

He had slept at the table for almost four hours.

Eli rubbed both hands over his face and sat back in the chair. His body felt heavy, but his mind was already awake. That was the problem. His mind woke up before the rest of him and immediately started carrying things.

The posts.

The comments.

The private messages.

The prayer.

The list of things he had written down and tucked inside his Bible.

He glanced at the folded paper sticking out between the pages and felt a pull in his chest. Part of him wanted to open it again. Another part wanted to pretend it was not there.

He reached for his phone.

Then stopped.

“No,” he said quietly.

The word sounded small in the kitchen.

He pushed the phone away.

Not yet.

He needed a few minutes before the world came pouring back in.

Eli stood, stretched his back, and walked to the sink. Outside, the neighborhood was still covered in early morning gray. A few porch lights remained on. A dog barked somewhere down the street. One truck rolled by slowly, headlights cutting across the front window.

Normal.

Everything looked normal again.

That bothered him.

He wanted the outside world to look as unsettled as he felt. He wanted the sky to show some sign that something important had happened inside him the night before. But the street looked the same. The houses looked the same. The trash cans at the curb looked the same.

Maybe nothing had happened.

Maybe he had gotten too emotional.

Maybe he was tired, stressed, and spending too much time online.

That explanation would be easier.

He could delete the posts. Ignore the messages. Tell Grace he had overreacted. Go back to work. Pay bills. Raise kids. Mow the yard. Go to church. Keep his thoughts to himself.

A good life.

A quiet life.

A safe life.

Eli filled a glass of water and drank half of it in one breath.

Then his phone buzzed.

He looked at it.

A new message appeared on the screen.

He knew he should leave it alone.

He picked it up anyway.

The message was from a woman he did not know.

You don't know me. Someone shared your post last night. I have not been to church in eleven years. I read what you wrote about awakening starting with us, and I sat on my bathroom floor crying. I think God has been trying to get my attention for a long time. Please pray for me.

Eli sat down.

He read the message again.

Then he locked the screen and placed the phone flat on the table.

The quiet life suddenly felt less simple.

A stranger on a bathroom floor.

A man crying in his truck.

A few sentences Eli had almost never posted.

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table.

“This is not my fight,” he whispered.

He meant it.

He had a family. A job. Responsibilities. He was not trained for this. He did not know how to counsel strangers. He did not know how to handle people’s pain. He did not know what to say when someone said God was waking them up.

A pastor should answer that message.

A ministry should answer it.

Someone with a degree, a title, and office hours should answer it.

Not him.

Eli opened the message again and stared at the blinking reply box.

For five minutes, he wrote nothing.

Then he typed:

I’m praying for you right now. Start by talking to God honestly. You do not need polished words. Tell Him the truth. Open the Gospel of John and read one chapter today. Then find a Bible-believing church near you and go this Sunday, even if you feel awkward. God is not finished with you.

He read it twice.

It sounded too simple.

Maybe too direct.

He sent it before he could talk himself out of it.

Then he bowed his head.

“Lord, help her.”

That was all he had.

No speech.

No strategy.

Just four words at a kitchen table.

From down the hall, Owen cried.

The day had begun.

By seven, the house was moving again.

Noah could not find his homework folder. Lily decided she hated the shirt she had loved the night before. Owen wanted a banana, then rejected the banana after Eli peeled it.

Grace moved through the morning with controlled urgency. She had her hair pulled back, one sleeve pushed up higher than the other, and the look of a woman holding the whole operation together by force of will.

Eli helped where he could, but his mind kept drifting.

He burned the toast.

Grace noticed.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

She looked at the blackened bread in the trash. “Convincing.”

He leaned against the counter. “I got another message this morning.”

Grace paused. “From the post?”

He nodded.

“What did it say?”

“A woman said she hadn’t been to church in eleven years. Said she cried on her bathroom floor.”

Grace’s expression softened.

“What did you tell her?”

“To pray honestly, read John, and go to church.”

“That was good.”

“It felt small.”

“Small is not bad.”

Eli looked toward the living room where the kids were arguing over whether a stuffed dinosaur belonged on the couch.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he said.

Grace walked over and lowered her voice. “You do not have to know everything. You just have to be faithful with what is in front of you.”

“I know, but what if it becomes too much?”

“Then we talk about it. We set boundaries. You are not responsible for every person who sends you a message.”

That sounded right.

It also sounded impossible.

Eli had always struggled to let burdens stay where they belonged. If someone handed him a problem, he carried it like it had his name engraved on it.

Grace touched his arm.

“Listen to me,” she said. “Do not confuse being used by God with trying to be God.”

Eli looked at her.

That one went deep.

She kissed him quickly on the cheek, then turned back toward the living room.

“Noah, your folder is under the couch!”

Noah shouted back, “Why is it under the couch?”

Grace answered without missing a beat. “Because you put it there!”

Eli almost smiled.

But her words stayed with him.

Do not confuse being used by God with trying to be God.

He needed to remember that.

On the drive to work, Eli decided he was not going to post anything that day.

That seemed reasonable.

Healthy, even.

He had already said enough. Maybe too much. A person did not need to turn every thought into a public statement. Besides, the internet was built to reward constant noise, and Eli did not want to become part of that machine.

He would work.

He would come home.

He would be present with his family.

He would let things settle.

At the first red light, he reached for the radio, then stopped when the morning show hosts began laughing about a story that did not seem funny to him at all. He turned it off.

Silence filled the truck.

Not peaceful silence.

The kind that made thoughts louder.

Eli passed the elementary school. Parents lined up in cars. Children climbed out with backpacks nearly as big as they were. A crossing guard in a yellow vest waved traffic through.

He saw a little boy holding his mother’s hand.

For some reason, it hit him.

Parents.

That was the word that came to him.

Not activists.

Not influencers.

Not experts.

Parents.

Where were they?

Not physically. Plenty of them were around. They went to work. They paid for things. They showed up at games and took pictures at birthdays. They cooked meals, washed clothes, checked homework, fixed broken doors, wiped tears, and carried sleeping children from cars to beds.

But spiritually?

Where were the parents who prayed out loud in their homes?

Where were the mothers and fathers who opened Scripture with their children?

Where were the parents who guarded the gates of their households?

Where were the parents who knew the enemy was not only after governments and churches, but after dinner tables, bedrooms, imaginations, and the souls of children?

Eli tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

“No,” he said.

He knew where that thought was going.

He was not posting today.

Not my fight.

He drove the rest of the way with his jaw set, like silence could be forced by willpower.

Work did not help.

His inbox was full before he sat down. A client was upset over a mistake that was not Eli’s fault but still became his problem. Two coworkers argued over a deadline. His supervisor used a calm voice that somehow made everything worse.

By ten-thirty, Eli had already reheated his coffee twice.

He kept his phone face down beside the keyboard.

Every time it buzzed, he ignored it.

Mostly.

At lunch, he took his sandwich outside instead of sitting in the breakroom. The air was cool, and the wind moved dead leaves along the edge of the parking lot.

He sat in his truck and finally checked the notifications.

More comments.

More messages.

More shares.

Some were kind.

Some were not.

One comment stood out.

Easy for you to talk about God. Where was God when my dad left?
Where was God when my mom drank herself to death? Where was God
when I begged Him to help me and nothing changed?

Eli stared at the words.

He had no quick answer for that.

Anything short would sound cheap.

Anything long might sound like a sermon.

He read it again and felt the anger drain out of him.

This was not an argument.

It was a wound.

That changed everything.

Eli set the sandwich down on the wrapper.

For several minutes, he did nothing.

Then he typed carefully.

I am sorry. I do not know your pain, and I will not pretend to
explain it away with a sentence. I do believe God was there, but I also
understand why that may be hard to believe. I am praying for you today.
Not as a slogan. Really.

He hesitated, then added:

And I am sorry for what you went through. Children are supposed
to be able to count on the people God gave them.

He sent it.

Then he sat there in the truck with his hands resting on his knees.

Children are supposed to be able to count on the people God gave
them.

The sentence echoed back at him.

His own father had stayed physically but had been distant in ways
Eli still had trouble naming. He had worked hard, paid bills, and taught
Eli practical things. How to change oil. How to split wood. How to
check a breaker box.

But prayer?

Affection?

Repentance?

Spiritual leadership?

Those things had been mostly absent.

Eli did not hate his father. He loved him. But love did not erase absence.

His mother had carried her own burdens too. Looking back, Eli could see that more clearly now. She had kept the house moving, remembered birthdays, handled appointments, packed lunches, and tried to keep peace when money was tight and tempers were short.

But even with both parents in the house, Eli had still grown up with quiet places in his heart that no one had known how to reach.

Maybe that was why the burden around parenting felt so sharp.

He did not want his children to wonder where he and Grace had been while the world trained them.

He did not want them to say, “Mom and Dad were there, but they were always looking at their phones.”

He did not want them to remember parents who knew every headline, every bill, every practice schedule, and every password, but did not know the condition of their hearts.

Eli picked up his sandwich, took one bite, and realized he was no longer hungry.

His phone buzzed again.

A reply came from the wounded commenter.

Thank you for not giving me a fake answer.

Eli leaned his head back against the seat.

Not my fight.

The words were getting harder to believe.

That evening, Eli stopped at the grocery store on the way home.

Grace had texted him a short list.

Milk.

Bread.

Eggs.

Laundry detergent.

Apples if they looked decent.

He moved through the aisles with the tired focus of a man trying not to forget anything. The store lights were too bright. Music played quietly overhead. A child cried near the cereal aisle. Somewhere near produce, an employee pushed a cart with one squeaky wheel.

Eli reached for a gallon of milk and heard two people talking at the end of the aisle.

He did not mean to listen.

But one sentence caught him.

“My son barely talks to me anymore unless he wants money.”

The other person gave a short laugh. “That’s kids now. Screens raised them.”

Eli stood still, hand on the milk jug.

Screens raised them.

The words bothered him.

Not because they were completely false.

Because they were partly true.

He placed the milk in the cart and walked away, but the sentence followed him.

Screens raised them.

At checkout, the cashier looked no older than nineteen. She scanned items with one hand and glanced at her phone between customers. Her face looked tired in a way that seemed too old for her age.

“How’s your night going?” Eli asked.

She looked surprised that he had asked.

“It’s going,” she said.

“That kind of night?”

She shrugged. “That kind of year.”

Eli nodded. “I’m sorry.”

She looked at him for a second, then back at the groceries.

“My mom says I need to pray more,” she said, almost like she had not meant to say it out loud.

Eli did not know what to do with that.

So he answered honestly.

“Your mom might be right.”

The cashier smiled faintly.

“Yeah,” she said. “Maybe.”

Eli paid, took the bags, and walked out into the parking lot.

The sky had gone dark.

Cold air moved across his face.

He loaded the groceries into the truck and stood there for a moment with both hands on the cart.

A stranger in a comment section.

A woman on a bathroom floor.

A cashier under fluorescent lights.
A parent in a grocery aisle talking about a child.
How many people were breaking quietly?
How many looked fine from a distance?
How many children were being raised by screens because their
parents were tired, distracted, deceived, or simply overwhelmed?
How many parents wanted to do better but did not know where to
start?
How many were waiting for someone to say something true?
Eli pushed the cart into the return and got in the truck.
He did not start it right away.
Instead, he took out his phone and opened a blank post.
Then he remembered his promise to himself.
No posting today. He closed it. Started the truck. Drove home.

Grace knew something was wrong as soon as he walked in.
Not wrong like bad news.
Wrong like Eli had brought the weight of the world in with the
groceries.
She stood at the counter unpacking bags while he leaned against the
fridge.
“You want to tell me now or after you pretend nothing is wrong for
an hour?” she asked.
Eli looked at her.
“After sounds tempting.”
She took the eggs from the bag. “Denied.”
He let out a tired laugh.
The kids were in the living room watching a cartoon. Owen sat on
the floor with a blanket over his head, laughing at nothing.
Eli lowered his voice.
“I think I’m supposed to say something about parents.”
Grace paused.
“What about them?”
“I don’t know yet. That we need to wake up. That we cannot let
screens and strangers disciple our children. That keeping them fed,
clothed, educated, and safe matters, but it is not the whole assignment.”
Grace set the eggs in the fridge.
“That sounds true.”
“It also sounds like the kind of thing that makes people mad.”

“Most true things do now.”

Eli looked toward the living room.

“I don’t want to become one of those people who speaks boldly online and then fails quietly at home.”

Grace leaned against the counter across from him.

“Then do not.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

He waited.

She continued, “If you are going to talk about parents waking up, then wake up here first. Start with our children. Start with bedtime. Start with prayer. Start with putting your phone down when they are talking to you.”

That stung.

Not because it was harsh.

Because it was accurate.

Eli looked down.

“You’re right.”

“I know.”

He looked back up.

She smiled slightly. “Sorry. That was too easy.”

He shook his head, but he smiled too.

Grace stepped closer.

“Eli, I believe God may be stirring something in you. I really do. But I also believe the enemy would love to twist it. If he cannot keep you silent, he may try to make you loud in public and absent at home.”

Eli absorbed that.

Loud in public and absent at home.

That was exactly what he feared.

“What do I do?”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Be Dad.”

So he did.

He put his phone in the bedroom.

Not face down on the table.

Not in his pocket.

In the bedroom.

Then he sat on the living room floor and let Owen climb on his back like a mountain. He helped Lily build a tower out of blocks and pretended not to notice when she cheated during a matching game. He listened to Noah explain, in great detail, why he believed their family needed a dog.

“What kind of dog?” Eli asked.

“A big one.”

“How big?”

“Like a wolf but nice.”

“That seems practical.”

Noah nodded seriously. “And it could protect us.”

“From what?”

“Bad guys. And raccoons.”

Eli looked at Grace. “Hard to argue with that.”

Grace laughed from the couch.

Later, after baths and pajamas, Eli gathered the kids in Noah’s room.

Usually bedtime prayers were quick. Too quick. A few lines. A kiss on the forehead. Lights out. Survival.

Tonight, Eli sat on the edge of the bed and opened the children’s Bible.

Noah groaned. “Is this going to be long?”

“No.”

“How long?”

“Longer if you keep asking.”

Lily climbed under her blanket. Owen sat in Grace’s lap holding a stuffed bear by one leg.

Eli turned to the story of David and Goliath.

He had read it many times before, but tonight he noticed something different.

David was young.

Overlooked.

Unqualified by every human measurement.

He was not the obvious choice.

Eli looked at his children and read slowly.

When he finished, Noah asked, “Was David scared?”

Eli closed the Bible.

“I think he probably was.”

“But he still fought?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Eli thought for a moment.

“Because he trusted God more than he trusted his fear.”

Noah seemed to consider that.

Lily asked, “Did the giant go to jail?”

Grace covered a smile.

“Not exactly,” Eli said.

Owen clapped, which he did whenever he sensed a story was over.

Then Eli looked at Grace.

“You want to pray with us?”

She nodded.

The kids bowed their heads.

This time, Eli did not rush.

“Lord, thank You for this family. Help us be the parents our children need. Help us teach them the truth. Help us listen when You speak. Give our children courage. Give them wisdom. Protect their hearts. And let our home belong to You.”

When he finished, Grace prayed too.

“Lord, help this house be full of Your peace. Help us love each other well. Help us repent quickly when we are wrong. Help our children know You are not just someone we talk about, but Someone we trust and follow.”

The room was quiet.

When Eli opened his eyes, Grace was looking at him.

Not dramatically.

Just looking.

But he could tell she understood.

This was where it had to begin.

Not online.

Not in a post.

Not with strangers.

Here.

With these children.

In this room.

Under this roof.

After the kids were asleep, Eli went back to the bedroom and picked up his phone.

He had dozens of notifications.

He ignored most of them.

Then he opened a blank post.

The words were already there.

He typed:

Parents, wake up. Your children are being disciplined by something. If it is not you, it will be the screen, the culture, the crowd, or the enemy. Providing is honorable. Keeping a house running matters. Working hard matters. But none of that replaces the spiritual assignment God has placed under your roof. Pray with your children. Read Scripture with them. Ask real questions. Put the phone down. Stay present. Lead with truth. Lead with love. Repent when you fail. Then get back up and lead again.

He stared at it.

It was stronger than his other posts.

More direct.

More likely to offend.

He looked toward the hallway where his children slept.

Then he thought of the parent in the grocery aisle.

Screens raised them.

He thought of the wounded commenter.

Where was God when my dad left? Where was God when my mom drank herself to death?

He thought of himself sitting at a kitchen table, writing a list of things he needed to repent of.

Then he posted it.

For a few seconds, nothing happened.

Then one like appeared.

Then a comment.

Then another.

Then a share.

Eli placed the phone on the nightstand and walked into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

When he came back, Grace was sitting up in bed holding his phone.

He froze.

“That bad?” he asked.

She looked up.

Her face was unreadable.

Then she handed it to him.

The post had already been shared forty-three times.
Eli stared at the number.
“That can’t be right,” he said.
Grace said nothing.
Another share appeared.
Then another.
A private message came in.
Then another.
Then another.
Eli sat slowly on the edge of the bed.
The room felt smaller.
His first instinct was fear.
His second was pride.
That scared him more.
He locked the phone and set it down.
Grace reached for his hand.
“What are you thinking?” she asked.
Eli swallowed.
“I’m thinking I said this was not my fight.”
Grace waited.
He looked toward the hallway again.
A night-light glowed faintly from Lily’s room.
“No,” he said quietly. “That’s not true.”
Grace squeezed his hand.
Eli looked down at the floor.
“It is my fight.”
The words did not feel heroic.
They felt heavy.
But they were true.
Not because Eli had all the answers.
Not because he was stronger than anyone else.
Not because he had been chosen to stand above other people and tell them what was wrong.
It was his fight because three children slept under his roof.
It was his fight because Grace was not meant to carry the burden alone.
It was his fight because every parent had been handed a sacred responsibility in a time when the world was fighting hard for the hearts of children.

And truth, Eli was learning, did not always arrive like thunder.

Sometimes it arrived in a child's bedroom.

Sometimes it came through a stranger's pain.

Sometimes it came in a grocery store aisle.

And sometimes it came through the quiet realization that the battle you kept calling someone else's responsibility had been waiting at your own front door the whole time.

Chapter Three

The First Post

Eli did not sleep much.

Every time he started to drift off, his phone buzzed again on the nightstand.

At first, he tried to ignore it.

Then he turned it face down.

Then he put it on silent.

Then he moved it to the dresser across the room.

None of that helped.

The sound was gone, but the knowledge remained.

People were reading what he had written.

People were sharing it.

People were answering it.

That should not have mattered as much as it did, but it did.

Eli lay on his back and stared into the dark while Grace slept beside him. The room was quiet except for the ceiling fan and the soft breathing of the woman who had stood beside him through more than he deserved.

He wanted to reach for the phone.

He wanted to see what people were saying.

He wanted to know if the post had slowed down or spread farther.

He wanted to know if the angry comments had started yet.

That bothered him.

It was not only concern. It was curiosity. And beneath the curiosity was something worse.

He wanted to know if he mattered.

The thought made him uncomfortable.

Eli turned onto his side and faced the wall.

“Lord, help me,” he whispered.

Grace moved slightly behind him. For a moment, he thought she was still asleep.

Then she said, “Phone?”

Eli closed his eyes.

“Yeah.”

“You checking it?”

“No.”

“Want to?”

“Yes.”

She was quiet for a few seconds.

Then she said, “Don’t.”

“I know.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

Her hand found his arm under the blanket.

“You already posted what you needed to post,” she said. “Now let God do what He wants with it.”

Eli swallowed.

That sounded simple.

It was not.

He was learning that obedience was sometimes easier than waiting. Posting had taken courage. Leaving it alone took surrender.

He heard Owen cough once down the hall, then settle again.

Grace squeezed his arm and fell quiet.

Eli stared at the wall.

Let God do what He wants with it.

He repeated the words in his mind until sleep finally took him.

The next morning, Eli found Noah sitting at the kitchen table before anyone else was awake.

That was unusual.

Noah was eight years old and considered mornings a personal attack.

But there he sat in pajama pants and a faded dinosaur shirt, staring at a piece of paper with a pencil in his hand.

Eli stopped in the doorway.

“You okay, buddy?”

Noah looked up. “I’m writing something.”

“At six in the morning?”

Noah nodded seriously.

Eli walked over and sat beside him. “What are you writing?”

Noah slid the paper closer but kept one hand on the corner, as if he might need to pull it back quickly.

At the top of the page, in uneven letters, he had written:

God is real even when people are mean.
Eli felt something catch in his throat.
He looked at Noah.
“Where did that come from?”
Noah shrugged. “I heard you and Mom talking.”
“When?”
“Last night.”
Eli winced. “How much did you hear?”
“Just some.”
“That is not specific.”
Noah looked down at the paper. “Are people mad at you?”
Eli sat back slowly.
There it was.
The thing he had feared.
His children feeling the weight of something he had chosen.
“Some people may not like what I wrote,” Eli said carefully.
“Because it was about God?”
“Mostly.”
“That’s dumb.”
Eli almost smiled. “Sometimes people are angry at God, and sometimes they take that anger out on people who talk about Him.”
Noah thought about that.
“Did you say something mean?”
“No.”
“Did you lie?”
“No.”
“Then why are you scared?”
Eli opened his mouth, then closed it.
It was a fair question.
A better question than Noah knew.
“I guess because telling the truth can still cost something,” Eli said.
Noah looked confused. “Like money?”
“Sometimes. But I mean it can cost friendships. Comfort. Peace. People’s opinions.”
Noah frowned.
Then he looked back at his paper.
“I think you should still tell the truth.”
Eli stared at his son.

Noah said it with the plain confidence of a child who had not yet learned how many excuses adults could build around fear.

Eli nodded slowly.

“You’re right.”

Noah looked pleased with that.

Then he pushed the paper toward Eli.

“Can you spell ‘because?’”

Eli laughed quietly.

“That one is tricky.”

He helped Noah spell the word, then sat with him as the house began to wake.

Grace came into the kitchen with Owen on her hip and Lily trailing behind her, dragging a blanket across the floor.

She stopped when she saw Eli and Noah at the table.

“What is happening here?” she asked.

“Noah is writing theology before breakfast,” Eli said.

Grace raised an eyebrow.

Noah held up the paper.

Grace read it.

Her expression softened.

She looked at Eli.

Neither of them said anything.

They did not need to.

The first real response to Eli’s post had not come from a stranger online.

It had come from his own kitchen table.

By the time Eli got to work, the post had been shared more than two hundred times.

He checked it in the parking lot before going inside, even though he had told himself he would not.

Two hundred and twelve shares.

Hundreds of reactions.

Dozens of comments.

More private messages than he could answer before lunch.

Some people thanked him.

Some people challenged him.

Some people told stories Eli wished they had never lived through.

A mother wrote that she had deleted an app from her daughter's tablet after reading his post.

A father wrote that he had prayed with his son for the first time in years.

A grandmother wrote that she was sending the post to her adult children.

Another person wrote, This is religious fearmongering. Kids need freedom, not control.

Someone else replied to that comment with a paragraph Eli would not have written and did not want attached to his name.

He stared at the thread for a moment.

Then he put the phone away.

Already, the post was becoming something he could not manage.

That was the nature of the internet. A man could write from conviction, but once the words left his hands, they could be carried by people with their own anger, pain, wisdom, foolishness, and agendas.

That scared him.

At his desk, Eli tried to work.

For almost an hour, he succeeded.

Then his phone lit up.

A message from Mason Clark.

Eli had known Mason since high school. They had played baseball together, gotten in trouble together, and spent too many nights driving back roads with no real purpose. Mason was funny, sharp, and impossible to embarrass.

He also had not taken anything seriously since about 2009.

The message said:

Bro. Are you becoming an internet preacher now?

Eli stared at it and sighed.

He typed:

No.

Mason replied almost instantly.

That's exactly what an internet preacher would say.

Eli smiled despite himself.

I posted a few thoughts. That's all.

Yeah, and my aunt shared one with six fire emojis and said revival is coming. So congrats, Reverend Carter.

Eli rubbed his forehead.

Please do not call me that.

Too late. I already made a contact name.

Eli leaned back in his chair.

Mason sent another message.

Seriously though, what's going on with you?

Eli looked at the screen for a long moment.

He could make a joke.

He could change the subject.

That would be easier.

Instead, he typed:

I think I got tired of seeing everyone act like things are fine when they are not.

Mason took longer to answer.

Then his reply appeared.

Things have always been bad. Internet just lets us watch it in HD now.

That sounded like Mason.

Part joke.

Part truth.

Part shield.

Eli typed:

Maybe. But watching everything burn is not the same as carrying water.

No reply came for a while.

Then Mason wrote:

That actually sounds like something a preacher would say.

Eli smiled.

Then Mason added:

Just be careful, man. People online are nuts.

Eli looked at the message.

For once, Mason was not mocking.

I know, Eli replied.

But he was not sure he did.

At lunch, Eli sat in his truck again.

He had started doing that more often, not because it was comfortable, but because it gave him quiet.

He opened his messages and began answering a few.

Not all of them.

Grace's warning stayed with him.

You are not responsible for every person who sends you a message. Still, he could answer some.

A woman asked how to pray with teenagers who rolled their eyes at everything.

Eli wrote back:

Start small. Do not turn it into a performance. Ask if there is anything they want prayer for. If they say no, pray anyway, but keep it simple. Let them see you being real with God, not religious for show.

A man asked what Bible to buy for his ten-year-old son.

Eli gave a simple answer and told him not to overthink it.

Another message came from someone named Dana Mitchell.

Her profile picture showed a woman with short gray hair standing beside a lake.

I am raising my two grandchildren. Their mother is in and out of their lives. I am tired. I read your post and felt convicted because I have been giving them screens just so I can breathe. I do not know how to fix everything.

Eli stared at the message.

He could feel the exhaustion in it.

He replied slowly.

You may not be able to fix everything today. Start with one thing. One meal without screens. One short prayer before bed. One honest conversation. One Bible story. Small faithfulness matters. I am praying for strength for you.

He sent it.

Then he sat with the phone in his hand.

Small faithfulness matters.

He wondered if he believed that enough.

In a digital world, everything rewarded size.

Big numbers.

Big reactions.

Big outrage.

Big platforms.

But the kingdom of God did not seem to begin that way.

It began like seed.

Small.

Buried.

Easy to overlook.

Then his phone rang.

The screen showed a number he did not recognize.

Eli let it ring twice.

Then, for reasons he could not explain, he answered.

“Hello?”

“Is this Eli Carter?”

The voice belonged to a man. Older. Calm.

“Yes.”

“My name is Nathan Brooks. I pastor New Hope Fellowship over on Miller Road. I hope I’m not bothering you.”

Eli sat up straighter.

“No, sir. You’re fine.”

“I was sent one of your posts this morning.”

Eli braced himself.

Pastors had opinions. Sometimes good. Sometimes not.

“Yes, sir.”

“I just wanted to encourage you,” Pastor Brooks said. “What you wrote was needed.”

Eli did not know what to say.

“Thank you.”

“I also wanted to caution you.”

There it was.

Eli almost smiled.

“Yes, sir.”

“The internet is a useful tool, but a dangerous place to form a soul.”

Eli looked through the windshield at the parking lot.

“That sounds right.”

“If God is stirring you to speak, then speak. But do not let responses become your shepherd. Not praise. Not criticism. Not numbers. Not outrage.”

Eli swallowed.

The pastor continued, “You need prayer covering. You need accountability. You need Scripture more than reaction. And you need to remember that your first ministry is not online.”

“My family,” Eli said.

“Yes,” Pastor Brooks said. “Your wife and children. Then your local church. Then whatever else the Lord gives you.”

Eli was quiet.

Those words felt like both warning and relief.

“I’m not trying to build anything,” Eli said.

“I believe you,” Pastor Brooks replied. “But many men have built things they did not mean to build. Some were good. Some were not. Direction matters early.”

Eli leaned his head back against the seat.

“Yes, sir.”

“I would like to pray for you, if that is alright.”

Eli blinked.

“Now?”

“Yes.”

Eli looked around the truck, as if someone might see through the windows and find it strange.

Then he said, “Yes, please.”

Pastor Brooks prayed simply.

No performance.

No preacher voice.

Just a steady prayer asking God to keep Eli humble, protect his home, purify his motives, give him wisdom, and stop anything that was not from Him.

When the prayer ended, Eli realized his eyes were wet.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

“You’re welcome. And Eli?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Do not confuse a spark with a fire. A spark has to be tended carefully, or it either dies out or burns what it should have warmed.”

Eli wrote that down on a napkin after they hung up.

Do not confuse a spark with a fire.

He folded the napkin and placed it in the console.

Then he went back inside to finish the workday.

By late afternoon, the post had reached people Eli did not know in states he had never visited.

That should have sounded exciting.

Instead, it made him uneasy.

He watched one comment thread turn into an argument between people who had never met and clearly did not want to understand each other.

One person accused another of being a bad parent.

Another replied with insults.

Someone else quoted Scripture like a hammer.

Eli felt sick reading it.

This was not what he wanted.

He opened the comment box.

His first draft was sharp.

He deleted it.

His second draft sounded like he was trying to control everyone.

He deleted that too.

Finally, he wrote:

Friends, if this post becomes another place to insult each other, we have missed the point. The call is not to shame struggling parents. The call is to wake up, repent where needed, and take one faithful step forward. Truth matters. So does the spirit we carry when we speak it.

He posted the comment and pinned it to the top.

Then he sat there, staring at it.

That was new.

He was no longer just posting thoughts.

He was tending something.

That word came to him and stayed.

Tending.

Not controlling.

Not performing.

Not branding.

Tending.

Like a garden.

Like a fire.

Like a child's heart.

The thought helped him breathe.

When Eli got home, the kids were already outside.

Grace sat on the porch steps while Lily drew chalk flowers across the walkway. Owen dug in the mulch with a plastic spoon. Noah stood in the yard holding a stick like a sword.

“Dad!” Noah shouted. “Battle!”

Eli had not even closed the truck door before Noah charged him.

Eli set his bag down and lifted both hands. “I come in peace.”

“No peace,” Noah said. “Only battle.”

“That sounds like a foreign policy problem.”

Noah swung the stick carefully at Eli's leg.

Eli made a dramatic falling motion against the truck.

“I’m hit.”

Lily looked up from her chalk. “You’re not hit. He barely touched you.”

“I am choosing to be supportive.”

Owen shouted something and threw mulch.

Grace stood from the steps. “Please do not support him throwing mulch.”

Eli smiled.

For the next half hour, he played outside with the kids. He chased Noah around the yard, helped Lily draw a crooked sun, and redirected Owen from eating dirt more than once.

His phone stayed in his bag.

He thought about it several times.

But he left it there.

That felt like a small victory.

After dinner, Eli helped clean the kitchen while Grace packed leftovers away.

“How was today?” she asked.

“Strange.”

“Good strange or bad strange?”

“Both.”

He told her about Mason’s jokes, the messages, the comment thread, and Pastor Brooks’s call.

Grace paused at that.

“Pastor Brooks called you?”

“Yeah.”

“What did he say?”

Eli leaned against the counter. “That the internet is a useful tool but a dangerous place to form a soul.”

Grace nodded slowly. “I like him already.”

“He said I need accountability.”

“You do.”

“I know.”

“He said your first ministry is here?”

Eli looked at her. “Almost exactly.”

“He is definitely right.”

Eli smiled faintly. “You enjoy when people agree with you.”

“When they are correct, yes.”

He laughed.

Then he grew serious.

“I think I need to meet with him.”

Grace closed the container of leftovers. “Then meet with him.”

“I don’t want to make this bigger than it is.”

“Meeting with a pastor for wisdom is not making it bigger. It is making it safer.”

That made sense.

Eli nodded.

“I’ll call him tomorrow.”

Grace studied him.

“What else?”

Eli looked down.

“There was a moment today where I liked it.”

“Liked what?”

“The numbers. The attention. The feeling that maybe something I said mattered.”

Grace did not flinch.

“That does not surprise me.”

“It surprised me.”

“It shouldn’t. You’re human.”

“I hated it.”

“Good.”

Eli looked at her.

Grace stepped closer.

“Temptation is not the same as surrendering to it,” she said. “But you need to be honest about it. With God. With me. With someone like Pastor Brooks.”

Eli nodded.

“I know.”

She touched his chest lightly with one hand.

“I believe in what God is doing in you. But I do not believe in you enough to think you can do it alone.”

Eli stared at her.

“That sounded insulting and loving at the same time.”

“It was both.”

He smiled.

Then she hugged him.

He held her for a long moment in the quiet kitchen.

This was another kind of accountability.

The kind that stood close enough to see what strangers could not.

That night, after the children were in bed, Eli sat at the kitchen table with his Bible, notebook, and phone.

The same place where everything had started.

Grace sat across from him folding a basket of laundry.

He had promised himself he would not post again that night unless he was sure.

He was not sure.

So he did not post.

Instead, he wrote in his notebook.

Rules for speaking publicly.

He underlined it once.

Then he began making a list.

Pray before posting.

Do not post out of anger.

Do not answer every critic.

Do not measure obedience by numbers.

Do not neglect Grace or the children.

Do not pretend to know what I do not know.

Tell the truth plainly.

Keep the gospel central.

Repent quickly.

Stay teachable.

He looked at the list for a long time.

Then he added one more.

Never let the platform become the altar.

Grace glanced over. "What are you writing?"

"Guardrails."

"Good."

"I don't know if I'll keep them perfectly."

"You won't."

"That was fast."

She folded a towel. "You need guardrails because you are not perfect. That is the point."

Eli looked back at the page.

She was right.

The goal was not to become a flawless messenger.

The goal was to remain a faithful one.

His phone lit up again.
A message from Mason.
Okay Reverend, your post is officially in my mom's church group chat. I can never escape you now.
Eli laughed.
Grace looked up. "What?"
"Mason."
"What did he say?"
Eli read it to her.
Grace smiled.
Then another message came through from Mason.
This one was different.
Also, my sister saw it. She called me crying. She said she feels like she failed her kids after the divorce. I told her I'd ask you to pray for her. So yeah. Pray for her, I guess.
Eli's smile faded.
He read the message twice.
Then he showed Grace.
She stopped folding.
"What's her name?" she asked.
"Rachel."
Grace bowed her head right there over the laundry basket.
Eli reached across the table and took her hand.
Together, in the quiet kitchen, they prayed for Rachel Clark and her children.
No lights flashed.
No music played.
No audience watched.
No one clicked like or share.
But Eli sensed, deep down, that this mattered more than all of it.
This was the hidden work.
The work no algorithm could measure.
When they finished praying, Eli replied to Mason.
We prayed for Rachel and the kids. Tell her she has not outrun God's mercy. One faithful step at a time.
Mason did not answer right away.
Then three dots appeared.
Disappeared.
Appeared again.

Finally, his message came through.

Thanks, man.

Two words.

But Eli knew Mason well enough to know they were not small.

The next morning, Eli met Pastor Nathan Brooks at a small diner on the edge of town.

The diner had cracked vinyl booths, strong coffee, and a waitress who called everyone honey regardless of age or gender. An old television above the counter played muted news while two retired men argued about baseball near the window.

Pastor Brooks stood when Eli walked in.

He was in his late fifties, with gray hair, kind eyes, and the calm presence of a man who had spent years sitting beside hospital beds, gravesides, and kitchen tables.

“Eli,” he said, extending his hand.

“Pastor Brooks.”

“Nathan is fine.”

Eli nodded, though he was not sure he could make himself use it yet.

They sat in a booth near the back.

The waitress poured coffee before either of them asked.

Pastor Brooks ordered eggs and toast. Eli ordered the same because he had forgotten to look at the menu.

For a moment, neither man spoke.

Then Pastor Brooks said, “Tell me what happened.”

Eli told him.

Not everything, but enough.

The first post.

The late-night prayer.

The message from the woman on the bathroom floor.

The parenting post.

The attention.

The pride.

The fear.

Pastor Brooks listened without interrupting.

When Eli finished, the older man stirred his coffee slowly.

“I believe God may be giving you a burden,” he said.

Eli let out a breath he had not realized he was holding.

“But,” Pastor Brooks continued, “a burden is not the same as a platform.”

Eli nodded.

“A burden is carried. A platform is stood upon. Those are very different postures.”

Eli wrote that down.

Pastor Brooks smiled faintly. “You take notes?”

“I forget things.”

“That is wise.”

Eli looked up. “What do I do?”

“For now?”

“Yes.”

“Be faithful in small things. Keep speaking if the Lord leads. Keep your home in order. Stay connected to your church. Do not isolate. Do not start thinking everyone who questions you is an enemy. Do not let supporters turn you into something you are not.”

“That sounds like a lot.”

“It is.”

Eli looked down at his coffee.

Pastor Brooks leaned forward.

“Eli, the digital age has made it possible for a man to speak to thousands before he has learned how to shepherd ten. That is dangerous.”

Eli felt that one.

“Then should I stop?” he asked.

“Maybe.”

Eli looked up quickly.

Pastor Brooks held his gaze.

“Would you?”

The question sat between them.

Eli wanted to say yes.

He wanted to say he would stop immediately if told.

But he knew better than to answer too fast.

“I do not know,” he said finally.

Pastor Brooks nodded. “That is an honest answer.”

“I want to say I would.”

“But part of you would not want to.”

Eli looked away.

“Yes.”

“That is important to know.”

Their food arrived.

Neither of them moved to eat right away.

Pastor Brooks bowed his head and prayed over the meal. Then he picked up his fork.

“Here is my counsel,” he said. “Do not chase the reach. Chase obedience. If God gives you one sentence, post one sentence. If He gives you silence, be silent. If He gives you a person to pray for, pray. If He gives you your children asking questions at the table, answer them before you answer strangers.”

Eli nodded.

“That helps.”

“Good.”

Pastor Brooks took a bite of eggs, then pointed gently with his fork.

“And Eli?”

“Yes?”

“If awakening comes, it will not come because you figured out the internet. It will come because God chose to move. Never reverse that order.”

Eli wrote that down too.

Never reverse that order.

When Eli left the diner, he sat in his truck for several minutes.

The morning sun had broken through the clouds, turning the windshield warm under his hands.

He looked at his phone.

More notifications.

More comments.

More messages.

For the first time, he did not feel the same urge to open them all.

Not because he no longer cared.

Because they no longer felt like commands.

He opened a blank post.

Then he stopped.

He prayed first.

Not long.

Not fancy.

“Lord, if this is not from You, kill it. If it is from You, keep it clean.”

Then he typed:

The goal is not to raise loud children, sheltered children, or religious children. The goal is to raise children who know the voice of God, love the truth, recognize deception, repent when they are wrong, and have courage when obedience costs them something. That starts with parents who are willing to become those people first.

He read it three times.

It did not feel like anger.

It did not feel like performance.

It felt like a burden.

He posted it.

Then he put the phone away.

As he started the truck, a message came in.

He almost ignored it.

Then he glanced down.

It was from Mason.

Rachel wants to go to church Sunday. Any recommendations?

Eli sat still.

The diner parking lot seemed quieter than before.

He thought of Pastor Brooks.

He thought of Grace.

He thought of Noah's handwritten sentence at the kitchen table.

God is real even when people are mean.

Then he typed:

New Hope Fellowship. I'll meet you there.

Mason replied:

You're going too?

Eli smiled slightly.

Looks like it.

Mason sent back:

Don't make it weird.

Eli laughed.

Then he started the truck and pulled out of the parking lot.

For the first time since the first post, he felt something other than fear.

Not confidence.

Not certainty.

Something steadier than both.

He felt led.

And that was enough for the next step.

Chapter Four

Small Fire

Sunday morning came too quickly.

Eli stood in front of the bathroom mirror, buttoning his shirt with more focus than the task required. He had changed twice already. Not because he cared that much about clothes, but because his hands needed something to do.

Grace stepped into the doorway holding Owen on her hip.

“You look nervous,” she said.

“I am not nervous.”

Grace looked at him.

Eli sighed. “I am trying not to be nervous.”

“That sounds more honest.”

Owen reached for Eli’s toothbrush on the counter. Grace shifted him to the other hip before he could grab it.

“You do realize we go to church almost every Sunday,” she said.

“This Sunday feels different.”

“Because Mason might come?”

“Mason. Rachel. Her kids. Maybe others.”

Grace nodded.

Eli picked up his watch and put it on, then took it off again.

Grace noticed.

“You are overthinking.”

“I know.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“That they will think I know what I’m doing.”

Grace smiled faintly. “No one who has seen you look for your keys while holding them will think that.”

“That was one time.”

“It was Thursday.”

Eli gave her a tired look, but he smiled.

Grace stepped closer.

“Listen,” she said. “You invited people to church. That is good. But you are not the service. You are not the sermon. You are not the Holy Spirit.”

“I know.”

“Then act like it.”

He nodded.

That was becoming one of Grace’s gifts to him. She could steady him without flattering him. She could encourage him without letting him drift into foolishness.

From the hallway, Noah shouted, “Lily said my hair looks like a squirrel nest!”

Grace closed her eyes.

Eli raised his eyebrows. “Does it?”

“A little,” Grace said.

“I heard that!” Noah shouted.

Owen laughed and clapped.

The house had officially entered Sunday morning mode.

Shoes had to be found. Hair had to be brushed. A missing Bible had to be located. Lily cried because her dress was itchy. Noah wanted to wear sneakers with mud on them. Owen managed to remove one sock between the living room and the front door.

By the time everyone was loaded into the van, Eli felt like they had already completed a full day’s work.

Grace buckled Owen into his car seat and climbed into the passenger side.

Eli started the engine.

Noah leaned forward from the back. “Is your friend coming?”

“Maybe,” Eli said.

“The funny one?”

“Mason?”

“Yeah.”

“He thinks he is funny.”

Grace laughed.

Lily asked, “Does he know Jesus?”

Eli looked at Grace, then back at the road.

“I think he knows about Jesus,” Eli said. “But knowing about someone is not always the same as knowing them.”

Lily seemed to accept that.

Owen shouted, “Jesus!”

Everyone went quiet for half a second.

Then Grace smiled. “That works too.”

Eli turned onto the main road.

The sky was clear, but the air still had a sharp edge to it. Sunday mornings always made the town look cleaner than it really was. Stores were closed or slow. Traffic was lighter. Church signs stood along the roads with short sayings meant to reach drivers moving too fast to think.

Eli passed one that read:

A FAMILY ALTAR CAN CHANGE A FAMILY TREE.

He glanced at Grace.

She had seen it too.

Neither of them spoke.

They did not have to.

New Hope Fellowship sat on a small rise outside town, with a white steeple, a gravel overflow lot, and a sign that had been slightly crooked for as long as Eli could remember.

The building was not impressive. Brick walls. Simple windows. A small covered entrance. A playground behind the fellowship hall.

But Eli had always liked that about it.

It did not feel like a performance.

It felt like people.

As they pulled into the parking lot, Eli immediately saw Mason's truck.

He knew it before he saw Mason. Same old dark pickup. Same dent near the rear bumper. Same faded sticker on the back window from a band they used to listen to years ago.

Eli parked two rows away and turned off the engine.

Mason stood beside the truck wearing jeans, boots, and a button-up shirt that looked like it had been purchased that morning or pulled from the back of a closet after a wedding.

Beside him stood a woman Eli recognized only from old pictures. Rachel. Mason's sister. She looked tired. Not sleepy tired. Life tired. Her shoulders were slightly rounded, and one hand rested protectively on the back of a boy who looked about ten.

A younger girl stood close to Rachel's side, holding a small stuffed animal against her chest.

Mason saw Eli and lifted one hand.

Grace looked over.

"That them?"

"Yeah."

Eli took a breath.

“Remember,” Grace said.

“I’m not the Holy Spirit.”

“And?”

“I’m not the sermon.”

“And?”

Eli looked at her.

She smiled. “Do not be weird.”

He laughed quietly. “Mason already said that.”

“Then Mason had one good thought.”

They got the kids out of the van and walked across the parking lot.

Mason looked uncomfortable, which was rare enough that Eli almost commented on it.

He decided not to.

“Hey,” Eli said.

Mason nodded. “Hey, Reverend.”

Eli pointed at him. “No.”

Mason held up both hands. “Fine. Eli.”

Grace smiled. “Good morning, Mason.”

“Morning, Grace.”

Rachel looked at Eli with cautious eyes.

“Rachel,” Mason said, “this is Eli. And Grace.”

Rachel shifted the stuffed animal from one of her daughter’s hands to the other. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Eli said. “I’m glad you came.”

She looked toward the church building.

“We almost didn’t.”

Eli nodded. “I understand.”

The boy beside her looked up. “Are they going to make us sing?”

Mason snorted.

Grace answered gently. “Probably. But you don’t have to know all the words.”

The boy seemed unsure whether that helped.

Lily stepped forward and looked at the younger girl. “I like your bunny.”

The girl hugged it tighter. “It’s a rabbit.”

“Oh,” Lily said. “I like your rabbit.”

The girl studied her, then gave a small nod.

That was enough.

The adults stood there for a moment, all feeling the awkwardness of beginnings.

Then Pastor Brooks appeared near the entrance.

He did not hurry toward them. He did not make a scene. He simply walked over with a warm smile, like he had expected them all along.

“Good morning,” he said.

Eli shook his hand. “Pastor Brooks, this is Mason, Rachel, and her children.”

Pastor Brooks greeted each of them by name after hearing it once.

That impressed Eli.

Not because it was a talent, but because it was care.

Rachel’s eyes lowered slightly when Pastor Brooks shook her hand.

“We’re just visiting,” she said quickly.

“You are welcome to visit,” he said. “No pressure.”

That seemed to ease something in her.

Pastor Brooks looked at the children. “We have Sunday school if they would like to go, or they can stay with you. Either is fine.”

Rachel looked uncertain.

Her son spoke first. “Can I stay?”

Rachel nodded. “Sure.”

Her daughter stayed silent, still holding the rabbit.

Grace leaned toward Rachel. “Our kids usually go, but Lily may stay with us today if that helps.”

Lily heard her name and turned. “I can sit with her.”

The little girl looked at Lily.

Again, one small nod.

Eli watched the whole exchange and felt something quiet move through him.

No platform.

No crowd.

Just one family helping another family get through the church doors.

Maybe this was how awakening started.

Not with a stage.

With a welcome.

The sanctuary smelled faintly of coffee, old hymnals, and furniture polish.

Sunlight came through the windows in pale strips across the carpet. People turned as Eli’s group entered, but not in a cold way. More like a

church family noticing unfamiliar faces and trying to decide whether to smile too soon.

An older woman near the aisle leaned toward Rachel.

“Good morning, honey,” she said.

Rachel gave a small smile. “Morning.”

Eli saw Ruth Bell sitting two rows from the front.

She was in her late seventies, though no one who knew her would have called her weak. Ruth was small, silver-haired, and steady-eyed. She had buried a husband, two brothers, and one son. She had also taught Sunday school longer than Eli had been alive.

If New Hope had a hidden engine, it was probably Ruth Bell’s prayer life.

She turned and saw Eli.

Then she saw the people with him.

Her eyes sharpened, not with suspicion but understanding.

She nodded once.

Eli nodded back.

He had the sudden feeling that Ruth had already prayed about this morning before he had even woken up.

They found seats near the back.

Mason sat on Eli’s left. Grace sat on his right with Lily beside her and Rachel’s daughter next to Lily. Rachel sat on the other side of her son, who kept his arms crossed and his eyes forward.

The music began.

The first song was familiar. Old, simple, and strong.

Eli sang quietly.

Grace sang beside him.

Noah and Owen had gone to Sunday school, but Lily stayed with the little girl, helping her find the words in the hymnal even though Lily could barely follow them herself.

Mason did not sing.

He stood with his hands in his pockets and looked around like a man pretending he was not affected by anything.

Rachel held the hymnal open but did not sing at first.

Then, during the second verse, Eli heard her voice.

Soft.

Unsteady.

But there.

He did not look at her.

He did not want to embarrass her.

But he heard it.

So did Grace.

She reached over and gently squeezed Eli's hand.

The song ended.

Pastor Brooks walked to the pulpit and opened his Bible.

He looked over the congregation for a moment before speaking.

"Before we begin this morning," he said, "I want to say something plainly. There are people in this room who came tired. Some came with questions. Some came with guilt. Some came because someone invited you and you did not know how to say no."

A few people chuckled softly.

Mason looked at Eli.

Eli pretended not to notice.

Pastor Brooks continued.

"You are not here by accident. But you are also not here to be pressured into pretending. The Lord is not honored by pretending. He is honored by truth. So bring Him the truth. Your tiredness. Your doubt. Your sin. Your fear. Your anger. Your grief. Bring Him what is real. He already sees it."

Rachel looked down.

Her son stopped moving.

Eli felt his own chest tighten.

Pastor Brooks looked down at his Bible.

"This morning, we are going to talk about the kind of awakening that begins where people least expect it. Not first in the nation. Not first in institutions. Not first in public squares. But in the heart. Then in the home."

Eli froze.

Grace glanced at him.

Mason leaned slightly toward Eli and whispered, "Did you plan this?"

Eli whispered back, "No."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Pastor Brooks read from Joshua.

"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

He paused.

“That verse is often hung on walls,” he said. “But it was never meant to be decoration. It was a line in the sand.”

The room went still.

Eli sat back slowly.

The sermon was not flashy. Pastor Brooks did not shout. He did not pace. He did not try to impress anyone.

He spoke about households.

About parents.

About repentance.

About children learning what matters by watching what adults worship.

He spoke about screens without sounding like a man afraid of technology. He spoke about culture without sounding like a man looking for someone to hate. He spoke about sin without softening it. He spoke about grace without cheapening it.

“Every home has a liturgy,” Pastor Brooks said. “Every home has repeated patterns that teach the soul. The question is not whether your home is forming your children. It is what your home is forming them into.”

Eli wrote that down on the back of the bulletin.

Mason noticed.

“Of course you take notes,” he whispered.

Eli kept writing.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“If the first voice we obey in the morning is the phone, that forms us. If anger fills the dinner table, that forms us. If parents never pray unless there is a crisis, that forms us. If children see confession, forgiveness, Scripture, service, and worship as normal life, that forms them too.”

Rachel wiped under one eye.

Her son saw it and looked away quickly, as if protecting her privacy.

Eli felt like he was watching something sacred from too close.

At the end of the sermon, Pastor Brooks did not ask people to raise hands. He did not use music to force emotion. He simply invited anyone who needed prayer to come forward after the service.

Then he prayed.

“Lord, begin with us. Begin in our hearts. Begin in our homes. Make us honest. Make us humble. Make us faithful. Wake us up before we ask You to wake up anyone else.”

Eli bowed his head.
He had prayed similar words alone at his kitchen table.
Hearing them spoken over the church made him feel both exposed and covered.

After the service, people stood and began talking in the aisles.
That was usually the part Eli liked.
Today, he felt unsure what to do.
Rachel stayed seated.
Her daughter leaned against Lily, who was explaining something about Sunday school snacks. Mason stood and stretched like he had survived a medical procedure.

“So,” Eli said.

Mason looked at him. “That was not terrible.”

“High praise.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

Mason looked toward Rachel. “I think it hit her pretty hard.”

Eli nodded. “Yeah.”

Rachel’s son turned around. “Does this church have food?”

Mason laughed. “That’s my nephew.”

Grace smiled. “Sometimes.”

Pastor Brooks walked over.

“Rachel,” he said gently, “I’m glad you came.”

Rachel nodded but did not speak.

Her eyes were wet again.

Pastor Brooks did not rush to fill the silence.

Finally, she said, “I think I messed up my kids.”

Her son stiffened.

The words seemed to surprise even Rachel. She covered her mouth with one hand.

Pastor Brooks knelt slightly so he was not standing over her.

“All parents fail in some ways,” he said. “That is why repentance matters.”

Rachel shook her head. “No, I mean really. The divorce. The fighting. The screens. Me being checked out. I was just trying to survive.”

Grace sat beside her.

“Survival seasons are real,” Grace said.

Rachel looked at her.
Grace continued, "But they do not have to be the rest of the story."
Rachel broke then.
Not loudly.
Not for attention.
She just lowered her face into her hands and cried.
Her daughter moved closer to Lily.
Her son looked at the floor.
Mason stared straight ahead, jaw tight.
Eli wanted to help, but he did not know how.
So he did the only thing he could.
He prayed silently.
Lord, help them.
Pastor Brooks asked Rachel if he could pray for her and her children.
She nodded.
Grace placed a hand on Rachel's shoulder.
Lily, without fully understanding, held the little girl's hand.
Mason stayed where he was, but his eyes did not leave his sister.
Pastor Brooks prayed softly.
He prayed for mercy.
He prayed for healing.
He prayed for Rachel's home.
He prayed for her children to know they were loved.
He prayed for shame to be broken and replaced with godly repentance.
He prayed for one faithful step.
Eli kept his head bowed.
When the prayer ended, Rachel wiped her face and whispered, "Thank you."
Pastor Brooks handed her a card.
"Call me this week," he said. "We can help you get connected with some women here. You do not have to walk through this alone."
Rachel nodded.
Mason cleared his throat and looked away.
Eli knew him well enough to know he was fighting emotion.
"You okay?" Eli asked quietly.
Mason gave him a quick look.
"No."

That was the most honest answer Eli had ever heard from him.

The rest of the morning moved in small pieces.

Ruth Bell came over and introduced herself to Rachel. Within two minutes, she had somehow learned the children's names, their ages, and that Rachel worked evenings three days a week.

Ruth did not ask like she was gathering information.

She asked like she was making room in her heart.

"If you ever need help getting them here on a Sunday morning, you call me," Ruth said.

Rachel looked overwhelmed. "You don't even know me."

Ruth smiled. "That can change."

Eli watched Rachel try to answer and fail.

Ruth turned to Mason. "And you come back too."

Mason lifted both hands. "I didn't do anything."

"Then it should be easy to come again."

Grace laughed under her breath.

Mason looked at Eli. "Is everyone here like this?"

"Mostly."

"That's concerning."

But he was smiling when he said it.

In the fellowship hall, someone had set out coffee, lemonade, and cookies. The children found the cookies immediately. Owen returned from Sunday school with a paper crown, one shoe untied, and a strong belief that he had made a new best friend named either Caleb or Carrot.

Eli could not get a clear answer.

Noah found Rachel's son near the cookie table.

"You like dogs?" Noah asked.

The boy shrugged. "Sure."

"We're trying to get one."

"We?"

"My family. Dad hasn't said yes yet, but I'm working on him."

The boy almost smiled.

Progress, Eli thought.

Small, but real.

Pastor Brooks joined Eli near the coffee.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

Eli looked around the room.

Rachel talking with Ruth.

Grace helping Lily and the little girl split a cookie.

Mason pretending not to care while listening to everything.

Noah making his case for a wolf-sized dog.

“I don’t know,” Eli said.

Pastor Brooks nodded. “That may be a healthy answer.”

“The sermon...”

“Yes?”

“That was not because of my post?”

Pastor Brooks smiled faintly. “No. I had planned Joshua weeks ago.”

Eli exhaled.

“But,” Pastor Brooks added, “I do not think the timing was accidental.”

Eli looked at him.

Pastor Brooks stirred his coffee.

“God is very good at arranging what men could not coordinate.”

Eli looked back toward Rachel.

“She thinks she ruined them,” he said.

“Many parents fear that.”

“What do you tell them?”

“The truth.”

“Which is?”

“That sin has consequences. Neglect has consequences. Anger has consequences. So does repentance. So does prayer. So does love. So does years of steady faithfulness.”

Eli listened.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Parents often want one emotional moment to fix ten years of disorder. Usually, God gives them a path instead. A humble one. A daily one.”

“One faithful step,” Eli said.

Pastor Brooks smiled. “Exactly.”

Eli looked down at his coffee.

“I posted that to someone yesterday.”

“Then believe it today.”

After church, Mason and Rachel stood with Eli and Grace near the parking lot.

The kids had loosened up by then. Rachel's daughter had told Lily her rabbit's name was Mr. Pickles. Rachel's son had admitted to Noah that he also wanted a dog, though he preferred German shepherds over wolves.

Mason leaned against his truck.

"Well," he said, "that was something."

Rachel looked tired but lighter. Her eyes were red, but her face had changed.

"Thank you," she said to Eli and Grace.

Grace shook her head gently. "You do not have to thank us."

"Yes, I do," Rachel said. "I would not have come if Mason had not sent me Eli's post. And Mason would not have sent it if he wasn't making fun of Eli first."

Mason pointed at her. "That is unfair but accurate."

Eli smiled.

Rachel turned serious.

"I don't know how to do this," she said.

Eli nodded. "I don't either."

She looked surprised.

Grace put a hand on Eli's arm. "None of us do perfectly."

Rachel looked toward her children.

"I want things to be different."

"That matters," Grace said.

"But wanting it does not make it happen."

"No," Grace said. "But it can be where you start."

Mason pushed away from the truck.

"Rachel," he said, "I can help with the kids some nights."

Rachel looked at him.

"You don't have to," she said.

"I know."

The two siblings stared at each other.

There was history there.

Eli did not know all of it, but he could feel enough.

Rachel nodded once.

"Okay."

Mason looked uncomfortable with the tenderness of the moment and quickly turned to Eli.

"You still owe me lunch for making me attend church."

"I invited you," Eli said. "I did not bribe you."

“Then start.”

Grace laughed.

They said goodbye.

Rachel buckled her kids into her car. Mason stood beside his truck for a moment before getting in.

Then he looked back at Eli.

No joke this time.

Just a nod.

Eli returned it.

As Mason drove away, Eli felt the weight again.

But it was different now.

Less like pressure.

More like responsibility.

Not responsibility for outcomes.

Responsibility for faithfulness.

That afternoon, the Carter house entered its usual Sunday rhythm.

Lunch.

Dishes.

Children changing out of church clothes.

Owen refusing a nap until the exact moment everyone gave up.

Noah asking again about the dog.

Lily lining up stuffed animals for what she called “church practice.”

Grace went upstairs to rest for a while, and Eli sat in the living room with his Bible open but unread in his lap.

His phone sat on the side table.

He had not checked it since before church.

That alone felt like discipline.

Finally, he picked it up.

The parenting post had continued to spread.

The newer post from that morning had been shared too.

There were more comments than he could reasonably read.

He scrolled slowly.

Some people were encouraged.

Some were angry.

Some were confessing.

Some were arguing.

Some were asking for help.

One comment had hundreds of responses beneath it.

A woman had written:
I am a single mother working two jobs. I am tired of people telling
parents to do better when no one helps us.
Eli stopped.
That was fair.
Painfully fair.
He read the replies.
Some were kind.
Some were not.
One person had replied, Then don't have kids.
Eli felt anger rise so fast he had to set the phone down.
Grace's warning came back.
Do not post out of anger.
He stood and walked into the kitchen.
The sink was full again.
It seemed impossible for a family of five to use that many cups in
one day, but they had done it.
He began loading the dishwasher.
As he worked, he thought about the woman's comment.
She was right to be tired.
She was right that commands without help could become burdens.
Wake up, parents.
Yes.
But then what?
What about the single mother?
The grandmother raising grandchildren?
The father working nights?
The mother battling depression?
The parents who never had faithful parents themselves?
The families with no church support?
The people who wanted to lead their homes but had no idea where
to begin?
Eli placed a plate in the dishwasher and stopped.
The call could not only be, "Do better."
It had to be, "Come with us."
That was different.
That was harder.
That required community.
That required churches.

That required older women like Ruth Bell and pastors like Nathan Brooks and friends who showed up even when they did not know what to say.

That required Eli to be more than loud.

It required him to be useful.

He dried his hands and picked up the phone again.

He found the single mother's comment and replied:

You are right. Parents do need to wake up, but they also need help. The church should not only tell families to stand. It should help hold up the tired ones. I am sorry people made your burden heavier instead of helping you carry it.

He paused, then added:

Start with one small thing you can do this week, not a whole new life overnight. One prayer. One meal without screens. One bedtime conversation. And if there is a solid church near you, ask for help. You should not have to carry it alone.

He posted it.

Then he wrote a separate post.

Conviction without compassion can crush people. Compassion without conviction can leave people asleep. Families need both. Parents need truth, but they also need help. If the church is going to call homes back to God, then the church must be ready to walk with tired parents, single parents, grandparents, foster parents, and broken families one faithful step at a time.

He read it twice.

Then he posted it.

This time, the response was immediate.

But Eli did not stay to watch it.

He set the phone down and finished the dishes.

That evening, the Carters had what Grace called a family reset.

It sounded more official than it was.

Everyone sat around the kitchen table. Owen sat in his booster seat with crackers. Lily held Mr. Bear. Noah brought a notebook because he said meetings needed notes.

Grace lit a candle in the middle of the table.

Lily gasped. "Are we having a birthday?"

"No," Grace said. "We are having a family talk."

Noah opened his notebook. "About the dog?"

“No,” Eli said.

Noah closed the notebook halfway.

“Then I might not need notes.”

Eli smiled. “You might.”

Grace looked at Eli, giving him the floor.

He took a breath.

“Your mom and I have been talking,” he said. “We want to be more careful about what our family gives attention to.”

Noah frowned. “Is this about screens?”

“Partly.”

Lily hugged Mr. Bear tighter. “Are we in trouble?”

“No,” Grace said. “This is for all of us. Mom and Dad too.”

Eli nodded. “We do not want our phones, shows, games, or busy schedules to become more important than God or each other.”

Noah looked suspicious. “How much less screen time are we talking?”

Grace smiled. “We are not starting with a big rule list.”

“We are starting with dinner,” Eli said. “No phones or screens at the table. For anyone. Including me.”

Noah looked at Grace. “What if Dad cheats?”

“Then you may respectfully remind him,” Grace said.

Noah wrote that down.

Eli pointed at him. “Respectfully.”

“I wrote that.”

Lily asked, “Can we still watch cartoons?”

“Yes,” Grace said. “This is not about never watching anything. It is about making sure screens are not leading our family.”

That answer seemed acceptable.

Eli continued.

“We are also going to pray together before bed every night. Not rushed. We can talk about what we are thankful for, what we are worried about, and who we should pray for.”

Lily raised her hand.

“You do not have to raise your hand,” Eli said.

“Can we pray for Rachel’s girl and Mr. Pickles?”

“Yes.”

Noah looked up. “Can we pray for a dog?”

Grace closed her eyes.

Eli nodded slowly. “You can pray. But prayer is not a way to trick God or your parents.”

Noah wrote that down too.

Owen slapped the table with both hands and shouted, “Amen!”

“That is probably enough for tonight,” Grace said.

But Eli was not finished.

He looked at the children.

“I also want to say something. I have not always done this well. Sometimes I look at my phone when I should be listening to you. Sometimes I get distracted. Sometimes I act like what is happening out there is more important than what is happening in here.”

The room got quiet.

Noah stopped writing.

Eli swallowed.

“I am sorry. I want to do better.”

Lily climbed out of her chair and walked around the table to hug him.

That nearly broke him.

Noah looked uncomfortable, then got up and hugged him too.

Owen shouted and reached for everyone, not knowing why but refusing to be left out.

Grace watched with tears in her eyes.

Eli held his children and felt something inside him settle.

Public repentance had power.

Private repentance had roots.

This was the kind of awakening no one could share online.

But it mattered.

Maybe it mattered most.

Later that night, after the children were asleep, Eli sat on the porch alone.

The air was cold enough to make him keep both hands wrapped around his mug.

Across the street, a television flickered blue through someone’s curtains. A car passed slowly. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked.

His phone was inside.

For once, he had left it there on purpose.

The door opened behind him.

Grace stepped out wearing a sweater and carrying a blanket.

“Room for one more?”

“Always.”

She sat beside him and spread the blanket over both their legs.

For a while, they said nothing.

Then Grace asked, “How are you really?”

Eli looked out at the street.

“Overwhelmed.”

“That seems fair.”

“But not crushed.”

“That is good.”

He nodded.

“Today felt important,” he said.

“It was.”

“Rachel coming. The kids. Pastor Brooks. The family talk.”

Grace leaned her head against his shoulder.

“It was a good day.”

Eli let that sit.

Then he said, “I keep thinking about fire.”

Grace waited.

“Pastor Brooks said not to confuse a spark with a fire. But today felt like a small fire. Not big. Not out of control. Just enough to warm something.”

Grace looked toward the street.

“Small fires still need tending.”

“I know.”

“And boundaries.”

“I know.”

“And people around them.”

Eli smiled faintly. “You are very committed to making sure I do not run off and become strange.”

“I married you. I accepted some strange.”

“Fair.”

Grace grew serious.

“Eli, if God is doing something, He will not need you to force it.”

“I know.”

“But He may ask you to obey when it costs more than a few mean comments.”

Eli looked down at his mug.

That was the part he had been trying not to think about.

So far, the cost had been small.
A little discomfort.
A little fear.
A few insults from strangers.
But if the message kept spreading, the cost could grow.
People did not mind vague faith.
They did not mind harmless inspiration.
But repentance was different.
The name of Jesus was different.
Calling parents to reclaim their homes was different.
Telling churches to help instead of only criticize was different.
Eli took a slow breath.
“I am afraid of that,” he said.
Grace reached for his hand under the blanket.
“Good.”
He looked at her.
“Fear can make you careful,” she said. “Just do not let it make you disobedient.”
They sat together in the quiet.
Then Grace said, “What is your next step?”
Eli thought for a moment.
“Meet with Pastor Brooks again. Keep praying. Answer what I can. Ignore what I should. Take care of home first.”
Grace nodded.
“That sounds right.”
“And maybe invite Mason and Rachel over for dinner.”
Grace smiled. “I was wondering when you would get there.”
“You already thought of that?”
“Of course.”
“What if Mason makes it weird?”
“He will.”
“That is true.”
“And it will be fine.”
Eli looked out at the dark street.
The world still looked normal from a distance.
But he no longer trusted distance.
Behind closed doors, people were crying in bathrooms, sitting in trucks, carrying guilt, raising grandchildren, losing children to screens, trying to pray again, and wondering if God still saw them.

And somehow, in ways Eli did not understand, a few sentences typed from his kitchen table had reached some of them.

That did not make him important.

It made him responsible.

There was a difference.

He needed to remember that.

Inside the house, Owen cried once, then quieted.

Grace started to get up.

Eli touched her arm.

“I’ll go.”

She looked at him.

He stood and set his mug on the porch rail.

Before he went inside, he looked once more at the street, the porch lights, the quiet homes, the dark windows.

Then he whispered, “Lord, tend the fire.”

He opened the door and stepped back into the house.

The small fire had begun.

And for now, it was enough.

Chapter Five

Grace at the Table

By Wednesday afternoon, Eli had learned that a small fire could still produce a lot of smoke.

His phone had not stopped.

The posts kept moving from one person to another, from church groups to family text threads, from parenting pages to people Eli had not spoken to in years. Some people shared them with prayer hands. Some shared them with warnings. Some shared them only to argue.

Eli had tried to keep boundaries.

He checked messages in the morning after prayer.

He checked them again during lunch.

Then he put the phone away until after the children were in bed.

That was the plan.

He kept it mostly.

Mostly was not perfect, but it was better than before.

On Wednesday, he broke the rule twice before breakfast.

The first time was while Grace was helping Lily find matching socks.

The second time was while Noah was telling him about a dream involving a pirate ship, a tornado, and a dog that may or may not have been their future pet.

Eli had nodded through most of the story while glancing at a message from a man in Ohio who wanted advice about getting his family back into church.

Noah stopped mid-sentence.

“You’re not listening.”

Eli looked up quickly. “I am.”

“No, you’re phone-listening.”

Grace froze near the laundry basket.

Eli lowered the phone.

“What does that mean?”

Noah crossed his arms. “It means your face acts like it’s listening, but your eyes are not.”

The words landed harder than Eli wanted to admit.

Lily looked at him with the open honesty of a child waiting to see what kind of adult he would be.

Grace said nothing.

She did not have to.

Eli turned the phone screen down on the counter and pulled out a chair.

“You’re right,” he said.

Noah looked surprised.

Eli leaned forward. “I’m sorry. Tell me again from the pirate ship.”

Noah studied him for a moment, deciding whether the apology was real.

Then he started over.

This time, Eli listened.

The dream made no sense.

That did not matter.

When Noah finished, Eli asked three questions about the dog. Noah answered each one with great detail.

After breakfast, Eli walked into the bedroom and placed his phone in the top drawer of his dresser.

Grace followed him to the doorway.

“That was important,” she said.

“I hated that he noticed.”

“But he did.”

“I know.”

Grace leaned against the doorframe. “This is what we talked about. If the message is about parents waking up, then you have to let your children wake you up too.”

Eli nodded.

He was beginning to understand that conviction did not always arrive through sermons, Scripture, or private prayer.

Sometimes it came from an eight-year-old saying, you’re phone-listening.

He looked at the closed drawer.

“I need help with this.”

Grace nodded. “Yes, you do.”

“I mean it.”

“So do I.”

Eli smiled faintly. “You are very consistent.”

“That is one of my spiritual gifts.”

He laughed, then grew serious again.

“I invited Mason and Rachel over Friday.”

Grace raised her eyebrows.

“You did?”

“I meant to ask you first.”

“Did you?”

“No.”

She stared at him.

“I realize that was wrong as soon as I said it out loud.”

“When Friday?”

“Dinner.”

“With her kids?”

“Yes.”

“And you invited them before asking the person who will probably help cook, clean, plan, and make sure this house does not look like a disaster zone?”

Eli closed his eyes.

“Yes.”

Grace stepped fully into the room.

“Eli.”

“I know.”

“No, I need you to hear this. I want them here. I think it is good. But if God is calling us to minister to people, that does not mean you volunteer my labor without talking to me.”

That one cut cleanly.

Not cruelly.

Cleanly.

Eli looked at her.

“You’re right.”

“I know I am.”

“I am sorry.”

Grace waited.

He continued, “I should have asked you first. I got ahead of myself.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I was thinking about helping Rachel and Mason.”

“I know.”

“But I forgot to honor you in it.”

Grace’s face softened slightly.

“Yes.”

Eli stepped closer.

“I’m sorry.”

She nodded.

“I forgive you.”

Then she pointed at him.

“But you are helping clean.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And cook.”

“Yes.”

“And you are texting Rachel to ask if anyone has food allergies.”

“I can do that.”

“And you are not turning Friday night into a counseling session, sermon, or strategy meeting.”

Eli paused.

Grace tilted her head.

He said, “I can also do that.”

“Good.”

She started to walk away, then stopped.

“And Eli?”

“Yeah?”

“This is exactly why the first ministry is home.”

He watched her leave.

The truth followed her out.

Friday evening came with rain.

It tapped against the windows and softened the sound of tires on the street. The sky had turned dark early, and the porch light made a pale circle on the front steps.

Inside, the Carter house smelled like chili, cornbread, and lemon cleaner.

Grace had made the chili.

Eli had made the cornbread from a box and had only burned one edge, which he considered measurable growth.

The children had been given simple instructions.

No fighting.

No wild running.

No asking Rachel’s children personal questions.

No mentioning that Mason once swallowed a bug on a dare in high school.

That last rule was mostly for Eli.

At 5:58, Mason's truck pulled into the driveway.

At 5:59, Rachel's car parked behind it.

At 6:00, Owen removed both socks.

Grace looked down at him.

"Of course."

The doorbell rang.

Lily ran toward the door.

Eli caught her gently by the shoulders.

"Remember. Calm."

Lily took a deep breath, then opened the door with the seriousness of a hotel clerk.

"Welcome to our house," she said.

Mason stood on the porch holding a two-liter bottle of soda.

He looked at Eli. "Did she practice that?"

"No," Eli said. "That was all natural."

Rachel stood behind him with her children. Her son, Tyler, wore a hoodie and kept his hands in the front pocket. Her daughter, Emma, held Mr. Pickles the rabbit under one arm.

Grace stepped forward.

"Come in out of the rain."

Rachel smiled nervously. "Thank you for having us."

"We're glad you're here," Grace said.

Mason handed Eli the soda.

"I brought this because I'm classy."

Eli looked at the bottle. "Nothing says elegance like discount root beer."

"It was on sale."

"That tracks."

Mason grinned, and some of the tension broke.

The children disappeared toward the living room after a brief period of awkward staring. Noah showed Tyler a box of toy cars. Lily introduced Emma to every stuffed animal she owned, including two with backstories long enough to require patience. Owen followed everyone while carrying one sock and shouting incomplete words.

The adults moved into the kitchen.

Rachel looked around. "Your house is nice."

Grace laughed softly. “You are seeing the cleaned-for-company version.”

“That still counts.”

“It does,” Grace said. “But I believe in honest advertising.”

Eli took bowls from the cabinet. Mason leaned against the counter until Grace handed him spoons.

“Make yourself useful,” she said.

Mason looked at Eli. “She always like this?”

“Yes,” Eli said.

Grace smiled. “Careful.”

Mason held up the spoons. “I am useful now.”

They filled bowls, passed cornbread, poured drinks, and gathered everyone around the table.

It was crowded.

Noah sat beside Tyler.

Lily sat beside Emma.

Owen sat between Grace and Eli because no one trusted him near the cornbread unsupervised.

Mason sat at one end of the table, looking like a man who expected someone to ask him to pray and was already planning an escape.

Eli noticed and almost smiled.

Instead, he looked at Grace.

She nodded.

Eli bowed his head.

“Lord, thank You for this food and for the people at this table. Help our homes belong to You. Help us love each other well tonight. Amen.”

“Amen,” Grace said.

“Amen,” Lily echoed.

Owen shouted, “Men!”

Mason pointed at him. “That kid gets it.”

Rachel laughed.

It was the first time Eli had heard her laugh.

It changed her face.

Dinner started carefully.

People passed bowls and asked safe questions.

School.

Work.

Weather.

Whether the chili was too spicy.
Tyler said it was not spicy at all, then drank half his water.
Noah noticed but did not comment, which Eli counted as maturity.
Emma whispered something to Lily, and Lily whispered back with the seriousness of a diplomat.
Mason ate fast.
Grace noticed.
“Mason, no one is taking it from you.”
He looked up. “Old habit.”
Rachel glanced at him.
Something unspoken passed between them.
Eli caught it but did not ask.
That was new for him too.
Not every open door needed to be walked through immediately.
After a while, conversation loosened.
Mason told a story about Eli in high school getting his truck stuck in a field after insisting he knew a shortcut.
Eli objected.
“That field was wetter than it looked.”
Mason pointed his spoon at him. “You said, and I quote, “Trust me.””
Grace looked at Eli. “That sounds familiar.”
“It was a long time ago.”
“You still say that before bad ideas,” she said.
Rachel smiled into her bowl.
Noah leaned forward. “Did Dad get in trouble?”
“Yes,” Mason said.
“No,” Eli said at the same time.
The kids laughed.
Grace shook her head.
For a few minutes, the table felt normal.
Not heavy.
Not spiritual in an obvious way.
Just human.
Bowls.
Laughter.
Children interrupting.
Rain against the windows.
Eli realized he had missed this.

Not because they never had people over, but because he had started thinking of ministry as messages, posts, comments, prayer requests, and public words.

But this was ministry too.

Maybe more than the rest.

A table could do things a post could not.

A table made people slow down.

A table gave pain a place to sit without being exposed too quickly.

A table allowed laughter and grief to exist in the same room.

A table reminded people they were not content to be consumed.

They were souls to be loved.

After dinner, the kids went to the living room with strict instructions not to destroy anything that could not be repaired with reasonable effort.

Owen went with them because he refused to be excluded from any gathering, even one involving children twice his size.

The adults stayed at the table with coffee.

The dishes sat stacked near the sink, waiting.

Grace did not rush to move them.

Rachel wrapped both hands around her mug.

“This was good,” she said.

“I’m glad,” Grace said.

Rachel looked toward the living room. “The kids needed it.”

“Maybe you did too,” Grace said gently.

Rachel nodded.

Mason leaned back in his chair. “I needed chili.”

Rachel gave him a look.

He shrugged. “What? I’m participating.”

Eli smiled but stayed quiet.

He had promised himself he would not force the conversation.

For a while, no one said much.

Then Rachel spoke.

“I was embarrassed on Sunday.”

Grace looked at her. “Because you cried?”

Rachel nodded.

“I hate crying in front of people.”

Mason looked at his coffee. “You always did.”

Rachel glanced at him.

There was tension there again.

Old tension.

Family tension.

Rachel looked back at Grace.

“I felt like everyone could see everything wrong with me.”

Grace shook her head. “I do not think they saw what was wrong with you. I think they saw someone tired enough to stop pretending.”

Rachel’s eyes filled quickly, but she did not cry.

“That feels worse.”

“It does at first,” Grace said.

Eli listened to his wife and felt grateful.

She was not performing. She was not trying to sound wise. She was simply telling the truth with gentleness.

Rachel looked toward the living room again.

“I have made a lot of mistakes.”

Grace nodded. “So have I.”

Rachel seemed surprised.

Grace continued, “Different mistakes maybe. Different circumstances. But mistakes, yes.”

Eli looked down at his coffee.

He knew some of those mistakes.

So did Grace.

Their home had not been built by perfect people. It had been built by mercy, apology, forgiveness, work, and starting over more times than anyone else saw.

Rachel rubbed the side of her mug with her thumb.

“After the divorce, I just shut down. I went to work. Came home. Let the kids watch whatever kept them quiet. I told myself it was temporary, but temporary became normal.”

Mason stared at the table.

Rachel’s voice tightened.

“Tyler used to ask me to read to him. I would tell him later. Then later would never come. Emma wanted me to pray with her after bad dreams. I did sometimes. Then I stopped.”

Grace reached across the table and touched Rachel’s hand.

Rachel swallowed.

“I read Eli’s post and got mad at first.”

Eli looked up.

Rachel gave a weak smile. “Sorry.”

“No,” Eli said. “I understand.”

“I thought, great, another person telling parents we are failing. But then I kept reading it. And it was the line about repenting when we fail and getting back up. I think I had decided failure was my identity. Like if I already failed, why try?”

The room went still.

Mason’s jaw tightened.

Eli did not speak.

Grace said softly, “Failure can be an event without becoming your name.”

Rachel closed her eyes.

A tear slipped down one cheek.

“That is hard to believe.”

“I know.”

Mason cleared his throat.

Everyone looked at him.

He sat forward, elbows on the table.

“Rach,” he said, then stopped.

Rachel looked at him carefully.

Mason rubbed his hands together.

“I should have helped more.”

Rachel’s face changed.

Mason kept his eyes on the table.

“I knew things were bad. I knew you were drowning. I made jokes. I checked in sometimes. But I stayed just far enough away that I didn’t have to actually be responsible for anything.”

Rachel stared at him.

Mason let out a breath.

“I’m sorry.”

For once, there was no joke after it.

No escape hatch.

No sarcasm.

Just the apology.

Rachel pressed her lips together.

Eli looked away, giving them the small mercy of not being watched too closely.

Grace lowered her eyes too.

The rain filled the silence.

Finally, Rachel said, “I was angry at you.”

“I know.”

“No, I mean really angry.”

“I know.”

“You acted like everything was a punchline.”

Mason nodded.

“Because if it was funny, I didn’t have to feel it.”

Rachel looked at him for a long moment.

Then she wiped her face.

“I don’t forgive you all at once,” she said.

Mason nodded again. “That’s fair.”

“But I want to.”

His eyes lifted.

Rachel looked toward the living room.

“And I need help.”

“I know,” Mason said. “I mean, I don’t know. But I know you do.”

It was clumsy.

But it was honest.

Rachel gave a small, broken laugh.

“That might be the most Mason apology ever.”

He smiled faintly. “I am new here.”

Grace smiled.

Eli felt the quiet weight of the moment.

This was not revival like people imagined it.

No crowd.

No altar music.

No dramatic scene.

Just a brother admitting he had stayed distant.

A sister admitting she needed help.

A kitchen table holding the truth without collapsing under it.

Small fire.

Still burning.

Later, while the kids played, Rachel helped Grace with the dishes despite Grace telling her not to.

Mason and Eli stepped onto the porch.

The rain had slowed to a mist.

Mason leaned against the railing and looked out at the wet street.

For once, he did not seem eager to talk.

Eli let the silence stretch.

Finally, Mason said, “I didn’t expect tonight to go like that.”

“No?”

“I expected chili and awkward church talk.”

“We did have chili.”

“Yeah. But not the other thing.”

Eli nodded.

Mason rubbed the back of his neck.

“Rachel’s been a mess for a while.”

“I figured.”

“I knew she needed help. I just didn’t want to get pulled into it.”

Eli looked at him. “Why?”

Mason gave him a look. “Because it’s hard.”

“That’s honest.”

“And because I don’t have my own life together. What am I going to do? Help somebody else?”

Eli leaned on the railing beside him.

“I’ve been asking the same question.”

Mason looked over.

“You?”

“Yes.”

“You’re the one posting spiritual wake-up calls.”

“That does not mean I know what I’m doing.”

Mason smiled. “That actually makes me feel better.”

“It should probably concern you.”

“It does both.”

The two men stood quietly.

Across the street, water ran along the curb.

Mason looked down.

“I think I might come back Sunday.”

Eli tried not to react too strongly.

“To church?”

“No, to your porch in dress clothes.”

Eli smiled. “I wanted to clarify.”

“Yeah. Church.”

“That’s good.”

Mason pointed at him. “Don’t make it a thing.”

“I won’t.”

“And don’t tell Rachel I said it.”

“She will know when you show up.”

“That is a flaw in my plan.”

Eli laughed.

Mason grew serious again.

“Do you really believe people can change?”

Eli looked at him.

“Yes.”

“Just like that?”

“No.”

“Then how?”

Eli thought about Pastor Brooks. Rachel. His own list tucked inside his Bible. Noah calling him out for phone-listening.

“One faithful step at a time,” he said.

Mason stared into the mist.

“That your thing now?”

“I guess it is becoming one.”

Mason nodded slowly.

“I can maybe do one step.”

Eli said nothing for a moment.

Then he answered, “That is enough to start.”

Inside, Grace and Rachel stood at the sink.

Rachel washed.

Grace dried.

The sounds from the living room were loud but happy.

Rachel glanced toward the porch, where Mason and Eli stood outside.

“He seems different,” she said.

“Mason?”

Rachel nodded.

Grace looked out the window.

“Maybe he is tired of hiding behind jokes.”

Rachel handed her a plate.

“He’s always done that.”

“People learn how to survive. Then sometimes they have to unlearn it.”

Rachel was quiet.

After a moment, she said, “Do you ever get scared?”

Grace smiled faintly. “Every day.”

Rachel looked surprised.

“You seem calm.”

“That is not the same thing as never being scared.”

“No, I mean with Eli. With all this online stuff. People listening to him.”

Grace dried the plate slowly.

“Yes,” she said. “I get scared.”

“Why?”

“Because attention changes people if they do not stay surrendered. And because good things can still become dangerous when they get out of order.”

Rachel nodded.

“Do you think this is good?”

Grace looked toward the porch again.

“I think God is doing something good. I also think Eli is still human.”

Rachel smiled slightly. “That sounds like marriage.”

“It is definitely marriage.”

They both laughed softly.

Rachel handed her another dish.

“On Sunday, when Pastor Brooks prayed for me, I felt something.”

Grace listened.

“I don’t know how to describe it. Not fixed. Not suddenly okay. Just... not alone.”

Grace nodded. “That matters.”

“I don’t know how to pray anymore.”

“There is no fancy way.”

“That’s what Eli told that woman online, right?”

Grace smiled. “Yes.”

Rachel looked down at the soapy water.

“What do I say?”

Grace leaned against the counter.

“Start with the truth.”

“What truth?”

“Whatever is real.”

Rachel swallowed.

Grace continued, “God, I am tired. God, I am angry. God, I am sorry. God, I do not know how to fix this. God, help me take one step. Start there.”

Rachel blinked back tears.

“I can do that.”

“Yes,” Grace said. “You can.”

When the dishes were done, everyone gathered in the living room.

The children had created a complicated arrangement of blankets, pillows, and chairs that they insisted was a fortress. Owen had been declared guard, though he had abandoned his post twice to look for snacks.

Tyler seemed more relaxed than he had at church. He and Noah were discussing dogs again, this time with Emma and Lily voting on names.

“Tank,” Noah said.

“Princess,” Lily said.

“For a boy dog?” Tyler asked.

“Dogs can be named anything,” Lily said.

Emma lifted Mr. Pickles. “He says the dog should be named Carrot.”

Mason sat on the couch. “I vote for Carrot.”

Eli shook his head. “You do not get a vote.”

“I brought root beer.”

“Still no.”

Rachel sat on the edge of the chair, watching her kids.

There was a softness in her face now.

Not peace exactly.

But a little less fear.

Grace brought out cookies because she said coffee required cookies and cookies required no explanation.

After the kids each had one, Eli felt a nudge in his spirit.

Not dramatic.

Just clear.

Pray.

He resisted for half a second.

Not because he did not want to pray, but because he did not want to make the evening strange. He remembered Grace’s warning about not turning dinner into a sermon or counseling session.

He looked at her.

Somehow, she already knew.

She gave a small nod.

Eli cleared his throat.

“Before you all head out, would it be alright if we prayed together?”

Rachel nodded immediately.

Mason looked at the floor, then said, “Yeah. That’s fine.”

The children gathered loosely. Owen tried to climb onto Eli’s lap and succeeded. Lily held Emma’s hand. Noah stood beside Tyler, who looked uncomfortable but did not move away.

Eli bowed his head.

He kept it simple.

“Lord, thank You for tonight. Thank You for food, laughter, and honest words. Thank You that failure does not have to be the end of the story. Help each of our homes belong to You. Give Rachel strength. Help Mason take the next faithful step. Protect these children. Teach all of us how to love You and each other better. Amen.”

For a moment, no one moved.

Then Owen shouted, “Men!”

Mason laughed under his breath.

Rachel wiped her face again, but she was smiling.

As they gathered coats and shoes, Emma hugged Lily goodbye. Tyler told Noah he would think about the name Tank. Mason thanked Grace for dinner in a way that was almost serious.

Rachel paused at the door.

She looked at Grace first.

“Thank you.”

Then she looked at Eli.

“And thank you for the post. I hated it, but I needed it.”

Eli smiled gently.

“I understand.”

Mason stepped onto the porch and looked back.

“See you Sunday, Reverend.”

Eli pointed at him. “Still no.”

Mason grinned. “We’ll workshop it.”

Then they were gone.

The cars pulled out of the driveway and disappeared into the wet night.

Eli closed the door.

The house was suddenly quiet except for the children already arguing about who got to keep the fortress up until morning.

Grace looked at the living room.

“The fortress comes down.”

All three children objected.

Grace held up one hand.

“Tomorrow is another day for architecture.”

Eli started gathering blankets.

Noah helped for once without being asked.

Lily carried pillows.

Owen dragged one blanket in a circle and contributed very little.

After the kids were in bed, Eli and Grace returned to the kitchen.

The counters were clean.

The table was wiped.

The candle had burned low.

Eli stood beside it, watching the small flame move.

Grace came up beside him.

“That was a good night,” she said.

“Yes.”

“You did not preach.”

“I tried.”

“You did well.”

He smiled faintly. “Thank you.”

Grace leaned against him.

For a while, they stood there in silence.

Then Eli said, “I think I understand something better now.”

“What?”

He looked at the table.

“I keep thinking God is using the posts. And maybe He is. But I think the posts are just doors. People still need somewhere to walk into.”

Grace nodded slowly.

“A table,” she said.

“A church.”

“A family.”

“A conversation.”

“A prayer.”

Grace looked at the candle.

“That matters.”

Eli nodded.

“It also means this gets harder.”

“Yes,” she said.

He looked at her.

She did not soften it.

That was one of the reasons he trusted her.

She would not pretend obedience was easy just to make him feel brave.

Eli sat down at the table and opened his notebook.

Grace sat across from him.

He wrote:

Posts can open doors, but people need tables.

He underlined it.

Then he wrote:

Do not call parents to wake up without helping them stand.

Grace watched him write.

“That should be part of the message,” she said.

“It is.”

He looked at the candle again.

The flame was small.

Barely enough to light the center of the table.

But it was real.

And in that quiet kitchen, after chili, confession, prayer, and children’s laughter, Eli began to understand that awakening was not only something shouted to a crowd.

It was something practiced in a home.

It was parents putting phones in drawers.

It was children being heard.

It was friends coming back to church.

It was siblings apologizing.

It was a tired mother learning to pray again.

It was a sarcastic man admitting he could maybe take one step.

It was dishes washed side by side.

It was grace at the table.

Eli closed the notebook.

Grace reached across and took his hand.

Together they bowed their heads.

No one watched.

No one shared it.

No one counted it.

But the fire kept burning.

PART TWO

The Calling

Chapter Six

Watchman

Eli met Pastor Brooks again the following Tuesday morning.

This time, they met at New Hope instead of the diner.

The church was quiet when Eli arrived. No music. No children running through halls. No conversations in the lobby. Just the low hum of lights and the soft sound of rainwater dripping from the roof outside.

The storm from the weekend had passed, but the ground was still wet. Gray clouds sat low over the parking lot, and a thin mist clung to the grass behind the church.

Eli parked near the side entrance and turned off the truck.

For a moment, he did not get out.

His phone sat in the cupholder.

Face down.

He had started doing that more often.

It helped.

Not completely, but enough.

The posts were still spreading. Not like wildfire, but steadily. People were still sending messages. Parents. Grandparents. Pastors. A few angry strangers. A few people Eli was not sure were even real.

Some wanted prayer.

Some wanted advice.

Some wanted a fight.

Some wanted Eli to say more than he knew.

That last group worried him.

The night before, a man had asked Eli to make a public statement about a complicated issue involving a school district three states away. Eli had read the message twice and felt the old urge to answer immediately. The topic mattered. Children were involved. Parents were angry. Screenshots were circulating.

But Eli did not know the facts.

So he wrote back:

I care about this, but I do not know enough to speak responsibly. Pray, gather facts, talk to people locally, and protect your children with wisdom. I will not pretend certainty where I do not have it.

The man had replied:

Weak.

Eli had stared at that word for too long.

Weak.

It irritated him more than he wanted to admit.

Part of him wanted to prove he was not weak. He wanted to post something strong, something sharp, something that would make people nod and share.

Instead, he put the phone away and helped Grace fold laundry.

That felt less impressive.

It was probably more faithful.

Still, the word had followed him into the morning.

Weak.

Eli grabbed his Bible from the passenger seat and stepped out of the truck.

Pastor Brooks was waiting near the side door with a mug in his hand.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Morning.”

“You look like you’re carrying something.”

Eli almost laughed. “Is that pastor vision?”

“No. You are just not very hard to read.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“It can be a mercy.”

Pastor Brooks unlocked the door and led him inside.

They walked down a short hallway lined with old photographs of church picnics, youth groups, Christmas plays, baptisms, and men standing around grills with the solemn focus of people doing important work.

Eli slowed near one photo.

A group of men and women stood outside the church holding shovels. The picture looked old, maybe from the 1980s.

“Building project?” he asked.

Pastor Brooks looked back.

“Yes. They added the fellowship hall.”

“You were here then?”

“No. Before my time.”

Pastor Brooks paused beside him.

“Most of the people who built what we use are no longer here.”

Eli looked at the photo.

“That feels important.”

“It is,” Pastor Brooks said. “Faithfulness often benefits people who will never know your name.”

They continued down the hallway.

Pastor Brooks’s office was small and full of books. Not decorative books chosen by color, but worn books with bent corners, slips of paper, and handwritten notes sticking out from the pages. A wooden cross sat on one shelf. A framed photo of his wife and children rested on the desk. Beside it was a picture of grandchildren.

The pastor motioned toward a chair.

“Coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

“You sure?”

“I’ve had too much already.”

“That is usually when people need it least and want it most.”

Eli smiled. “Exactly.”

Pastor Brooks sat across from him, not behind the desk, but in the other chair near the window.

That small choice made the room feel less formal.

“So,” Pastor Brooks said, “tell me what has happened since Sunday.”

Eli told him.

He told him about Mason and Rachel coming to dinner.

About Rachel admitting she did not know how to pray.

About Mason apologizing.

About the family reset.

About Noah calling him out for phone-listening.

Pastor Brooks smiled at that.

“Children have a way of reaching places sermons cannot.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And the posts?”

Eli exhaled slowly.

“They are still spreading. People are responding. Some are angry. Some are hurting. Some want me to speak about things I do not know enough about.”

“That will increase.”

“I figured.”

“Good. Expect it.”

Eli looked down at his Bible.

“One man called me weak because I would not make a statement.”

Pastor Brooks did not answer right away.

The silence made Eli look up.

The older man studied him.

“Did that bother you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Eli shifted in the chair.

“Because I do not want to be weak.”

“That is not an answer. That is a reaction.”

Eli sighed.

Pastor Brooks waited.

Finally, Eli said, “Because I think part of me is afraid people will stop listening if I am careful.”

Pastor Brooks nodded slowly.

“That is worth paying attention to.”

Eli did not like how true that felt.

Pastor Brooks leaned forward.

“Eli, the digital world rewards speed, certainty, and outrage. Wisdom is often slower than all three.”

Eli reached for his notebook.

Pastor Brooks smiled slightly. “You may want to write that down.”

“I was about to.”

He wrote:

The digital world rewards speed, certainty, and outrage. Wisdom is often slower.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“If you are going to speak, you must learn the difference between courage and reaction. Courage obeys God. Reaction obeys pressure.”

Eli wrote that down too.

Courage obeys God.

Reaction obeys pressure.

The words felt like a fence being built inside him.

A good fence.

A needed one.

Pastor Brooks opened his Bible to Ezekiel.

Eli recognized the book but not the exact passage.

“I want to show you something,” Pastor Brooks said. “Have you ever studied the watchman passages?”

“A little.”

“What do you remember?”

“That the watchman warns people when danger is coming.”

“Yes.”

Pastor Brooks turned the Bible toward him.

“In Ezekiel, God gives the prophet the image of a watchman. The watchman stands on the wall. If he sees the sword coming and blows the trumpet, the people are warned. If they ignore the warning, that is on them. But if he sees danger and does not warn them, their blood is required at his hand.”

Eli listened carefully.

He had heard the passage before, but it felt heavier now.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Many people like the idea of being a watchman because it sounds important. It can make them feel brave, special, even superior.”

Eli looked up.

“But the role is not glamorous,” Pastor Brooks said. “A true watchman does not enjoy danger. He does not invent threats to feel useful. He does not shout for attention when there is no sword. He does not mock the people sleeping in the city. He watches because he loves what is inside the walls.”

Eli sat very still.

Pastor Brooks held his gaze.

“That matters. If you warn people because you despise them, you are not functioning like a biblical watchman. If you warn them because you love them and fear God, that is different.”

Eli looked down at the open Bible.

He thought of comment threads.

He thought of people calling each other fools.

He thought of his own anger rising when strangers mocked him.

He thought of how easy it was to start loving the warning more than the people being warned.

“That is hard,” he said.

“Yes,” Pastor Brooks said.

“I see things that make me angry.”

“You should.”

Eli looked at him.

Pastor Brooks continued. "Some things deserve anger. Evil should not make us shrug. Harm to children should not make us calm in the wrong way. Lies should not make us passive. But anger is a dangerous fuel. It burns hot and dirty when it is not submitted to God."

Eli wrote that down.

Anger is a dangerous fuel.

Pastor Brooks sat back.

"The Bible says, 'Be angry and do not sin.' That means anger itself is not always sin. But it becomes sin quickly when pride grabs it."

Eli nodded slowly.

"I think that happens to me."

"It happens to many people."

"I do not want it to."

"Then do not hide it. Bring it into prayer. Bring it into accountability. Let people who love you tell you when your tone is no longer clean."

"Grace does that."

"Good. Listen to her."

"I try."

Pastor Brooks raised an eyebrow.

"I am learning to try better," Eli said.

"That is more honest."

They sat quietly for a moment.

Rainwater dripped outside the window.

Pastor Brooks turned a few pages in his Bible.

"I also want you to understand something else," he said. "There is a difference between a prophet and a pundit."

Eli looked at him. "That sounds like another thing I need to write down."

"It is."

Eli wrote the line.

There is a difference between a prophet and a pundit.

Pastor Brooks continued.

"A pundit comments on everything. A prophet speaks what God gives him. A pundit needs constant material. A prophet can be silent. A pundit feeds on attention. A prophet fears the Lord. A pundit wants to be proven right. A prophet wants people to repent and live."

Eli stopped writing.

That one cut deep.

Pastor Brooks noticed.

“Which one tempts you?”

Eli looked at the notebook.

“The pundit.”

The answer came faster than he expected.

Pastor Brooks nodded. “Good. Name it.”

“I do not want to be that.”

“Then do not feed it.”

“How?”

“Do not comment on everything. Do not confuse your opinion with God’s word. Do not make every issue central. Do not use people’s fear to hold their attention. Do not let your audience train your conscience.”

Eli wrote as fast as he could.

The pastor waited.

When Eli finished, Pastor Brooks added, “And do not become addicted to being the one who sees what others do not.”

Eli looked up slowly.

Pastor Brooks’s voice softened.

“That addiction is common among people who watch corruption, deception, and cultural decay closely. They begin with concern, but over time they enjoy feeling awake while others are asleep. That is spiritually dangerous.”

Eli felt exposed.

Not accused.

Exposed.

There was a difference.

“I have felt that,” he admitted.

Pastor Brooks nodded. “Most watchmen have.”

“What do I do with it?”

“Repent of it. Regularly.”

Eli breathed out.

That answer was not complicated.

It was just unwelcome.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Remember, the goal is not to be awake and angry. The goal is to be awake and faithful.”

Eli wrote it down.

Not awake and angry. Awake and faithful.

Pastor Brooks stood and walked to his bookshelf.

He pulled down a worn copy of a devotional and slipped a folded paper from inside it.

“I wrote this years ago,” he said. “Not for publication. Just for myself.”

He handed it to Eli.

The paper had four lines written in blue ink.

Warn without hatred.

Discern without pride.

Speak without performance.

Serve without needing to be seen.

Eli read it twice.

Then again.

“This is good.”

“It has been useful to me.”

“Can I copy it?”

“You can keep it.”

Eli looked up. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Eli folded the paper carefully and placed it inside his Bible.

“Thank you.”

Pastor Brooks sat back down.

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

“You are not.”

“I want to sober you.”

“That is happening.”

“Good.”

Eli rested his Bible on his knee.

“Do you think I should stop posting?”

Pastor Brooks looked at him for a moment.

“I think you should stop asking that question in the abstract.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is too broad. Ask better questions. Did I pray first? Am I speaking from Scripture, wisdom, or reaction? Is this mine to say? Is it true? Is it useful? Is it loving? Is it necessary now? What does Grace think? What would I say if the person I am addressing sat across my table?”

Eli wrote each question down.

Especially the last one.
What would I say if the person sat across my table?
That question changed things.
Online, it was easy to speak to categories.
Parents.
Critics.
Churches.
The culture.
The lost.
The asleep.
But at a table, people had names.
Rachel.
Mason.
Dana.
The cashier.
The woman on the bathroom floor.
The man in the truck.
Even angry people had stories.
That did not mean Eli should soften truth until it became useless.
But it did mean truth should not be stripped of mercy just because
the screen made people look less human.
Pastor Brooks watched him carefully.
“Do you see it?”
Eli nodded.
“I think so.”
“The digital age lets us speak to crowds while forgetting how to love
persons.”
Eli wrote that down too.
His hand was starting to cramp.

Pastor Brooks then did something Eli did not expect.
He asked about Grace.
“How is your wife?”
Eli paused.
“She is good.”
Pastor Brooks waited.
Eli smiled faintly. “That was a weak answer.”
“Yes.”
Eli closed the notebook.

“She is steady. But I think this is heavy on her too. Maybe heavier than she says.”

“Likely.”

“She believes God is doing something.”

“And?”

“She is afraid I will get pulled into it in the wrong way.”

“Is she right to fear that?”

Eli did not want to answer.

So he answered honestly.

“Yes.”

Pastor Brooks nodded.

“Then honor that fear. Do not dismiss it as lack of faith.”

“I would not.”

“Maybe not out loud.”

Eli looked at him.

Pastor Brooks’s eyes were kind but direct.

“Men sometimes hear caution from their wives as resistance when it is actually protection.”

Eli sat back.

That one needed no explanation.

He had already done that more than once.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“If Grace says slow down, you need to listen. If she says the children are feeling your absence, you need to listen. If she says your tone has changed, you need to listen. Not because she is always right about every detail, but because she sees parts of you your audience never will.”

Eli nodded.

“I know.”

“Good. Then live like you know.”

Eli almost smiled.

Pastor Brooks had a way of sounding gentle and blunt at the same time.

It reminded him of Grace.

Maybe that was why he trusted him.

Before Eli left, Pastor Brooks took him into the sanctuary.

It was empty.

Rows of wooden pews stretched toward the pulpit. The cross on the wall stood simple and unlit. The baptismal area was closed. A piano sat to one side, covered with a cloth.

Pastor Brooks walked slowly down the center aisle.

Eli followed.

When they reached the front, the pastor turned toward the pews.

“I come in here sometimes when no one is around,” he said.

“To pray?”

“Yes. And to remember.”

“Remember what?”

“That the church is not mine.”

Eli looked around.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“When people praise a sermon, the church is not mine. When they criticize one, the church is not mine. When attendance rises, the church is not mine. When people leave, the church is not mine.”

He looked at Eli.

“If God gives you any influence, you will need to say the same thing.”

Eli looked toward the empty pews.

“The platform is not mine,” he said quietly.

“Nor the people.”

Eli nodded.

“Nor the results.”

Pastor Brooks smiled slightly.

“Exactly.”

They stood in silence.

Then Pastor Brooks said, “Kneel with me.”

Eli followed him to the front pew.

Both men knelt.

The carpet pressed against Eli’s knees.

Pastor Brooks prayed first.

“Lord, You see this man. You know what is from You and what is not. Purify what is from You. Kill what is not. Guard his home. Guard his marriage. Guard his children. Guard his heart from pride, fear, anger, and performance. Make him useful, but keep him small in his own eyes.”

Eli bowed his head lower.

The words landed with weight.

Useful.

But small.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“If You have called him to warn, teach him to warn with tears. If You have called him to speak, teach him to speak under authority. If You have called him to help awaken families, begin daily in his own home. Let no public fruit grow from private neglect.”

Eli felt his throat tighten.

Then Pastor Brooks stopped.

The silence waited.

Eli knew it was his turn.

He did not feel ready.

But prayer, he was learning, did not require readiness.

It required honesty.

“Lord,” Eli said quietly, “I do not trust myself with attention.”

The words sounded strange out loud.

But true.

“I like it more than I want to admit. I like being heard. I like being right. I like when people say something helped them. And I hate when people mock me.”

He paused.

Pastor Brooks stayed quiet beside him.

“I do not want to become proud. I do not want to use Your name to build my own. I do not want to hurt my family while claiming to help others. I do not want to speak from anger and call it courage.”

His voice broke slightly.

“So if this is not You, stop me. If it is You, discipline me. Keep me close. Keep me clean. Help me tell the truth because I love people, not because I need to win.”

He stopped there.

That was all he had.

Pastor Brooks placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Amen,” the pastor said.

“Amen,” Eli answered.

They remained kneeling for another moment.

When Eli stood, he felt tired.

But clear.

Not light.

Not excited.

Clear.

There was a difference.

On the drive home, Eli did not listen to anything.

No radio.

No podcast.

No news.

No commentary.

Just the sound of the road under the tires.

He thought about watchmen.

He had always imagined a watchman standing high above a city, seeing what others could not.

That was part of it.

But now he thought more about what was behind the wall.

Families.

Children.

Old people.

Wounded people.

Busy people.

Distracted people.

People who did not know danger was near.

People who might hate the trumpet because it interrupted their sleep.

A true watchman did not sound the alarm because he enjoyed being loud.

He sounded it because he loved the city.

Eli turned onto his street.

The house came into view.

A bicycle lay in the yard near the porch. One of Lily's chalk drawings had been partly washed away by rain. A small muddy shoe sat upside down on the steps.

Eli smiled.

This was his city first.

This little house.

These children.

Grace.

This table.

These bedtime prayers.

If he could not watch here, he had no business warning anywhere else.

He pulled into the driveway and turned off the truck.

Before going inside, he picked up his phone.

There were notifications, of course.

There were always notifications now.

But he did not open them yet.

He opened a blank post.

Then he stopped and prayed.

“Lord, only if it is from You.”

The thought that came was simple.

He typed:

Parents, do not mistake panic for discernment. The goal is not to make our homes fearful. The goal is to make them faithful. Watch the gates, yes. Guard what enters, yes. But do it with prayer, wisdom, peace, and love. A watchman who hates the city is not fit to stand on the wall.

He read it several times.

Then he thought of Pastor Brooks.

Is it true?

Yes.

Is it useful?

He thought so.

Is it loving?

Yes.

Is it necessary now?

He waited.

No pressure.

No rush.

No need to feed the machine.

He closed the app without posting.

Then he sat there, surprised.

Maybe the words were for later.

Maybe they were just for him.

That was possible too.

Not every burden had to become content.

Eli put the phone in his pocket and stepped out of the truck.

Inside, Owen ran toward him with one sock on and one sock missing.

Lily shouted from the kitchen, “Dad, Noah says my drawing looks like a potato, but it is a horse!”

Noah yelled, “It looks like both!”

Grace appeared in the hallway, holding a laundry basket.

“You’re home early,” she said.

“A little.”

“Good. You can settle the potato horse dispute.”

Eli looked at the children.

Then at Grace.

Then back at the muddy shoe on the porch.

He felt the weight of the calling.

But he also felt the order of it.

This first.

Always this first.

He knelt to hug Owen, then walked inside.

That evening, Eli told Grace about the meeting.

They sat on the porch after the children were asleep. The air smelled like wet grass and woodsmoke from somewhere nearby.

Grace listened as he repeated Pastor Brooks’s words.

A burden is not the same as a platform.

Courage obeys God. Reaction obeys pressure.

Warn without hatred.

Discern without pride.

Speak without performance.

Serve without needing to be seen.

Grace sat quietly, wrapped in a blanket.

When Eli finished, she said, “I am thankful for him.”

“Me too.”

“What did you feel when he said all that?”

“Exposed.”

“That is not always bad.”

“No. It was good.”

He looked down at his hands.

“I almost posted something in the driveway.”

“What happened?”

“I didn’t.”

Grace turned toward him.

“Why?”

“I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to. So I didn’t.”

Grace smiled.

“That may be one of the best things you have done so far.”

“Not posting?”

“Yes.”

Eli leaned back.

“That feels strange.”

“Of course it does. The whole world is training us to believe every thought must be shared.”

He nodded.

“Pastor Brooks said not every burden has to become content.”

Grace looked at him.

“Write that down.”

“I already did.”

“Good.”

They sat together in the quiet.

Eli looked across the street at the dark windows of the neighboring houses.

He wondered what burdens lived inside them.

He wondered how many parents felt alone.

How many children were scared.

How many marriages were strained.

How many people were angry at God but secretly hoping He would answer anyway.

He still felt the urge to speak.

But now the urge had a frame around it.

A watchman did not shout at every shadow.

A watchman waited, watched, prayed, and warned when warning was required.

And when he warned, he remembered the city was full of people God loved.

That changed the sound of the trumpet.

Grace leaned her head against his shoulder.

“What now?” she asked.

Eli looked toward the house.

“Now I keep watch.”

She took his hand.

“Here first.”

He nodded.

“Here first.”

Inside, the house was quiet.

Outside, the world kept moving.

And somewhere between the two, Eli Carter began to understand that being a watchman was not about standing above people.

It was about staying awake for them.

Chapter Seven

Digital Babylon

Eli used to think distraction was harmless.

A few minutes here.

A quick scroll there.

A video while the coffee brewed.

A headline while the kids put on shoes.

A message answered at a red light.

A comment checked during commercials.

None of it felt serious in the moment.

That was the danger.

Most things that weakened a soul did not announce themselves as enemies. They arrived as convenience, entertainment, connection, information, and relief.

By Thursday morning, Eli had started to see his phone differently.

Not as evil.

That would have been too simple.

It was not evil when Grace sent him a grocery list. It was not evil when Mason texted to say Rachel was bringing the kids to church again. It was not evil when a tired mother asked for prayer at midnight or when a grandfather sent Eli a message saying he had read Scripture to his grandson for the first time.

The phone was not the problem by itself.

But it was a gate.

And gates mattered.

Eli stood in the kitchen before work, staring at his phone on the counter like it was a loaded tool.

Useful.

Dangerous.

Dependent on the hands holding it.

Owen sat in his booster seat eating scrambled eggs with both hands. Lily was under the table looking for a purple crayon she insisted had rolled there days ago. Noah sat with a notebook, drawing what appeared to be a battle scene involving a dog, a castle, and possibly a lawn mower.

Grace stood at the sink rinsing a pan.

Eli picked up his phone, unlocked it, then locked it again.

Grace looked over her shoulder.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to decide if I should check messages before work.”

“Should you?”

“That is what I am trying to decide.”

She dried her hands and turned to face him.

“Did you pray?”

“No.”

“Then probably not yet.”

Eli set the phone down.

“That answer is becoming annoying.”

“Truth often is.”

Noah looked up from his drawing. “What’s annoying?”

“Being responsible,” Eli said.

Noah nodded slowly. “Yeah. I hate that.”

Grace gave Eli a look.

Eli smiled. “He comes by it honestly.”

Lily crawled out from under the table holding the purple crayon in triumph.

“I found it!”

Owen clapped with eggs on his fingers.

Grace closed her eyes briefly. “Please do not clap eggs.”

Owen clapped again.

The morning continued.

But Eli’s eyes kept returning to the phone.

He was not drawn only by vanity now. That would have been easier to fight. Some of it was responsibility. People were writing to him. Real people. Hurting people. Parents trying to make changes. People returning to church. People asking how to pray.

That made ignoring the phone feel selfish.

But checking it too often had already hurt his family.

That made answering feel dangerous.

The tension followed him into the truck.

Before starting the engine, he bowed his head.

“Lord, teach me how to use this without being used by it.”

The prayer was short.

It was also honest.

Then he drove to work with the phone face down in the passenger seat.

At lunch, Eli sat in the breakroom because it was raining too hard to sit in his truck.

The television in the corner was on again with the sound off. A panel of people argued silently beneath a red banner that promised breaking news. No one in the room seemed to know what was breaking.

Three coworkers sat at the next table, each looking at a screen.

One laughed at something.

Another shook her head and said, "People are insane."

The third said, "That's why I don't read comments."

Then all three kept reading.

Eli unwrapped his sandwich and tried not to look at his own phone.

He failed after four minutes.

There were more messages.

One from Rachel.

I prayed with the kids last night. It was awkward. Tyler stared at the wall the whole time. Emma asked if God likes rabbits. I said yes because I didn't know what else to say. But we did it.

Eli smiled.

He wrote back:

That is a faithful step. Awkward does not mean bad. Keep going.

Another message was from Mason.

Rachel prayed with the kids. She told you already, didn't she? She's acting like she invented prayer now.

Eli laughed under his breath.

He replied:

Let her have the win.

Mason answered immediately.

Fine. Also I might come Sunday again. Do not alert the media.

Eli typed:

Too late. Press release drafted.

Mason sent back a thumbs-down emoji.

Eli was still smiling when a new message appeared from a man named Garrett.

The tone was different from the first line.

You are not going far enough.

Eli hesitated, then opened it.

The message continued:

Parents do not just need encouragement. They need to know who is behind this. The schools, the media, the tech companies, the politicians, all of it. You need to start naming names. Stop playing church and start exposing the machine.

Eli read it twice.

A week earlier, that message would have pulled him in quickly.

Not because every word was wrong.

That was what made it dangerous.

There were real problems. Institutions had failed. Technology companies did shape behavior. Schools were battlegrounds in many communities. Media could distort truth. Politicians often used families as talking points while helping create the conditions that weakened them.

But something about the message felt off.

Not entirely false.

Off.

The spirit of it felt hungry.

Not hungry for repentance.

Hungry for enemies.

Eli set the phone beside his sandwich.

Pastor Brooks's words returned.

A true watchman does not invent threats to feel useful.

Warn without hatred.

Discern without pride.

The digital world rewards speed, certainty, and outrage.

Eli picked up the phone and typed slowly.

There are real systems and people that deserve scrutiny. But if we teach parents to see enemies everywhere while neglecting prayer, repentance, Scripture, and their own homes, we have not helped them. We have only made them anxious and angry. I am not interested in building fear. I am interested in calling families back to faithfulness.

He stared at it.

Was that too soft?

Too careful?

Weak?

That word still bothered him.

He deleted the last sentence and rewrote it.

Truth matters. So does the spirit driving us.

He sent it.
Garrett replied less than a minute later.
You're controlled opposition.
Eli blinked.
Then he laughed once, quietly.
A coworker looked over.
"You okay?"
"Yeah," Eli said. "Just the internet being the internet."
He locked the phone and put it away.
His heart beat faster than it should have.
Controlled opposition.
That was a new one.
He wanted to defend himself.
He wanted to explain.
He wanted to prove he was not afraid.
Instead, he ate his sandwich.
It tasted like cardboard.
But he ate it anyway.

That evening, Pastor Brooks invited Eli to sit in on a small group at the church.

The group met in the fellowship hall every Thursday night.

Eli had expected a Bible study.

It was that, but not only that.

There were twelve people there. A retired couple. A young mother with a baby. Two men from the church Eli knew by sight but not well. Ruth Bell. A widower named Frank who wore suspenders and carried a Bible so marked up it looked like it had survived a war. A college student named Mara who had recently started coming to New Hope after what she called "a long season of bad choices and worse ideas."

Pastor Brooks opened with prayer, then looked around the room.

"Tonight, I want to talk about attention."

That got Eli's attention immediately.

Pastor Brooks smiled slightly when he noticed.

"Our age does not merely compete for our beliefs," he said. "It competes for our attention. And what holds our attention often shapes our worship."

Ruth nodded as if she had already settled this years ago.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“People think worship only happens when we sing. That is not true. Worship is also shown by what we trust, what we fear, what we obey, what we sacrifice for, and what we keep returning to for comfort.”

The young mother shifted the baby on her shoulder.

Frank said, “That’ll preach.”

Pastor Brooks smiled. “It may have to.”

He asked everyone to name one thing that competed for their attention more than it should.

The answers came slowly at first.

Work.

News.

Sports.

Shopping.

Worry.

Games.

Text messages.

Political arguments.

Short videos.

Approval.

Eli did not speak right away.

Then Ruth looked at him.

“What about you, young man?”

Eli almost smiled.

He had not been called young man in a while.

“My phone,” he said.

No one seemed surprised.

He added, “Not just wasting time. Sometimes it feels like responsibility. Messages. Prayer requests. People asking for help. But it still pulls me away from what is in front of me.”

The young mother nodded.

“That is how it gets me too,” she said. “I tell myself I am just looking up one parenting thing. Then twenty minutes later I am watching a woman organize a pantry I do not have.”

Several people laughed.

Mara leaned forward.

“I think the apps know when I’m lonely.”

The room got quiet.

She looked embarrassed after saying it.

Pastor Brooks did not let the moment pass.

“What do you mean?”

Mara shrugged.

“When I feel alone, I scroll more. And it’s like the phone gives me exactly enough to keep me there but never enough to actually make me feel better.”

Eli looked down at the table.

That was one of the clearest descriptions he had heard.

Exactly enough to keep me there.

Never enough to heal.

Pastor Brooks nodded slowly.

“That is important. Much of the digital world is designed to keep us engaged, not whole.”

Eli wrote that down.

Designed to keep us engaged, not whole.

Pastor Brooks opened to Romans.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

He looked around the table.

“Conformity is not always forced. Often, it is trained.”

That line made Eli stop writing for a second.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Repeated exposure trains us. Repeated fear trains us. Repeated outrage trains us. Repeated lust trains us. Repeated comparison trains us. Repeated foolishness trains us. And yes, repeated truth can train us too.”

Ruth said, “Amen.”

Pastor Brooks turned to Eli.

“You have used the phrase digital age. That is accurate. But perhaps we should also understand it as a place of exile.”

Eli looked up.

“What do you mean?”

Pastor Brooks folded his hands.

“Babylon in Scripture was a place of power, wealth, idolatry, pressure, compromise, and confusion. God’s people had to learn how to live faithfully there without becoming Babylonian in their souls.”

Eli sat back.

Digital Babylon.

The phrase formed in his mind before Pastor Brooks said it.

“We are not in ancient Babylon,” Pastor Brooks continued. “But we live under systems that disciple us toward distraction, appetite, fear,

image, pride, and self-rule. Families must learn how to live faithfully in that environment without letting it form their children unchallenged.”

Eli wrote the phrase at the top of the page.

Digital Babylon.

It felt like a title.

Not only for the chapter.

For the age.

After the study, Ruth Bell intercepted Eli near the coffee table.

She had a way of intercepting people that felt polite but impossible to escape.

“I’ve been praying for you,” she said.

Eli smiled. “Thank you.”

“I mean really praying.”

“I believe you.”

She studied him.

“You look tired.”

“I am.”

“Good.”

Eli blinked. “Good?”

“Tired men are sometimes easier for God to correct than impressed men.”

Eli laughed softly. “You and Pastor Brooks spend too much time together.”

“We have both buried enough proud men to know better.”

That ended the laugh.

Ruth picked up a cookie, broke it in half, and handed part to Eli.

He accepted it.

“I saw one of your posts,” she said.

That made Eli nervous for reasons he did not understand.

“You did?”

“My niece printed it for me. I do not do all that online foolishness.”

Eli nodded. “Probably wise.”

“It was good.”

“Thank you.”

“But be careful.”

There it was again.

Everyone who loved him seemed to be telling him to be careful.

Maybe that was mercy.

Ruth continued.

“The devil does not care if you speak truth, so long as he can get you to speak it without love, without prayer, or without obedience in your own house.”

Eli looked at her.

She ate her half of the cookie.

Then she said, “And he especially enjoys when Christians mistake being informed for being faithful.”

Eli’s face grew serious.

“That is a strong sentence.”

“It is a true one.”

He nodded.

Ruth looked toward the emptying fellowship hall.

“I was married to a good man for fifty-two years. Henry read the newspaper every morning. He knew what was happening in the world. But he also knew what was happening in our children. He knew when the neighbor needed firewood. He knew when I was tired before I said it. He knew when to turn off the television and pray.”

She looked back at Eli.

“Do not know the world better than you know your home.”

Eli swallowed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She patted his arm.

“Good. Now take the other half of this cookie to your wife.”

Eli looked down at the half-cookie in his hand.

“I think you gave it to me.”

“I changed my mind.”

He smiled.

“Yes, ma’am.”

When Eli got home, Grace was at the kitchen table with a calculator, a stack of bills, and a look that told him the numbers had not become friendlier while he was gone.

He placed the half-cookie beside her.

She looked at it.

“What is this?”

“Ruth said to bring it to you.”

“Half a cookie?”

“She ate the other half.”

Grace picked it up. “That feels very Ruth.”

“She also told me not to know the world better than I know my home.”

Grace stopped with the cookie halfway to her mouth.

“Ruth Bell said that?”

“Yes.”

Grace set the cookie down.

“I like her.”

“I thought you would.”

Eli sat across from her.

“How bad are the bills?”

“Not terrible. Not fun. But not terrible.”

“That sounds like our official financial status.”

Grace smiled tiredly.

He looked at the papers.

A strange guilt moved through him.

He had been thinking about awakening, messages, digital Babylon, and public obedience. Grace had been thinking about groceries, electric bills, insurance, and whether Owen needed new shoes.

Both mattered.

But one was easier to turn into a meaningful story.

The other was the kind of faithfulness nobody applauded.

Eli reached for the calculator.

“What can I do?”

Grace looked surprised.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“You hate this.”

“I do. But I live here.”

She leaned back.

“That is one of the most romantic things you have said all week.”

“I aim high.”

She handed him the electric bill.

For the next forty minutes, they worked through the household budget.

It was not inspiring.

It was not dramatic.

No one would write a worship song about comparing grocery costs to the month before.

But Eli felt the quiet correction in it.
Do not know the world better than you know your home.
He needed to know this too.
The bills.
The appointments.
The children's shoe sizes.
The condition of Grace's heart.
The rhythms of their table.
The small repairs waiting around the house.
The actual needs under his own roof.
A man could speak about parents waking up and still sleep through
the practical burdens his wife carried every day.
That would not be faithfulness.
That would be hypocrisy with better language.
When they finished, Grace stretched her neck and sighed.
"Thank you."
"I should have helped sooner."
She looked at him.
"Yes."
He nodded.
"I know."
She reached across the table and touched his hand.
"But thank you for helping now."
That was grace.
Not pretending the failure had not happened.
Not refusing the repentance either.
Eli squeezed her hand.

Later that night, Eli sat in bed reading Daniel.
He had not planned to.
But the phrase from the small group had stayed with him.
Digital Babylon.
So he opened to the book of Daniel and began reading about young
men taken into a foreign empire. They were given new names, new
education, new language, new food, and a new system of honor.
Babylon did not merely want their labor.
It wanted their identity.
Eli underlined the passage where Daniel resolved not to defile
himself with the king's food.

Resolved.

That word stood out.

Daniel did not stumble into faithfulness.

He resolved.

Eli thought of parents in the digital age.

Maybe that was what homes needed.

Resolve.

Not panic.

Not isolation.

Not fear of every new technology.

Resolve.

A decision that this house would not be disciplined by Babylon without resistance.

A decision that screens would be tools, not masters.

A decision that children would not be handed over to algorithms without guidance.

A decision that parents would repent first, lead humbly, and build habits that pointed toward God.

He opened his notebook and wrote:

Digital Babylon does not only want our attention. It wants our formation.

Then:

Parents must decide what forms the home before the world decides for them.

He stared at the words.

They felt important.

Maybe post-worthy.

He picked up his phone.

Then paused.

Grace was brushing her teeth in the bathroom. The children were asleep. The house was quiet.

He remembered his rule.

Pray before posting.

So he prayed.

“Lord, is this for now?”

No immediate answer came.

No strong push.

No clear burden.

Just quiet.

Eli set the phone down.

Not yet.

He closed the notebook and placed it beside the bed.

Grace came out of the bathroom and noticed.

“You didn’t post?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I think I’m learning that not every true thing has to be said immediately.”

Grace climbed into bed.

“That sounds healthy.”

“It feels inefficient.”

She laughed softly. “That also sounds healthy.”

He turned off the lamp.

In the dark, Grace reached for his hand.

“What was the study about?”

“Attention.”

“That is timely.”

“Yes.”

“What did you learn?”

Eli thought for a moment.

“That the digital world is not just informing us. It is forming us.”

Grace was quiet.

Then she said, “That is true.”

“And that we need to be intentional about what forms our home.”

“We do.”

“I do not want to overreact and become strange about technology.”

“Good.”

“But I do not want to be passive either.”

“Also good.”

He turned his head toward her in the dark.

“I think we need a family plan.”

“For screens?”

“For attention.”

Grace did not answer right away.

Then she said, “That is bigger.”

“Yes.”

“And better.”

Eli smiled faintly.

“We can talk tomorrow?”

“Yes,” she said. “But not at midnight.”

“Agreed.”

They lay quietly.

Eli’s mind kept moving, but not as violently as before.

He thought about Daniel.

He thought about Babylon.

He thought about children learning to bow without realizing they had bent their knees.

He thought about parents so overwhelmed by survival that they let the loudest voices train the house.

He thought about his own phone in the drawer.

He thought about Ruth’s warning.

Do not know the world better than you know your home.

That sentence would stay with him.

Maybe forever.

The next evening, the Carters held another family meeting.

Noah brought his notebook again.

Lily brought three stuffed animals and announced they were “committee members.”

Owen brought a wooden spoon for reasons no one understood.

Grace lit the candle in the middle of the table.

Eli had come to like that.

The candle made the table feel set apart.

Not fancy.

Just intentional.

“We are not in trouble,” Grace began.

Noah looked relieved. “Good.”

“We are talking about attention,” Eli said.

Noah opened his notebook. “Like paying attention in school?”

“Sort of. Attention means what we give our minds and hearts to.”

Lily raised her hand.

“You still do not have to raise your hand,” Eli said.

“Do stuffed animals have attention?”

Eli glanced at Grace.

Grace said, “For tonight, let’s say no.”

Lily whispered something to the animals that sounded like an apology.

Eli continued.

“Mom and I want our home to have better habits. Not because screens are always bad. We use them. We learn from them. We talk to people with them. Sometimes we watch fun things. But we do not want screens to lead our family.”

Noah narrowed his eyes. “How many rules?”

“Not many.”

“That usually means many.”

Grace smiled. “Three to start.”

Noah wrote the number three.

“First,” Eli said, “no phones at meals.”

“We already said that,” Noah replied.

“And now we are keeping it.”

Noah nodded, accepting this.

“Second,” Grace said, “no screens before school in the morning.”

Noah’s pencil stopped.

Lily gasped. “Ever?”

“On school mornings,” Grace said.

Noah looked wounded. “What about educational videos?”

Eli gave him a look.

Noah slowly crossed something out in his notebook.

“Third,” Eli said, “we are going to have one family night each week with no shows, no games, no phones. We can play outside, read, build something, bake something, play a board game, or visit someone.”

Lily brightened. “Can we bake cookies?”

“Yes.”

Owen slammed the spoon on the table.

“Cookie!”

“That vote is clear,” Grace said.

Noah looked thoughtful.

“Can family night include talking about the dog?”

“No,” Eli said.

Noah wrote something down.

“What did you write?”

“Pending.”

Eli sighed.

Grace hid a smile.

Then Eli grew serious.

“This is not only for kids. Mom and I have rules too.”

Noah looked up quickly. "Like what?"

"I will not check messages while you are talking to me."

Noah watched him carefully.

"And if I do," Eli continued, "you can respectfully remind me."

Noah wrote that down.

Grace added, "And I am going to be careful not to scroll when I am stressed instead of praying or talking."

Lily looked at her. "You do that?"

Grace nodded. "Sometimes."

Lily seemed surprised that mothers could admit such things.

Eli looked around the table.

"We are all learning. That is the point. We are not trying to be perfect. We are trying to be faithful."

Noah wrote that sentence down.

Eli noticed.

"What?"

Noah shrugged. "That one sounded important."

Eli smiled.

"It is."

The first no-screen family night happened Saturday.

It was a disaster for the first twenty minutes.

Owen cried because he wanted a cartoon.

Lily cried because Owen was crying.

Noah declared that board games were less fun when people could not also watch videos.

Grace looked at Eli with an expression that clearly said, This was partly your idea.

Eli considered abandoning the entire plan.

Then the power flickered.

Just once.

A quick blink.

The lights went out and came back on.

Owen stopped crying.

Lily froze.

Noah looked toward the window.

"Was that lightning?"

"I don't think so," Eli said.

The house settled into a strange quiet.

Then Grace stood.

“Everybody get shoes.”

“Why?” Noah asked.

“We are going outside.”

“It’s dark.”

“Exactly.”

They went into the backyard with flashlights.

The rain had cleared, and the sky had opened enough to show stars between the clouds. The grass was damp. The air smelled clean.

Owen forgot about the cartoon within two minutes.

Lily searched for worms.

Noah challenged Eli to identify constellations. Eli correctly named the Big Dipper and then began making things up.

“That one is the Mighty Chicken,” he said, pointing.

Noah squinted. “That is not real.”

“Ancient constellation.”

“No.”

Grace laughed.

They stayed outside for almost an hour.

No agenda.

No lesson.

No post.

Just a family standing in the dark, looking up.

At one point, Lily slipped her hand into Eli’s.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Does God see all the stars at the same time?”

Eli looked down at her.

“Yes.”

“And us too?”

“Yes.”

She looked back up.

“That is a lot to see.”

“It is.”

“Good thing He’s God.”

Eli smiled.

“Yes. Good thing.”

A week earlier, he might have turned that into a post.

Tonight, he let it stay where it was.

A holy thing between a child, her father, and the God who saw them both under the stars.

On Sunday morning, Mason came to church again.

So did Rachel and her children.

This time, Rachel did not look quite as frightened walking in. Tyler still kept his hands in his hoodie pocket, but he nodded at Noah. Emma showed Lily that Mr. Pickles had a new ribbon.

Mason wore the same button-up shirt as the week before.

Eli noticed.

Mason noticed him noticing.

“What?” Mason said. “It’s my church shirt now.”

“Singular?”

“Don’t get ambitious.”

Pastor Brooks preached from Daniel.

Eli almost laughed when he announced the passage.

Grace looked at him.

He whispered, “Of course.”

The sermon was about faithfulness in Babylon.

Not escape.

Not compromise.

Faithfulness.

Pastor Brooks spoke about Daniel resolving who he would be before the pressure came.

“Many believers wait until the music starts playing before deciding whether they will bow,” he said. “That is often too late. Resolve is formed before the test.”

Eli wrote that down.

Mason leaned over.

“You’re going to use up that bulletin.”

Eli whispered, “I brought a pen.”

“Of course you did.”

But Mason listened.

Eli could tell.

After the service, Ruth found Eli again.

“I heard you had a no-screen night,” she said.

Eli looked at Grace. “Did you tell her?”

Grace shook her head.

Ruth smiled. “Noah told me. He said you discovered the Mighty Chicken.”

Eli closed his eyes.

Mason burst out laughing.

Ruth patted Eli’s arm.

“Good. Children remember foolishness done with love.”

“That is comforting, I think,” Eli said.

“It should be.”

Then she lowered her voice.

“And they remember when parents choose them over glowing rectangles.”

Eli nodded.

“Yes, ma’am.”

That afternoon, Eli finally posted the thought he had been carrying. Not all of it.

Just enough.

He prayed first.

Then wrote:

We are living in a kind of Digital Babylon. It does not only want to inform our children. It wants to form them. Parents do not need panic, but we do need resolve. Screens can be useful tools, but they make poor shepherds. Decide what forms your home before the world decides for you.

He read it carefully.

It was direct.

But not frantic.

Serious.

But not hateful.

He posted it and set the phone down.

Then he went outside, where Noah was attempting to teach Owen how to kick a ball and Lily was drawing a creature on the sidewalk that might have been a horse, a potato, or the Mighty Chicken.

Grace sat on the porch steps.

Eli sat beside her.

“You posted?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Feel okay about it?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

They watched the children play.

After a few minutes, Eli’s phone buzzed inside the house.

Then again.

Then again.

He heard it through the open window.

He did not move.

Grace noticed.

He smiled faintly.

“Not yet,” he said.

She leaned her shoulder against his.

The small fire kept burning.

But for once, Eli did not rush to feed it.

He watched his children instead.

And under the ordinary afternoon sun, with chalk on the sidewalk and laughter in the yard, Eli understood something more clearly than before.

Babylon could build towers.

It could demand attention.

It could reward compromise.

It could train appetites.

It could shout from every screen.

But it could not force a family to bow.

Not if that family had resolved to stand.

Chapter Eight

The Prayer Room

The idea started with Ruth Bell.

That should not have surprised anyone.

By now, Eli had learned that Ruth rarely made suggestions unless she had already prayed over them long enough to make everyone else feel late.

It happened after Sunday service, while people were still gathered in the fellowship hall drinking coffee and pretending the store-bought cookies were better than they were.

Eli stood near the back wall with Grace, Pastor Brooks, Mason, Rachel, and Ruth. The children had claimed one of the far tables and were building a tower out of paper cups. Owen had already been warned twice not to eat the cups.

Mason watched the children with suspicion.

“That tower is structurally unsound,” he said.

Eli looked over. “They are using paper cups.”

“That is no excuse for poor engineering.”

Rachel smiled. “You built a bookshelf once that leaned against the wall for support.”

“It was a partnership with gravity.”

Grace laughed.

For a few minutes, it was ordinary. Coffee. Children. Jokes. Church voices rising and falling around the room.

Then Ruth spoke.

“We need to start praying together.”

The group went quiet.

Pastor Brooks looked at her like he had been expecting it.

Eli held his coffee cup in both hands.

“We do pray,” Mason said.

Ruth looked at him.

Mason shifted. “I mean, not me professionally, but people do.”

Rachel gave him a look.

“What?” Mason said. “I’m new.”

Ruth did not smile, but her eyes softened.

“I mean intentionally,” she said. “For the families waking up. For the parents trying to lead. For the children. For the homes. For Eli and Grace. For this church. For whatever God is stirring.”

Eli felt the familiar instinct to step back.

“For us?” he asked.

Ruth turned to him. “Especially for you.”

That made him uncomfortable.

“I don’t want this to become about me.”

“Then you need prayer all the more.”

Pastor Brooks nodded. “She is right.”

Eli looked at him.

Pastor Brooks continued, “If God is using these posts to open doors, then prayer needs to be the first work, not the decoration after the work.”

Rachel looked down at her coffee.

“I don’t know how to pray out loud,” she said.

Ruth answered immediately. “Then pray quietly until you do.”

Mason lifted one hand. “I am also in the quiet category.”

“That is fine,” Ruth said. “God hears quiet men.”

Mason looked at Eli. “She keeps doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Saying things that make it hard to joke.”

Eli smiled. “Yeah. She does that.”

Grace looked at Pastor Brooks.

“What would this look like?”

Pastor Brooks thought for a moment.

“Simple. Once a week. No livestream. No recording. No promotion. No pressure. We gather, read Scripture, share specific burdens, and pray.”

Ruth nodded. “Tuesday evenings.”

Pastor Brooks looked at her. “You already picked a day?”

“Yes.”

“Of course you did.”

“I picked a time too.”

Mason leaned toward Eli. “She’s running this, isn’t she?”

Eli whispered back, “I think she has been running things quietly for years.”

Ruth looked directly at them.

“I can hear both of you.”

Mason stood straighter. “Yes, ma’am.”
Grace smiled into her cup.
Eli looked around the fellowship hall.
Parents talking.
Children playing.
Older saints lingering near the coffee.
A young couple trying to calm a baby.
People with jobs, bills, grief, marriages, doubts, regrets, and hopes.
He thought about the posts spreading online.
The comments.
The messages.
The arguments.
The need.
Then he thought about Pastor Brooks’s words.
Prayer needs to be the first work.
Eli nodded slowly.
“Tuesday works.”
Grace looked at him.
He corrected himself.
“Tuesday works for us if it works for Grace.”
Grace gave him an approving look.
“It works,” she said.
Ruth nodded once, like a matter had been settled.
“Good. Seven o’clock. In the small classroom by the nursery.”
Mason frowned. “Why that room?”
“Because it has chairs, a table, and no stage.”
Eli understood immediately.
No stage.
That mattered.

The small classroom by the nursery smelled faintly of crayons, disinfectant, and old carpet.

A faded poster of Noah’s ark hung on one wall. A shelf held picture books, glue sticks, construction paper, and a plastic bin labeled “Lost Mittens.” Several tiny chairs were stacked in the corner, along with a child-sized table covered in scratches and marker stains.

It was not impressive.

That was probably why Ruth had chosen it.

Eli and Grace arrived at 6:53 on Tuesday night. Noah, Lily, and Owen were staying with a woman from the church who had offered to watch children in the nursery during the prayer time.

Owen had accepted this arrangement only after being shown a basket of toy animals.

Mason was already there when Eli walked in.

That surprised him.

Mason sat in one of the regular chairs with his arms crossed, staring at the Noah's ark poster.

"You're early," Eli said.

Mason looked over. "I panicked about being late and overcorrected."

"That is growth."

"No, it is anxiety in church clothes."

Grace smiled. "Where is Rachel?"

"Parking. Emma had a crisis because Mr. Pickles could not come into the prayer room."

"Why not?" Grace asked.

Mason looked serious. "Apparently he is emotionally unprepared."

Eli laughed.

Rachel came in a minute later, looking tired but present. Tyler followed her, though he quickly went to the nursery after seeing Noah. Emma held Mr. Pickles and looked at Ruth with concern.

Ruth bent slightly. "Mr. Pickles may sit quietly with you for the first five minutes. Then he may go help in the nursery."

Emma considered this.

"Does he have to pray?"

"Only if he wants to."

Emma nodded. "Okay."

Mason whispered, "She negotiated with a stuffed rabbit."

Eli whispered back, "And won."

By seven, twelve people had gathered.

Pastor Brooks.

Ruth.

Eli and Grace.

Mason and Rachel.

Frank, the widower with the marked-up Bible.

Dana Mitchell, the grandmother raising two grandchildren, who had driven forty minutes after messaging Eli online.

Mara, the college student.

The young mother from small group, whose name was Bethany.

An older couple named Paul and Linda Reeves.

No stage.

No microphones.

No worship band.

No camera.

Just chairs in a loose circle and a Bible on the table.

Pastor Brooks opened the meeting.

“I want to keep this simple,” he said. “We are not here to manufacture something. We are not here to build a name. We are not here to chase emotion. We are here to seek God, repent where we need to repent, and ask Him to strengthen homes.”

Everyone was quiet.

The room felt smaller than it was.

Pastor Brooks opened to Acts and read about the early believers devoting themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer.

Then he closed the Bible.

“Before God uses public voices, He often does hidden work. This is hidden work.”

Eli looked down.

Hidden work.

He liked that.

It felt clean.

Pastor Brooks continued, “We will begin with confession. Not public confession of every private sin. But honest confession that we need God before we ask Him to move through us.”

Mason shifted in his chair.

Rachel stared at her hands.

Grace reached over and touched Eli’s knee.

Pastor Brooks bowed his head.

“Lord, begin with us.”

For a while, no one else spoke.

The silence stretched.

Not awkward silence.

Heavy silence.

Then Ruth prayed.

“Lord, forgive us for treating prayer like a last resort.”

Her voice was soft but steady.

“Forgive us for complaining about darkness more than we have asked You for light. Forgive us for criticizing parents without helping them. Forgive us for letting children be formed by the world while the church was busy with lesser things.”

Eli closed his eyes.

Frank prayed next.

“Lord, forgive us old men for acting like the battle belongs only to the young. Help us stand in the gap again.”

Bethany prayed through tears.

“Lord, forgive me for using my phone to escape my children when I am overwhelmed. Help me ask for help before I disappear into distraction.”

Rachel’s shoulders trembled.

Grace prayed.

“Lord, forgive us for the places our home has been ruled by hurry, noise, and exhaustion. Teach us peace. Teach us order. Teach us love.”

Eli felt her words deeply.

Then the room went quiet again.

He knew he should pray.

Not because anyone was waiting on him.

Because the burden was there.

He bowed his head lower.

“Lord, forgive me for wanting public fruit without always honoring private obedience.”

The words came slowly.

“Forgive me for liking attention. Forgive me for fearing criticism. Forgive me for caring too much about being heard and not enough about being holy. Keep me from becoming loud in public and absent at home.”

Grace’s hand found his.

Eli continued.

“If You are waking families up, do not let me get in the way. If You use my words, keep them clean. If You give me silence, help me accept it. And if You correct me through my wife, my children, my pastor, or anyone in this room, help me listen.”

He stopped.

That was enough.

Mason exhaled beside him.

Then, to Eli’s surprise, Mason prayed.

It was short.

Awkward.

Completely unpolished.

“God, I don’t really know how to do this. But I’m here. Help Rachel. Help her kids. Help me stop being useless when people need me. Amen.”

No one moved.

Rachel covered her mouth.

Eli kept his head bowed.

Mason cleared his throat and stared hard at the floor.

Ruth said softly, “Amen.”

It was not a big prayer.

But it felt like a door opening.

After confession, Pastor Brooks asked them to pray for specific homes.

Not ideas.

Not movements.

Homes.

Dana spoke first.

She told them about her grandchildren.

Her daughter had been gone for months, appearing only when she needed money or a place to sleep. Dana was raising two children on retirement income and stubbornness. The older boy was angry. The younger girl had nightmares.

“I read the post about one meal without screens,” Dana said, looking at Eli. “So I tried it.”

“How did it go?” Grace asked.

“Terrible,” Dana said.

Several people laughed gently.

Dana smiled, then wiped her eyes.

“The boy said it was stupid. The girl cried because he was mad. I almost quit right there.”

“Did you?” Ruth asked.

Dana shook her head.

“No. I told them we were going to sit for ten minutes. Just ten. No screens. No yelling. We made it six.”

“That is a start,” Pastor Brooks said.

Dana nodded.

“Then the little one asked if we could do seven minutes next time.”

Bethany began crying again.

Dana looked embarrassed.

“I know it sounds small.”

Ruth leaned forward.

“It does not sound small to me.”

Pastor Brooks asked everyone to pray for Dana’s home.

This time, several people prayed.

Not fancy prayers.

Specific ones.

For strength.

For patience.

For the angry boy.

For the little girl’s sleep.

For provision.

For a church near Dana’s home to come alongside her.

Eli listened.

He had replied to Dana’s message online. That had mattered.

But this was different.

This was her name spoken before God by people sitting close enough to see her tears.

Digital connection had opened a door.

Prayer made it human.

Rachel spoke next.

She looked nervous.

Mason sat beside her, unusually still.

“I prayed with the kids three nights,” she said. “Then I missed one.”

No one corrected her.

No one rushed to encourage her.

They let her speak.

“I almost used that as proof that I couldn’t do it. Like, see, I failed again. But then Tyler asked the next night if we were doing the weird prayer thing.”

A small laugh moved through the room.

Rachel smiled faintly.

“So we did it again.”

Grace smiled. “That is good.”

Rachel nodded.

“But Tyler is angry. I can tell. He says he is fine, but he is not. Emma is clingy. I am tired. And I am scared that if I try to change things now, they will see how much I should have done before.”

The room was quiet.

Then Linda Reeves, the older woman, spoke.

“Children are often more willing to receive repentance than we are willing to offer it.”

Rachel looked at her.

Linda continued, “You do not need to pretend you always did right. Tell them you are learning too. Tell them you are sorry where you failed. Then keep showing up.”

Rachel nodded, but tears fell.

Mason looked at her and then at the floor.

Pastor Brooks asked if they could pray.

Rachel nodded.

This time Mason reached for his sister’s hand.

She looked surprised.

Then she took it.

Eli felt like he should look away.

Some moments were too holy for staring.

They prayed for Rachel.

For Tyler.

For Emma.

For the home to be rebuilt slowly.

For shame to lose its grip.

For Mason to become a faithful uncle.

Mason whispered, “Careful,” but no one laughed because his voice broke on the word.

The prayer meeting lasted an hour and fifteen minutes.

No one wanted to be the first to leave.

Not because it had been exciting.

Because it had been real.

When Pastor Brooks closed, he did not give a speech. He simply read from Galatians.

“Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”

Then he prayed.

“Lord, help us not give up.”

That was all.
Afterward, people stood slowly.
Chairs scraped against the floor.
The nursery door opened, and children spilled into the hallway.
Owen ran to Eli carrying a plastic giraffe.
“Mine!”
The nursery worker shook her head. “Not yours.”
Owen hugged it tighter.
Eli crouched. “Buddy, we cannot steal church giraffes.”
Owen frowned deeply.
Mason looked down at him. “The kid has ambition.”
Grace gently removed the giraffe and returned it.
Owen cried as if betrayed by every adult he had ever trusted.
The sacred moment had officially ended.
Or maybe it had not.
Maybe sacred things included tired parents, crying toddlers, folding chairs, and borrowed toys returned under protest.
As they walked to the parking lot, Dana stopped Eli.
“I almost did not come,” she said.
“I’m glad you did.”
“I thought it would be embarrassing.”
“Was it?”
“Yes,” she said. “But in a good way.”
Eli smiled.
“I think I know what you mean.”
Dana looked toward her car.
“I have been praying alone for a long time. Tonight felt different.”
“You are not alone.”
She nodded slowly.
“I might believe that now.”
Then she got into her car and drove away.
Eli stood under the parking lot light and watched the red taillights disappear into the dark.
Grace came beside him.
“You okay?”
“Yes.”
“That yes sounded real.”
“It is.”
He looked back at the church.

“I think this matters more than the posts.”

Grace nodded.

“The posts may be the invitation,” she said. “This is the work.”

Eli looked at her.

That was exactly it.

The posts were the invitation.

Prayer was the work.

The next morning, Eli woke up early.

Not from the baby monitor.

Not from his phone.

He simply woke.

The house was still dark. Grace slept beside him. The children were quiet. The world had not yet entered through screens, schedules, noise, or need.

He got up carefully and went to the kitchen.

His Bible was still on the table from the night before.

So was his notebook.

He made coffee, then sat down and opened to Acts.

The early church did not have platforms.

They did not have algorithms.

They did not have branding.

They had the Spirit of God, the Word of God, prayer, repentance, fellowship, courage, and homes open enough for people to gather.

Eli wrote:

Prayer is not support work. Prayer is the work.

He underlined it.

Then he wrote:

Do not build publicly what has not been covered privately.

He sat with that for a long time.

His phone was on the counter.

He had not touched it yet.

Eventually, he picked it up.

There were messages.

There were always messages now.

One from Garrett, the man who had called him controlled opposition.

Eli almost ignored it.

Then he opened it.

I still think you're too soft. But my wife read your Digital Babylon post and now we're talking about screens with the kids. So there's that.

Eli stared at the message.

Then he laughed quietly.

Not mockingly.

Just because people were complicated.

He replied:

That sounds like a faithful step. I'm praying for your family.

Garrett did not answer.

That was fine.

Eli opened a blank post.

He prayed first.

Then he typed:

The digital world can spread a message, but only God can awaken a heart. Do not mistake reach for revival. Do not mistake engagement for fruit. If we want homes restored, parents strengthened, children protected, churches awakened, and souls brought back to God, we must pray. Prayer is not the decoration after the work. Prayer is the work.

He read it carefully.

Then posted it.

After that, he put the phone in the drawer.

Not because the messages did not matter.

Because prayer had to matter more.

That evening, the Carters' first no-screen family night of the week involved baking cookies.

It went poorly.

Owen dumped flour on the floor.

Lily cracked an egg directly onto the counter.

Noah argued that chocolate chips should be measured by the heart, not the recipe.

Grace stared at the mess and said, "This is why people buy cookies."

Eli laughed harder than he should have.

By the time the cookies were in the oven, the kitchen looked like something had exploded.

Owen had flour in his hair.

Lily had chocolate on her chin.

Noah had eaten enough dough to require a parental warning.

Grace leaned against the counter, exhausted.

Eli looked around.

“This was a success.”

Grace gave him a look.

“You and I define success differently.”

“No screens.”

“There is flour in the drawer.”

“Still no screens.”

She shook her head, but she smiled.

After the cookies cooled, they sat around the table with milk.

Eli opened the Bible and read a short passage from Matthew about Jesus blessing the children.

Lily leaned against Grace.

Noah listened while pretending not to.

Owen slowly crushed a cookie into dust.

When Eli finished, he asked, “Who should we pray for tonight?”

Lily said, “Emma and Mr. Pickles.”

Noah said, “Tyler.”

Grace said, “Dana and her grandkids.”

Eli said, “Mason.”

Noah looked at him. “Because he needs it?”

Eli smiled. “We all need it.”

They prayed around the table.

Lily prayed first.

“God, help Emma and Mr. Pickles not be scared.”

Noah prayed for Tyler to get a dog, which Eli decided not to correct.

Grace prayed for tired parents.

Eli prayed for their home.

Owen shouted, “Amen!” before anyone was finished.

It was messy.

It was imperfect.

It was real.

Afterward, while Grace helped the kids get ready for bed, Eli stayed behind to wipe flour from the drawer.

His phone buzzed from the other room.

He heard it.

Then heard it again.

For a moment, he felt the pull.

Maybe someone needed prayer.

Maybe something important had happened.
Maybe the post was spreading.
Maybe someone was angry.
Maybe someone was waiting.
He looked at the flour on the floor.
Then at the half-eaten cookies on the plate.
Then toward the hallway where his family moved through the
bedtime routine.

Not now.

He kept cleaning.

A few minutes later, Noah came back into the kitchen.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“You missed flour over there.”

“Thank you for the inspection.”

Noah stood by the table for a moment.

Then he said, “I like family nights.”

Eli stopped wiping.

“You do?”

Noah shrugged.

“Not all of it. But some.”

“That is honest.”

Noah picked up a cookie crumb and ate it.

“Can Tyler come next time?”

Eli smiled.

“We can ask.”

Noah nodded, then ran back down the hall.

Eli stood alone in the kitchen, holding the rag.

He thought again about the prayer room.

Dana’s tears.

Rachel’s trembling voice.

Mason’s awkward prayer.

Ruth’s steady faith.

Pastor Brooks reading Scripture.

Grace praying for homes.

No stage.

No recording.

No applause.

Just a small group of people asking God to do what only God could do.

The phone buzzed again.

Eli did not move.

He looked down at the flour, the crumbs, the ordinary evidence of a family trying to become more faithful.

Then he whispered, "Lord, this too."

Because he was starting to understand.

The prayer room was not only at church.

It was here.

It was wherever people stopped pretending they could fight spiritual battles with human strength.

It was wherever parents bowed their heads over tired children.

It was wherever repentance became normal.

It was wherever the hidden work was done.

It was wherever God was invited to begin.

And in the Carter house, under a roof full of noise, crumbs, prayer, and grace, the hidden fire kept burning.

Chapter Nine

The First Attack

The attack did not begin with a threat.

It began with a screenshot.

By Monday morning, Eli's post about Digital Babylon had traveled farther than anything he had written before. He did not know how far exactly, because he had stopped checking every number. That had been intentional. Necessary. Wise.

Still, he knew it was spreading.

People were tagging friends. Parents were sharing stories. A few pastors had reposted it. A homeschool group had discussed it. A local youth ministry had printed it for a parent meeting. Someone had even made a simple graphic with the line:

Screens can be useful tools, but they make poor shepherds.

Eli had mixed feelings about that.

On one hand, the sentence was true.

On the other hand, seeing his own words turned into a graphic made him uneasy. It looked too official, too polished, too much like something that belonged to a person who knew what he was doing.

He still did not feel like that person.

That morning, he sat at the kitchen table with his Bible open, coffee cooling beside it, and his phone in the drawer across the room.

Grace came downstairs first.

She wore a sweatshirt, had her hair pulled back, and looked like she had slept, but not deeply.

"You're up early," she said.

"So are you."

"Owen coughed at four, and my brain decided that was morning."

Eli smiled faintly. "That sounds familiar."

She poured coffee and sat across from him.

For a few minutes, they were quiet together.

That had become one of Eli's favorite parts of the day. Before the children woke up, before the schedules started, before the world pushed through the door, there was sometimes a thin slice of peace at the kitchen table.

Grace looked at the Bible.

“What are you reading?”

“Nehemiah.”

“Why Nehemiah?”

“I don’t know. It felt right.”

“What part?”

Eli looked down.

“The wall.”

Grace nodded, waiting.

He tapped the page.

“The people are rebuilding, and their enemies start mocking them first. Then threatening them. Then trying to confuse them. Then trying to lure Nehemiah away from the work.”

Grace held her mug in both hands.

“And that feels relevant?”

“Maybe.”

She studied him.

“You expecting trouble?”

Eli leaned back.

“I don’t know. Maybe I just assume trouble comes when people start waking up.”

Grace was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, “That may be true. But do not go looking for it.”

“I’m not.”

“Good.”

He heard the caution in her voice.

She was right to give it.

There was a strange temptation in expecting opposition. A person could start to see every disagreement as proof of importance, every insult as persecution, every correction as an attack.

Eli did not want that.

He wanted discernment without drama.

That was harder than it sounded.

From upstairs, Lily called, “Mooooom!”

Grace closed her eyes.

“And so it begins.”

Eli smiled and stood.

“I’ll get her.”

Grace looked surprised.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

He headed toward the stairs.

Behind him, his phone remained in the drawer.

For the moment, that felt like victory.

The screenshot arrived at 9:17.

Eli was at work, halfway through responding to an email about a billing issue, when his phone buzzed.

He ignored it.

Then it buzzed again.

Then again.

He looked down.

Three messages from Mason.

That was rarely good.

The first said:

Uh.

The second said:

You seen this?

The third was a screenshot.

Eli opened it.

At first, he did not understand what he was looking at.

It was his post.

Or part of it.

Someone had cropped out most of the text and left only a few lines:

Parents do need resolve... Screens... poor shepherds... Decide what forms your home...

Above the screenshot, someone had written:

LOCAL MAN SAYS PARENTS WHO LET KIDS USE
SCREENS ARE BAD CHRISTIANS

Eli stared at it.

His jaw tightened.

That was not what he had said.

Not even close.

Below the caption, hundreds of comments had started piling up.

Religious nut.

Great, another control freak telling parents how to live.

Must be nice to have a perfect family.

People like this are dangerous.

This is how cults start.

Eli felt heat rise in his neck.

He clicked the link Mason had sent.

It opened to a public post from a local community page Eli recognized. The page usually shared school closings, road work updates, lost pets, and arguments about property taxes.

Now it was sharing him.

Or a false version of him.

His name was visible.

His profile picture was visible.

The cropped post was visible.

The lie was visible.

Eli's fingers hovered over the screen.

He wanted to answer immediately.

Not later.

Now.

He wanted to write a correction so clear and sharp that no honest person could misunderstand it. He wanted to expose the dishonesty. He wanted to defend his family, his words, his motives, his faith.

He opened the comment box.

Then stopped.

Courage obeys God.

Reaction obeys pressure.

Pastor Brooks's words came back like a hand on his shoulder.

Eli closed the comment box.

He set the phone down.

Then picked it up again.

Then set it down harder.

His coworker across the aisle looked over.

"You good?"

Eli nodded.

"Yeah."

He was not good.

But he was trying to be.

His phone buzzed again.

Mason.

Don't go nuclear.

Eli almost laughed despite the anger.

He typed back:

I'm trying not to.

Mason replied:

Try harder.

Then another message came through.

Grace.

Have you seen it?

Eli closed his eyes.

So she had seen it too.

He typed:

Yes.

Her reply came quickly.

Do not answer while angry.

He stared at the message.

Then typed:

I know.

She replied:

I mean it.

Eli looked toward the ceiling.

Apparently, the Lord had built a fence around him using Pastor Brooks, Mason, and Grace.

That was annoying.

It was also mercy.

By lunch, the screenshot had spread to several other pages.

A few people defended Eli.

Some did it well.

Some did it badly enough that he wished they had not.

One man wrote, Eli is right, most parents are lazy and need to be shamed.

Eli groaned aloud when he read it.

That was exactly the opposite of what he had been trying to say.

Another person commented, I know Eli personally. He is just trying to help families.

That one made him grateful.

Then someone replied, Of course his friends defend him.

The argument grew.

Eli sat in his truck with his lunch untouched beside him.

Rain tapped lightly against the windshield.

His phone felt heavier than usual.

He opened his original post and reread it.
It was still there. Whole. Clear. Balanced.
Parents do not need panic, but we do need resolve.
Screens can be useful tools, but they make poor shepherds.
Decide what forms your home before the world decides for you.
He still believed every word.
So why did the lie bother him so much?
Because it had his name on it.
Because strangers were judging a false version of him.
Because some people would never read the original.
Because his children might hear about it.
Because Grace might have to carry stress from something he had posted.
Because part of him wanted to be seen correctly.
That last reason bothered him most.
He bowed his head against the steering wheel.
“Lord, help me not sin with my mouth. Or my thumbs.”
The prayer was not poetic.
But it was sincere.
His phone rang.
Pastor Brooks.
Eli answered.
“Hello?”
“I assume you have seen it,” Pastor Brooks said.
“Yes.”
“How angry are you?”
Eli looked out at the wet parking lot.
“More than I want to be.”
“Good honest answer.”
“I want to correct it.”
“That may be appropriate.”
“I want to crush it.”
“That is not.”
Eli sighed.
“I know.”
Pastor Brooks’s voice remained calm.
“Eli, you are being given an early gift.”
“It does not feel like a gift.”
“Most correction does not.”

“This is not correction. It is slander.”

“It may be. But the gift is in what it reveals.”

Eli was quiet.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“It reveals how attached you are to being understood. It reveals whether your peace depends on people representing you fairly. It reveals whether your first instinct is prayer or defense. It reveals whether you will let critics set your tone.”

Eli closed his eyes.

“I hate this gift.”

“I know.”

“What do I do?”

“First, pray. Second, talk to Grace. Third, if you respond publicly, be brief, truthful, and without venom. Do not answer every comment. Do not make a spectacle of yourself. Do not turn this into your main work.”

Eli nodded even though Pastor Brooks could not see him.

“And Eli?”

“Yes?”

“Remember Nehemiah.”

Eli looked up.

“What?”

“The enemy tried to pull him off the wall. His answer was, ‘I am doing a great work and I cannot come down.’”

Eli looked through the windshield.

The words settled heavily.

I cannot come down.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Sometimes defense is necessary. Sometimes it is distraction. Ask God which this is.”

After they hung up, Eli sat quietly for several minutes.

Then he texted Grace.

Can we talk when I get home before I respond?

She replied:

Yes. Thank you.

He put the phone away.

His lunch was soggy at the edges.

He ate it anyway.

By the time Eli pulled into the driveway, he was exhausted.

Not physically.

Worse.

Mentally and spiritually worn thin.

The attack had not ruined anything. No one had come to the house. No employer had called. No serious threat had been made.

But it had invaded his attention.

That was enough.

He walked inside and immediately heard the children in the living room.

Noah was building something with blocks. Lily was singing to her stuffed animals. Owen was running in a circle for reasons known only to toddlers and possibly angels.

Grace stood in the kitchen cutting carrots.

She looked up when he entered.

For one second, neither of them spoke.

Then Eli said, "I'm sorry."

Grace set the knife down.

"For what?"

"For bringing this to our door."

Her face softened, but she did not rush to erase the concern.

"Come here."

He walked over.

She wrapped her arms around him.

He held her tightly.

The children did not notice. Owen ran past them shouting, "Fast!"

Grace pulled back.

"I am not mad at you."

"You could be."

"I know."

That made him smile faintly.

She continued, "I am concerned. But I am not mad."

"Have the kids seen anything?"

"No. But Noah asked why my phone kept buzzing."

Eli grimaced.

"What did you say?"

"That grown-ups were arguing online."

"What did he say?"

"That grown-ups need family night."

Eli closed his eyes.

Grace nodded. “Exactly.”

They sat at the kitchen table while the children played.

Eli showed her the screenshot, the comments, and the original post.

Grace read quietly.

Her face showed anger before her words did.

“This is dishonest.”

“Yes.”

“But you cannot respond in the same spirit.”

“I know.”

“What do you want to say?”

Eli took out his notebook.

“I wrote a draft.”

Grace looked worried.

“It is not nuclear.”

“Read it.”

He read:

Someone has shared a cropped version of my post and claimed I said parents who let children use screens are bad Christians. I did not say that, and I do not believe that. My point was simple: screens can be useful tools, but they should not shepherd our homes. Parents need wisdom, not panic; conviction, not shame; and support, not condemnation. My original post remains available for anyone who wants to read it in full. I will not argue in comment threads, but I do care about being truthful.

Grace listened.

Then she nodded slowly.

“That is good.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. It corrects without attacking.”

“I want to add something about lying.”

“Do not.”

“I really want to.”

“I know. Do not.”

He exhaled.

“Okay.”

Grace reached across the table.

“Eli, this is going to happen again.”

“I know.”

“No, I need you to really know it. People will misquote you. Some will misunderstand honestly. Some will twist things on purpose. Some will try to pull you into fights because fighting gets attention.”

He looked at her.

“And if every attack owns the whole house,” she said, “then the enemy does not have to stop you. He only has to keep you distracted.”

That was sharp.

And true.

Eli wrote it down.

If every attack owns the whole house, distraction wins.

Grace watched him write.

Then she said, “Post the correction. Then put the phone away for dinner.”

He nodded.

“I can do that.”

“Good.”

He posted the statement.

Then he placed the phone in the drawer.

Within seconds, it buzzed.

Then again.

Then again.

Eli stared at the drawer.

Grace stared at him.

He looked away.

“Dinner,” she said.

“Dinner,” he agreed.

Dinner was louder than usual.

Not because of the children.

Because Eli’s mind kept making noise.

The phone buzzed from the drawer.

Every few minutes.

Sometimes several times in a row.

Each buzz felt like a small hook in his attention.

Noah noticed first.

“Dad, your phone is going crazy.”

“I know.”

“Are you going to get it?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m eating dinner with my family.”

Noah looked suspicious.

“Is this a test?”

Eli smiled. “Maybe.”

Lily pointed a carrot at him. “You should pass.”

“I am trying.”

Owen threw a carrot.

Grace said, “Owen is failing.”

That made everyone laugh.

The laughter helped.

For a few minutes, Eli was fully there.

He listened to Noah explain that his teacher had moved his seat because he and another boy were “too powerful together.” He listened to Lily describe an argument between two stuffed animals that apparently required parental mediation. He helped Owen retrieve a piece of bread he had dropped and then regretted returning it once Owen dipped it in his water.

The phone kept buzzing.

But the table held.

After dinner, Eli helped with dishes.

Then he played a board game with the kids.

Then bedtime prayers.

When they gathered in Noah’s room, Eli expected quick prayers.

But Noah raised his hand.

“You still do not have to raise your hand,” Eli said.

“I know. I just like it.”

“Okay. What is it?”

“Can we pray for the grown-ups arguing online?”

Eli went still.

Grace looked at him.

Lily nodded seriously. “They need it.”

“They probably do,” Eli said.

Noah bowed his head.

“God, help the grown-ups not be mean and help Dad not be phone-listening. Amen.”

Eli closed his eyes.

Grace pressed her lips together, trying not to smile.

“Amen,” Eli said.

Lily prayed next.
“God, help people tell the truth and not crop things.”
Eli opened one eye.
Grace whispered, “She heard us talking.”
He nodded slowly.
Owen shouted, “Amen!”
The prayer was over.
But the correction remained.
Help people tell the truth and not crop things.
Out of the mouths of children.

After the kids were asleep, Eli and Grace sat at the kitchen table.
The phone was still in the drawer.
Eli had not checked it for almost two hours.
That felt both healthy and painful.
Grace placed a cup of tea in front of him.
“You ready?” she asked.
“No.”
“Good answer.”
He opened the drawer and picked up the phone.
The correction had spread quickly.
Many people were supportive.
Some apologized for believing the cropped version.
Others doubled down.
One person wrote:
That’s not what the screenshot said. Why are you backtracking?
Another wrote:
He sounds reasonable. This was taken out of context.
Then the original community page added an update:
Update: Eli Carter says the post was cropped and claims he was misrepresented. Original post linked below.
Eli stared at the word claims.
“That word bothers me,” he said.
Grace took the phone and read it.
“Yes,” she said. “But they linked the original.”
“They did.”
“That is enough.”
“Is it?”
“It has to be.”

He knew she was right.
Not because the correction fixed everything.
Because nothing would.
There was no perfect public response that could make every person
fair, honest, careful, or kind.
Eli had told the truth.
Now he had to leave it.
That was harder than posting it.
A private message appeared from Mason.
Not bad. Very mature. Hated it.
Eli laughed.
Another message came from Rachel.
I saw what happened. I'm sorry. For what it's worth, Tyler said,
"That's not what he said." So you have a ten-year-old fact-checker.
Eli smiled.
Then another message came in from someone he did not know.
I was angry when I saw the screenshot. Then I read the full post. I
still do not agree with everything, but it made me talk to my husband
about how much we both disappear into our phones. We put them away
tonight during dinner. Our daughter asked if somebody died. So thanks,
I guess.
Eli read it aloud to Grace.
She smiled.
"That is fruit."
"Messy fruit."
"Most fruit grows in dirt."
"That sounds like something Ruth would say."
"It does."
Eli set the phone down.
Then it rang.
Unknown number.
He looked at Grace.
She shook her head.
"No."
He let it go to voicemail.
A few seconds later, a message appeared.
He played it on speaker.
A man's voice filled the kitchen.

“You don’t know me, but I run the community page that shared the screenshot. I should have checked the full post before sharing it. I added the link. I’ll take the post down if you want. Sorry for the trouble.”

Eli stared at the phone.

Grace looked at him.

“That is unexpected,” she said.

“Yes.”

“What are you going to do?”

Eli thought for a moment.

Part of him wanted the post removed.

Part of him wanted the correction to stay visible.

Part of him wanted a public apology.

Part of him wanted to be done.

He called the number back.

The man answered on the second ring.

“This is Mark.”

“Mark, this is Eli Carter.”

There was a pause.

“Yeah. Hey. Sorry again.”

Eli closed his eyes briefly.

“Thank you for calling.”

“I messed up. Someone sent it to me, and I posted it too fast. That page moves quick, and people react quick.”

“I understand.”

“I can delete it.”

Eli looked at Grace.

She waited.

He said, “I appreciate that. But if you delete it, people who saw the cropped version may never see the correction. Would you be willing to leave it up with a clearer correction at the top?”

Mark was quiet.

“Yeah. I can do that.”

“Please say the post was cropped and did not represent the full point.”

“That is fair.”

“And link the original.”

“Done.”

Eli paused.

“I appreciate you owning it.”

Mark sighed.

“Honestly, I’m tired of everyone fighting on that page. I probably made it worse.”

“That is easy to do.”

“Yeah.”

Another pause.

Then Mark said, “For what it’s worth, my wife said your original post was right. We fight our kids about tablets every night.”

Eli almost smiled.

“Most families are trying to figure it out.”

“Yeah. Seems like it.”

After the call ended, Eli set the phone down.

Grace leaned back in her chair.

“That went better than expected.”

“Yes.”

“You did well.”

“I wanted to be sharper.”

“I know.”

“Still do, a little.”

“That is why you did well.”

Eli looked at her.

She smiled faintly.

“Obedience is not only doing right after the wrong desire disappears. Sometimes it is doing right while the wrong desire is still loud.”

He wrote that down too.

The next morning, the community page had updated the post.

Correction: The screenshot below cropped Eli Carter’s original statement and did not fully represent his point. His original post was about parents using wisdom with screens, not condemning every parent who lets children use technology. The full post is [linked here](#).

It was not perfect.

But it was honest enough.

Eli felt some of the pressure lift.

Then he noticed something else.

The full post had gained even more attention because of the controversy.

More people were reading it now than before the attack.

That made him uneasy.

Grace saw his face as he looked at the screen.

“What?”

“It spread more because of the argument.”

She nodded.

“That happens.”

“I don’t like that.”

“Good.”

He looked at her.

She continued, “Do not start thinking attacks are strategy.”

He stared at her.

“That is another thing I need to write down.”

“Yes, it is.”

He wrote:

Do not use conflict as strategy.

Grace poured coffee.

“If conflict comes, respond faithfully. But do not feed it because it works.”

Eli nodded.

That mattered.

A person could become addicted to conflict just as easily as attention. Maybe more easily. Conflict made people gather. It created sides. It gave a rush of purpose. It made everything feel urgent.

But urgency was not the same as importance.

Outrage was not the same as awakening.

A crowd was not the same as fruit.

Eli looked at the original post again.

There were new comments from people asking practical questions.

How do we set limits without constant fights?

What if one parent cares and the other does not?

What about teenagers?

What if screens are required for school?

What if I already failed?

That last question appeared more than once.

What if I already failed?

Eli stared at it.

That was the real wound under so many arguments.

Parents did not only need warnings.

They needed hope.

That afternoon, Eli asked Pastor Brooks if they could open the prayer room early the next Tuesday and invite anyone local who wanted prayer for their family.

Pastor Brooks did not answer immediately.

Instead, he asked, “Why?”

Eli sat in his truck outside work, phone pressed to his ear.

“Because people are asking for help.”

“That is true.”

“And because the controversy made the post spread farther.”

“That is also true.”

Eli waited.

Pastor Brooks said, “Are you wanting to gather people for prayer, or are you trying to turn the attention into momentum?”

Eli closed his eyes.

There it was.

The question under the question.

“I don’t know,” Eli admitted.

“Good. Sit with that before acting.”

“That is frustrating.”

“Yes.”

“I do think people need prayer.”

“They do.”

“And help.”

“Yes.”

“And the church should respond.”

“Yes.”

“But?”

“But not every open door is yours to run through immediately.”

Eli leaned back against the seat.

Pastor Brooks continued, “Bring it to prayer Tuesday. Talk with Grace. Talk with the group. If the Lord is leading it, it will not become less obedient because you waited a few days.”

Eli smiled reluctantly.

“That sounds wise.”

“It is annoying how often wisdom is slow.”

Eli laughed.

“I said something like that recently.”

“I know. You wrote it down from me.”

“That is true.”

After they hung up, Eli did not post about a public prayer gathering.
Not yet.

He texted Grace instead.

I think we need to pray before expanding anything.

She replied:

Yes. Thank you.

Two simple sentences.

But Eli knew what they meant.

They meant he had listened.

That evening, the Carters had family night.

No screens.

No checking comments.

No defending.

No monitoring the page.

Grace made grilled cheese and tomato soup. Eli slightly burned two sandwiches and was accused by Noah of doing it “for texture.” Lily set the table with napkins folded into shapes that did not have names. Owen dipped his sandwich in his water and seemed pleased with the result.

After dinner, they played a board game.

Noah won and acted humble for nearly four seconds.

Lily accused him of “celebrating in his eyebrows.”

Grace laughed so hard she had to cover her face.

Eli looked around the table and felt a deep ache of gratitude.

The attack was still out there.

People were still arguing.

Some still believed the lie.

But here, under this roof, something better was happening.

Not perfect.

Better.

His children were laughing.

His wife looked lighter than she had the night before.

His phone sat in the drawer.

The table was holding.

Later, during prayer, Eli thanked God for protecting their home from his own distraction.

He had not planned to say it that way.

But once he did, he knew it was true.
After the children were in bed, he and Grace sat on the porch.
The night was cool.
The stars were hidden behind clouds.
For a long time, neither spoke.
Then Grace said, "You passed a test."
Eli looked over.
"I do not know about that."
"You did not pass perfectly. But you passed."
"I wanted to fight."
"But you didn't."
"I wanted to prove myself."
"But you told the truth and stopped."
"I still care what people think."
Grace smiled softly. "Of course you do. You are not dead."
He laughed.
Then grew quiet.
"I think I understand Nehemiah better now."
Grace waited.
"The goal of the enemy was not only to mock the work. It was to stop the work by pulling him into the wrong conversation."
Grace nodded.
"And what is the work?" she asked.
Eli looked back at the house.
"Our home. Prayer. Faithfulness. Telling the truth when God leads. Helping people take one step."
"And?"
He looked at her.
"Not coming down from the wall every time someone yells."
Grace smiled.
"That sounds right."
They sat close under the porch light.
Inside, Owen coughed once in his sleep.
A car passed.
Somewhere down the street, a dog barked.
The world kept moving.
So did the arguments.
So did the lies.
So did the hunger for outrage.

But Eli no longer felt the same need to chase every spark of conflict.
Let them shout, he thought.
There was work to do.
The wall still needed building.
The homes still needed prayer.
The children still needed parents awake enough to lead them.
And if Eli was going to be useful, he could not spend his strength
answering every voice calling him down.
He looked into the dark and whispered the words from Nehemiah.
“I am doing a great work and I cannot come down.”
Grace reached for his hand.
The first attack had come.
It would not be the last.
But the fire still burned.
And by God’s grace, it had not burned the house down.

Chapter Ten

Who, Me?

The second Tuesday prayer gathering was larger than the first.
Not much larger.

But enough that everyone noticed.

When Eli and Grace arrived at the small classroom by the nursery, the chairs had already been rearranged into a wider circle. Ruth Bell was moving with purpose, carrying extra chairs from the hallway one at a time despite Pastor Brooks telling her he could do it.

“I have carried harder things than chairs,” she told him.

Pastor Brooks looked at Eli as he walked in. “Help her before she carries the piano in here too.”

Eli smiled and took two chairs from the stack.

The room still smelled like crayons and old carpet. The Noah’s ark poster still hung slightly crooked on the wall. The small table still had scratches and marker stains across the top. But tonight the room felt different.

Not impressive.

Fuller.

Dana had come back. So had Frank, Bethany, Mara, Paul, and Linda. Mason and Rachel came with Tyler and Emma, who delivered Mr. Pickles to the nursery with a whispered instruction to “be brave.”

Two new couples came too.

One was young, maybe late twenties, with a baby carrier and the stunned faces of people who had not slept properly in months.

The other couple was older. They sat close together but did not touch. The wife kept her hands folded tightly in her lap. The husband stared at the floor.

A single father named Jordan came in just before seven with a teenage son who clearly did not want to be there. The boy wore a black hoodie, earbuds in, eyes down. Jordan looked apologetic before anyone had said a word.

Eli recognized him from a message.

I don’t know how to talk to my son anymore.

That was what Jordan had written.

Eli had answered with the same phrase that kept becoming more true:

Start with one faithful step.

Now Jordan was standing in the prayer room, looking like the first step might crush him.

Grace saw them and walked over first.

Eli watched her greet them.

No speech.

No pressure.

Just welcome.

That mattered.

Pastor Brooks began at seven.

No microphone.

No stage.

No livestream.

Just a Bible on the small table and people sitting in a circle.

“We are here to pray,” he said. “We are not here to impress one another. We are not here to fix every home in one night. We are not here because we are strong. We are here because God is merciful.”

The room quieted.

Pastor Brooks opened to Matthew and read:

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

He closed the Bible.

“Some of you came heavy tonight,” he said. “That is not a disqualification. That is the invitation.”

Eli looked around the room.

He could see the heaviness.

In Dana’s tired eyes.

In Rachel’s hands.

In the young mother bouncing her baby carrier with one foot.

In the older couple sitting apart while sitting together.

In Jordan’s face.

In the teenage boy hiding behind earbuds.

In Mason, who made no jokes tonight.

And, if Eli was honest, in himself.

Pastor Brooks bowed his head.

“Lord, we are here because we need You.”

That was how the prayer began.

At first, people prayed quietly.

Ruth thanked God for bringing the tired and the wounded.

Frank prayed for parents who felt like they had started too late.

Bethany prayed for mothers who were touched out, worn out, and ashamed of how often they wanted to disappear.

The young mother with the baby carrier began to cry during that prayer.

Her husband stared at the floor and rubbed the back of his neck.

Then Dana prayed for grandparents raising children they had expected only to spoil.

That made several people laugh softly, but the laughter quickly turned tender.

Rachel prayed next.

Her voice shook less than the week before.

“Lord, help me keep showing up when it feels awkward. Help Tyler know I am sorry by how I live, not just what I say. Help Emma feel safe. Help me not quit after one bad night.”

Mason looked at her with quiet respect.

Then he bowed his head.

“God,” he said, “help me be useful.”

He stopped.

That was all.

Ruth whispered, “Amen.”

Eli almost smiled.

For Mason, that was a full sermon.

Pastor Brooks looked around the circle.

“If you are new tonight, you are not required to speak. But if you would like prayer, you may share your first name and what you are asking God for.”

For several seconds, no one moved.

Then the older woman lifted her hand slightly.

“My name is Carol,” she said.

Her voice was thin but clear.

“This is my husband, Dennis.”

Dennis did not look up.

Carol swallowed.

“Our daughter is thirty-two. She has not spoken to us in almost two years. We were hard on her growing up. Too hard. Religious, but not kind. We thought if we controlled enough, she would turn out right.”

Her eyes filled.

“She left home at eighteen. Left church. Married someone we did not approve of. We said things we should not have said.”

Dennis shifted in his chair.

Carol continued.

“We found one of Eli’s posts because someone from my sister’s church sent it to me. The one about truth without love becoming a weapon.”

Eli looked down.

He remembered writing that.

It felt like a long time ago.

Carol wiped her face.

“I have used truth as a weapon. And now my daughter will not answer my calls.”

The room was still.

Carol looked at her husband.

Dennis’s jaw worked like words were trying to get out and failing.

Finally, he spoke without lifting his eyes.

“I told her she was choosing hell over her family.”

The sentence hit the room hard.

Carol began crying.

Dennis pressed his thumb and forefinger against his eyes.

“I believed I was defending truth,” he said. “Maybe I was. But I did not sound like Jesus.”

No one corrected him.

No one softened it.

No one piled on.

Pastor Brooks leaned forward.

“What are you asking God for tonight?”

Dennis finally looked up.

His eyes were wet.

“I want my daughter back.”

Then he shook his head.

“No. That is not first.”

He took a hard breath.

“I want to repent whether she comes back or not.”

Eli felt that in his chest.

That was different.

That was not bargaining.

That was surrender.

Pastor Brooks nodded slowly.

“Then we will pray for repentance first, and reconciliation according to God’s mercy.”

They prayed.

Carol wept quietly.

Dennis did not make a sound, but his shoulders shook.

Eli prayed silently, remembering every time he had wanted to be right more than he had wanted to be loving.

Truth without love becomes a weapon.

He had written it.

Dennis had lived the warning.

So had Eli, in smaller ways than he liked to admit.

When the prayer ended, Carol whispered, “Thank you.”

Dennis only nodded.

Then Jordan spoke.

The single father.

He sat beside his teenage son, who still had his earbuds in.

“My name is Jordan,” he said. “This is Caleb.”

Caleb stared at the floor.

Jordan glanced at him, then looked back at the circle.

“My wife died three years ago.”

Several faces softened.

“I did not handle it well. I mean, I went to work. I paid the bills. I kept food in the house. But I was not there. Not really.”

His voice tightened.

“Caleb was twelve. His sister was seven. I thought keeping everything running was enough. I gave them screens because I did not know what to say to them. Then I got angry when they stopped talking to me.”

Caleb’s jaw tightened under the hood.

Jordan continued.

“I saw the post about screens making poor shepherds, and it made me mad. I thought, who is this guy to talk? But I could not get it out of my head.”

He looked at Eli.
Not accusing.
Just honest.
“I have let a lot of things shepherd my son because I was too broken to lead.”
The room was quiet.
Caleb pulled one earbud out.
Only one.
But Eli noticed.
So did Jordan.
Jordan’s face changed, but he kept talking.
“I do not know how to fix it. I do not know how to talk to him. Every time I try, I sound like I’m either lecturing or begging.”
Caleb looked away.
Pastor Brooks asked gently, “What are you asking God for?”
Jordan’s answer came fast.
“My son.”
Caleb stood suddenly.
The chair scraped loudly against the floor.
Everyone froze.
Jordan looked up. “Caleb—”
“I knew this was a bad idea,” Caleb said.
His voice was low but shaking.
“I’m not some project for a church circle.”
Jordan stood too. “That is not what this is.”
“Yes, it is.”
Caleb’s eyes were wet now, but angry.
“You bring me here so everyone can pray because I’m messed up? You disappeared for three years, but I’m the problem?”
Jordan looked like he had been struck.
No one moved.
Eli felt the urge to step in, then knew immediately he should not.
This was not his moment to manage.
Caleb continued.
“You don’t want me. You want the old me. The kid who didn’t make you feel guilty.”
Jordan opened his mouth.
No words came.
Caleb pulled his hood tighter.

“I’m going outside.”

He walked out before anyone could stop him.

The room remained silent after the door closed.

Jordan stood there, breathing hard.

Then he sat down and covered his face with both hands.

“I should not have brought him.”

Pastor Brooks spoke softly.

“Maybe this is the first honest thing he has said in a long time.”

Jordan looked up.

“It felt like hate.”

“It sounded like pain.”

Jordan closed his eyes.

Grace leaned toward him.

“Go after him,” she said gently. “Not to correct him. To hear him.”

Jordan looked at her.

She nodded.

“Just hear him.”

For a moment, he seemed afraid to move.

Then he stood and went after his son.

The door closed behind him.

No one spoke.

Then Ruth bowed her head.

“Lord, meet them outside.”

The whole room prayed.

Not loudly.

Not with drama.

But with the deep urgency of people who knew they had just witnessed a wound break open.

Eli stared at the closed door.

This was not clean.

It was not controlled.

It would not fit neatly into a post.

Awakening sounded noble from a distance.

Up close, it sounded like a teenage boy saying what grief had done to him.

Jordan and Caleb did not return for nearly twenty minutes.

During that time, the prayer room continued.

But everyone seemed aware of the empty chairs.

The young couple shared next.

Their names were Aaron and Melissa.

The baby in the carrier was named Jude.

Melissa said she was afraid she was already failing as a mother because she felt more anxiety than joy.

Aaron admitted he stayed late at work sometimes because the house felt overwhelming.

They both looked ashamed.

Grace and Bethany prayed for them with the tenderness of people who knew exhaustion could lie.

Then Mara asked for prayer because she wanted to delete several apps from her phone but was afraid of feeling alone without them.

“I know that sounds stupid,” she said.

“It does not,” Eli answered before he could stop himself.

She looked at him.

He continued carefully.

“A lot of people are more afraid of silence than they realize.”

Mara nodded.

“That’s it.”

They prayed for her too.

When the door finally opened, everyone turned.

Jordan came in first.

His face was red.

Caleb followed behind him, hood still up, earbuds now in his hand.

They sat down.

Not close.

But closer than before.

Jordan did not explain.

Caleb did not apologize.

No one asked them to.

But Eli noticed Jordan’s hand shaking.

He also noticed Caleb did not put the earbuds back in.

That was something.

Maybe not much.

But something.

One faithful step.

Near the end of the meeting, Pastor Brooks asked Eli to pray.

Eli had prayed in the group before, but this felt different.

The room was full of wounds.

Carol and Dennis.

Jordan and Caleb.

Rachel and her children.

Mara and loneliness.

Aaron and Melissa's exhaustion.

Dana's grandchildren.

Mason's awkward usefulness.

Grace's steady burden.

And Eli himself.

He felt suddenly unqualified.

Not mildly.

Completely.

What was he doing here?

He was not trained for this. He had no counseling degree. No seminary degree. No special authority. He was not even sure he was managing his own home well enough to speak into anyone else's.

His posts had brought some of these people here.

That realization no longer felt exciting.

It felt terrifying.

A cropped screenshot was one thing.

A comment thread was one thing.

But real people in a room with real pain?

That was holy ground.

And Eli did not feel clean enough to stand on it.

Pastor Brooks looked at him gently.

"Eli?"

The room waited.

Eli bowed his head.

No words came.

He tried again.

Still nothing.

His throat tightened.

Grace reached for his hand.

That almost broke him.

Finally, he whispered, "Lord, who am I to pray over these people?"

The room stayed silent.

Eli had not meant to say it that way.

But once it was out, the rest followed.

“Who am I to speak into families? Who am I to call parents to wake up? Who am I to warn anyone? I am tired. I am proud. I am scared. I get distracted. I fail in my own house. I do not know what I am doing.”

His voice shook.

“Who, me?”

There it was.

The question that had followed him since the beginning.

Not as a title.

Not as a phrase.

As a cry.

Who, me?

He kept his head bowed.

“I do not have what these people need. But You do. So please do not let them see me. Let them see You. Do not let my words become a wall between hurting people and Your mercy. Do not let my weakness stop Your work. Help us repent. Help us forgive. Help us listen. Help us take one faithful step. Wake us up, Lord. But begin with me.”

He stopped.

No polished ending came.

No strong finish.

Only silence.

Then Ruth whispered, “Amen.”

Others followed.

“Amen.”

“Amen.”

Grace squeezed his hand.

Eli kept his head down for a moment longer.

Something in him had loosened.

Not all the fear.

Not all the pride.

Not all the weight.

But something.

The question had been spoken honestly at last.

Who, me?

And in the quiet that followed, Eli sensed the answer.

Not because you are enough.

Because I am.

After the meeting ended, people stayed longer than usual.

Carol and Dennis spoke quietly with Pastor Brooks.

Dana hugged Rachel.

Bethany helped Melissa carry the baby carrier to the nursery.

Mason stood near the door with his hands in his pockets, watching everything like a man trying to understand a language he had started learning late.

Eli stepped into the hallway alone.

He needed air.

The church hallway was dim except for the light near the nursery. Children's drawings hung on one bulletin board. A paper cross made from cutout handprints was taped to another.

Eli stood there, breathing slowly.

He felt embarrassed.

Not ashamed exactly.

Exposed.

Grace found him a minute later.

"You okay?"

He leaned against the wall.

"I cried in front of everyone."

"Yes."

"That was not the plan."

She smiled softly. "I figured."

"I meant to pray something helpful."

"You did."

"I said I didn't know what I was doing."

"That was probably helpful too."

He looked at her.

She stepped closer.

"Eli, people do not need you to be impressive. They need you to be honest and submitted to God."

He swallowed.

"I felt like a fraud."

"Maybe that was mercy."

"That sounds awful."

"Maybe. But better to feel your weakness than forget it."

He looked toward the prayer room.

"I don't have what they need."

"No," Grace said. "You don't."

She said it without hesitation.

Then she touched his face gently.
“But God does.”
Eli closed his eyes for a second.
Not because the words were new.
Because they were true.
And he needed them to be true.

Jordan and Caleb came out of the classroom together.
Jordan looked emotionally exhausted.
Caleb looked uncomfortable, which for a teenager in a church hallway probably counted as normal.
They stopped near Eli and Grace.
Jordan cleared his throat.
“I just wanted to say thank you.”
Eli shook his head. “You do not have to thank me.”
Caleb looked at Eli.
For a moment, Eli expected anger.
Instead, Caleb said, “I still think posts about phones are annoying.”
Eli nodded seriously.
“That is fair.”
Caleb seemed surprised.
Then he added, “But my dad listened outside.”
Jordan looked down.
Eli looked at him.
“That matters,” Eli said.
Caleb shrugged.
“Maybe.”
He put one earbud back in, then seemed to think better of it and took it out again.
Jordan noticed.
So did Eli.
Again, one faithful step.
Before they left, Grace told Jordan they would keep praying.
Jordan nodded.
“I think we are going to come back next week.”
Caleb muttered, “Maybe.”
Jordan smiled faintly.
“Maybe,” he agreed.
They walked out into the night.

Eli watched them go.
A father and son.
Still wounded.
Still awkward.
Still carrying years of grief.
But not silent anymore.
That was not small.

Mason approached Eli near the nursery.

He looked uncomfortable.

That usually meant he was about to say something serious or make a joke to avoid it.

This time, serious won.

“That prayer,” Mason said.

Eli waited.

“When you said, ‘Who, me?’”

Eli looked down. “Yeah.”

“That was the first thing you’ve said that made total sense to me.”

Eli looked up.

Mason shrugged.

“I mean, I hear the other stuff. Parents waking up. Digital Babylon. Prayer is the work. All of it. Some of it lands. Some of it still sounds like church words to me.”

“That is honest.”

“But that question?” Mason said. “I get that one.”

Eli studied him.

Mason looked toward the door Rachel had gone through with her kids.

“I keep thinking, who am I to help Rachel? I was not there when I should have been. Who am I to pray? I barely know what I believe half the time. Who am I to walk into church after years of making jokes about people who did?”

He looked back at Eli.

“So yeah. That one I get.”

Eli nodded slowly.

“What if that is the point?” Eli said.

“What?”

“That none of us come because we are qualified. We come because we are called.”

Mason stared at him.

Then he frowned.

“See, then you went churchy again.”

Eli laughed.

Mason smiled faintly.

“But I think I know what you mean,” Mason said.

“That might be enough.”

“Don’t push it.”

They both smiled.

Then Mason grew quiet.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah.”

“When you pray, do you feel something every time?”

“No.”

“Good.”

Eli smiled. “Good?”

“I thought I was defective.”

“No. Sometimes prayer feels like fire. Sometimes it feels like talking into drywall.”

Mason laughed. “That should be in a brochure.”

“But God hears both.”

Mason nodded.

He looked like he wanted to believe that.

Maybe he almost did.

That night, after they got home, Eli did not post.

He did not check comments.

He did not read messages.

He helped get the children ready for bed, prayed with them, and listened as Lily explained that Mr. Bear was also “feeling spiritually tired.”

Grace handled that one with impressive seriousness.

After the kids were asleep, Eli sat at the kitchen table with his notebook.

The house was quiet.

Grace made tea and sat across from him.

For a while, he did not write.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

He looked at the blank page.

“I think I have been afraid of being unqualified because I thought calling meant God saw something strong in me.”

Grace listened.

“But maybe calling means God is choosing to show His strength through what is weak.”

She nodded.

“That sounds biblical.”

“It is.”

He smiled faintly.

“I know. I just hate when the Bible applies to me.”

Grace laughed softly.

Eli picked up the pen and wrote:

Who, me?

He stared at the words.

Then underneath he wrote:

Not because I am enough. Because He is.

Grace read it upside down from across the table.

“That is the heart of the book.”

Eli looked at her.

The phrase startled him.

“The book?”

She looked equally surprised, as if she had not planned to say it.

Then she shrugged slightly.

“Maybe someday.”

Eli looked back at the page.

Who, me?

The question was no longer only about him.

It belonged to Rachel.

Mason.

Dana.

Jordan.

Carol and Dennis.

Mara.

Aaron and Melissa.

Every parent who felt too late.

Every believer who felt too ordinary.

Every tired person who thought obedience was for someone stronger, cleaner, smarter, or more prepared.

Who, me?

Yes.
You.
Not because you are enough.
Because He is.
Eli underlined the sentence.
Then closed the notebook.

Before bed, he finally picked up his phone.
There were many notifications.
But one message stood out.
It was from Pastor Brooks.
Tonight was important. Not because it was impressive. Because it was honest. Rest now. Do not post from the emotion of the evening.
Eli smiled.
The man knew him too well already.
He replied:
I won't. Thank you.
Then he put the phone on the dresser.
Not the nightstand.
The dresser.
Grace noticed.
"Good choice."
"I'm learning."
"Slowly."
"Yes."
They turned off the light.
For once, Eli fell asleep quickly.
No scrolling.
No mental arguments.
No imagined replies.
No need to explain himself to strangers.
The prayer room stayed with him, but not as pressure.
As a reminder.
The work was too holy for performance.
The people were too wounded for pride.
The calling was too heavy for self-confidence.
And the God who had begun the fire did not need Eli to be impressive.
He needed him surrendered.

That was enough for one day.

The next morning, Eli woke before dawn again.

The house was still.

He went downstairs, made coffee, and opened his Bible.

This time, he turned to Corinthians.

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

Eli read the passage slowly.

Then he opened his notebook.

At the top of a fresh page, he wrote:

Who, Me?

Below it, he wrote:

A story of ordinary obedience in a digital age.

He sat back.

The words looked strange on the page.

Too big.

Too possible.

Too much.

He almost laughed.

Then he whispered, “Lord, if this is You, write it deeper than ink.”

Outside, the first light touched the windows.

Inside, the house waited to wake.

Soon there would be cereal, missing socks, work emails, arguments about screen time, prayer requests, bills, dishes, comments, and all the ordinary work of faithfulness.

But for that moment, Eli sat in the quiet with a Bible, a notebook, and a question that no longer sounded like an excuse.

Who, me?

The answer was still yes.

Not because Eli Carter was ready.

But because God was already moving.

PART THREE
The Fire Spreads

Chapter Eleven

A Thousand Screens

By the end of the week, Eli's words were on screens he would never see.

They appeared on phones in school pickup lines.

On laptops in church offices.

On tablets beside hospital beds.

On desktop monitors in breakrooms.

On social media feeds between recipes, arguments, advertisements, and headlines.

Most people saw only a sentence or two.

Some read the full posts.

A few printed them.

Others copied them into family text threads.

Some mocked them.

Some argued.

Some wept.

Some prayed.

Eli knew only a fraction of it, and even that was more than he could carry.

On Friday morning, he stood in the kitchen before work, watching Owen try to eat cereal with a fork. Lily was explaining to Grace why Mr. Bear needed a birthday party even though no one knew his birthday. Noah sat at the table reading the back of the cereal box with the seriousness of a scholar.

Eli's phone buzzed on the counter.

He glanced at it.

Then looked away.

Grace noticed.

"That one hurt?"

"What?"

"Not checking it."

He smiled faintly. "A little."

"Good."

"That is not compassionate."

“It is accurate.”

Noah looked up from the cereal box. “Dad, is your phone still famous?”

Eli nearly choked on his coffee.

“My phone is not famous.”

“But people keep sending you stuff.”

“That does not mean famous.”

“What does it mean?”

Eli paused.

That was a harder question than Noah knew.

“It means some people are reading things I wrote.”

“About God?”

“Yes.”

“And parents?”

“Yes.”

“And phones?”

“Yes.”

Noah nodded, then looked at Eli’s phone.

“So the phone is telling people not to use phones too much?”

Grace laughed.

Eli pointed at Noah. “That is a very fair observation.”

Noah returned to the cereal box.

Lily looked at Eli.

“Can Mr. Bear have a famous phone?”

“No,” Grace said immediately.

Lily sighed. “He never gets anything.”

Owen lifted his fork and shouted, “Bear!”

The morning moved on.

But Noah’s question stayed with Eli.

The phone was telling people not to use phones too much.

There was irony in that.

Maybe even danger.

Eli was using the very system he was warning people about. A thousand screens were carrying messages about resisting the power of screens. A thousand distractions were delivering calls to attention. A thousand little glowing gates were passing along words about guarding the gates of the home.

It felt useful.

It also felt unstable.

Like sending medicine through a poisoned pipe.

Maybe that was too dramatic.

Maybe it was simply the world they lived in.

Tools did not wait until motives were pure.

Neither did opportunities.

The question was whether Eli could use the tool without letting the tool use him.

That question had no final answer.

Only daily ones.

He picked up his phone, opened his messages, and checked only the first one.

It was from Pastor Brooks.

Call me when you have a few minutes. No emergency.

Eli looked at Grace.

“Pastor Brooks wants me to call.”

“Now?”

“Says no emergency.”

Grace poured Owen more cereal.

“Then after breakfast.”

Eli set the phone down.

It buzzed again.

He did not touch it.

Noah noticed and gave him a small approving nod.

That mattered more than Eli expected.

Eli called Pastor Brooks from the truck before leaving for work.

The morning was cold and clear. Frost clung to the windshield edges, and the neighborhood lawns looked silver in the early light.

Pastor Brooks answered on the second ring.

“Good morning.”

“Morning. Everything okay?”

“Yes. I wanted to speak with you before you heard it from someone else.”

Eli’s stomach tightened.

“That sounds like the beginning of something.”

“It may be nothing. It may be something.”

“That is not comforting.”

Pastor Brooks gave a soft laugh.

“A pastor friend in Ohio called me last night. One of your posts was shared with his church leadership. They are planning a parent prayer night around the themes of repentance, attention, and family discipleship.”

Eli did not answer.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Another pastor in Tennessee sent me a message this morning. Similar situation. They want to use a few of your lines in a family meeting, with credit.”

Eli stared through the windshield.

Ohio.

Tennessee.

Churches he had never visited.

Parents he had never met.

Pastors planning meetings because of sentences written at his kitchen table.

He did not know what to feel.

Fear came first.

Then gratitude.

Then suspicion of the gratitude.

Then the old question.

Who, me?

Pastor Brooks seemed to know he was quiet for a reason.

“How are you receiving that?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Good. That may be safer than knowing too quickly.”

“It feels too big.”

“It is too big for you.”

Eli let out a breath.

“Thank you for the reminder.”

“I mean that kindly.”

“I know.”

Pastor Brooks’s voice grew serious.

“Eli, when words spread, people may assume the writer is the center of what God is doing. Do not believe them.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Wanting is not enough. You need practices that keep you grounded.”

“I thought I had some.”

“You do. You need more.”

Eli leaned back.

“What kind?”

“Do not count reach every day. Do not search your own name. Do not read every comment. Do not accept every invitation. Do not let strangers have faster access to you than your wife does. Do not let people turn your sentences into slogans without keeping your life rooted in Scripture and prayer.”

Eli closed his eyes briefly.

“That is a lot.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think I should tell pastors not to use the posts?”

“Not necessarily. If the words are useful, let them be useful. But do not chase where they go.”

Eli looked toward the house.

Grace stood visible through the kitchen window, wiping Owen’s face with a towel while Owen fought like a man defending property.

“What do I chase?”

“Christ. Faithfulness. Your family. Your local church. Prayer. Truth with love.”

“That sounds less efficient.”

“It is.”

“Less impressive too.”

“Yes.”

Eli smiled faintly.

Pastor Brooks continued, “The kingdom of God is not built by impression. It is built by obedience.”

Eli reached for his notebook, then realized he had left it inside.

“I need to write that down.”

“Then remember it until you can.”

“I’ll try.”

“One more thing,” Pastor Brooks said.

“Yes?”

“Ruth wants the prayer room to meet twice next week.”

Eli laughed once.

“Of course she does.”

“I told her we would pray about it first.”

“What did she say?”

“She said she already had.”

Eli smiled.

“That sounds like Ruth.”

“It does. But even Ruth must not outrun the Lord.”

“That sounds like a sermon.”

“It may become one.”

After they hung up, Eli sat in the truck for another minute.

Ohio.

Tennessee.

A thousand screens.

He looked at his phone.

There were more notifications.

He did not open them.

Instead, he prayed.

“Lord, do not let me chase what only You can carry.”

Then he started the truck and drove to work.

At lunch, Mason called.

Eli answered because Mason almost never called during the day unless something was wrong or funny enough to interrupt work.

“Please tell me you are not in jail,” Eli said.

“Not currently.”

“That is comforting.”

“I have news.”

“Okay.”

“My mother has joined the movement.”

Eli closed his eyes. “There is no movement.”

“Tell that to my mother. She printed three of your posts and put them on her refrigerator.”

“That is not a movement.”

“She used a magnet shaped like a dove. That feels official.”

Eli smiled despite himself.

Mason continued, “Also, she wants to know if you are writing a book.”

Eli froze.

“What?”

“A book. You know, pages, cover, probably too many forewords.”

“Why would she ask that?”

“Because church ladies think any man with three decent paragraphs and a Bible verse should write a book.”

Eli rubbed his forehead.

“Please tell your mother no.”

“I did.”

“Good.”

“I told her you were too busy becoming nationally important.”

“Mason.”

“I’m kidding. Mostly.”

Eli leaned back in the truck seat.

Mason’s voice shifted.

“You okay, man?”

Eli looked out over the work parking lot.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s been your brand lately.”

“It feels like things are spreading faster than I can understand.”

“Isn’t that good?”

“Maybe.”

“But maybe not?”

“Maybe not if I start thinking spread means success.”

Mason was quiet for a second.

“That sounded like Pastor Brooks.”

“It probably was.”

“Good. Use his wisdom. Yours is questionable.”

“Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

Eli smiled.

Then Mason said, “Rachel wants to invite Dana and her grandkids over next week.”

Eli sat up a little.

“Really?”

“Yeah. She said if people helped her, maybe she can help someone else.”

Eli felt something warm and steady in his chest.

“That is good.”

“Yeah. It is.”

Mason cleared his throat.

“And I told her I’d help.”

“You did?”

“Do not sound shocked.”

“I’m trying not to.”

“You failed.”

Eli laughed.

Mason continued, “It’s weird. I used to think helping people meant you had to have answers. Turns out sometimes it means carrying chairs and bringing discount root beer.”

“That may be your calling.”

“I knew it.”

Eli smiled.

After the call ended, he sat with that thought longer than the news about Ohio and Tennessee.

Rachel helping Dana.

Mason helping Rachel.

A grandmother receiving prayer.

A single mother finding support.

A sarcastic man carrying chairs.

That felt more like awakening than numbers on a screen.

A thousand screens could spread a sentence.

But one open home could carry a soul.

Eli wrote that on a napkin.

Then he paused.

Maybe not every good sentence needed to be posted.

He folded the napkin and put it in his lunchbox.

That evening, Eli came home to a house in motion.

Noah and Lily were arguing over whether the living room counted as neutral territory in a game they had invented. Owen had colored on his own arm with washable marker and was very proud of it. Grace stood at the stove, stirring something in a pot while talking on the phone with her shoulder pressed to her ear.

She looked at Eli when he entered and mouthed, “My mother.”

Eli nodded solemnly, as if she were in a dangerous negotiation.

He took Owen to the bathroom and washed the marker from his arm.

Owen objected.

“Art!”

“I understand,” Eli said. “But your mother will not accept arm art at dinner.”

“Art!”

“You are very committed.”

After dinner, Grace told him that her mother had heard about the posts from someone in her church.

Eli set down his fork.

“Your mother?”

“Yes.”

“From her church?”

“Yes.”

“She lives two hours away.”

“I know.”

Eli looked at his plate.

Grace studied him.

“You look like you might crawl under the table.”

“I’m considering it.”

“She was encouraged.”

“That’s good.”

“She also asked if you were writing a book.”

Eli stared at her.

“No.”

Grace smiled slightly.

“That was your response?”

“Yes. Possibly too fast.”

“Why too fast?”

“Because Mason’s mother asked the same thing today.”

Grace’s smile faded into thought.

“Oh.”

“No.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You said ‘oh.’”

“That is not a commitment.”

“It sounded dangerous.”

Grace leaned back.

“Eli, I am not saying you should write a book.”

“Good.”

“I am saying maybe people are asking because the message is bigger than posts.”

He stood and began clearing plates.

“The message is repent, pray, lead your home, do not let screens shepherd your children, and take one faithful step. That does not require a book.”

“No,” Grace said. “But a book might help some people walk through it slowly.”

He turned.

Grace’s expression was calm.

Not pushing.

Just considering.

Eli shook his head.

“I’m not an author.”

“You were not an internet preacher either.”

“I am still not that.”

“I know.”

Noah looked up from the table.

“Are you writing a book?”

“No,” Eli said.

Grace said nothing.

Noah looked disappointed.

“What would it be called?”

“I am not writing one.”

Lily raised her hand.

“You still do not have to raise your hand,” Eli said.

“I think it should be called Mr. Bear Saves the Parents.”

Owen shouted, “Bear!”

Noah shook his head. “No. It should be called The Mighty Chicken and the Phone War.”

Eli pointed at him. “That is better than I expected.”

Grace laughed.

Eli carried the plates to the sink.

The conversation moved on, but not in his mind.

A book.

No.

That was too much.

Too official.

Too permanent.

Posts were temporary. They moved through feeds and disappeared. A book sounded like someone claiming to know something.

Eli did not want that.

At least, he thought he did not.

But later, while loading the dishwasher, the phrase from his notebook came back.

Who, Me?

A story of ordinary obedience in a digital age.
He nearly dropped a spoon.

The prayer room met again the next Tuesday.

Ruth had gotten her way, sort of.

They did not add a second meeting yet, but they opened the room thirty minutes early for quiet prayer.

By the official start time, twenty-two people had arrived.

That was too many for the small classroom.

People sat against the wall. Two stood in the back. Someone brought extra chairs from the fellowship hall. The nursery worker recruited a second volunteer because more children had come too.

Pastor Brooks looked at the room and then at Ruth.

Ruth lifted her chin slightly, as if to say, I told you.

He wisely said nothing.

Eli felt uneasy seeing the room full.

Not because people had come.

Because part of him liked that they had.

He confessed that silently before the meeting started.

Lord, I like full rooms. Keep me clean.

Pastor Brooks opened with Scripture from Psalm 127.

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

He looked around the room.

“That includes this room. Unless the Lord builds what is happening here, we labor in vain.”

Eli needed that.

The prayers were heavier that night.

A mother confessed that she had discovered messages on her daughter’s phone that frightened her.

A father admitted he had not prayed with his family in years and did not know how to begin without looking fake.

A couple asked for prayer because their teenage son no longer believed in God.

Dana shared that her grandchildren had made it eight minutes at dinner without screens.

The room applauded.

Dana cried.

Rachel hugged her.

Mason carried more chairs.

Everywhere Eli looked, small things were happening.

Not dramatic things.

Small things.

The kind people might overlook if they were only searching for revival in the form of crowds and music.

But Eli was learning.

A mother asking for help was not small.

A father admitting failure was not small.

A child sleeping without nightmares was not small.

A teenager removing one earbud was not small.

A family eating together for eight minutes without screens was not small.

A sarcastic man carrying chairs without being asked was not small.

Toward the end, Pastor Brooks asked everyone to pray in small groups.

Eli found himself sitting with Jordan and Caleb.

Caleb had come again.

He still wore the hoodie, but the hood was down this time.

Eli counted that as progress but wisely did not mention it.

Jordan looked nervous.

Caleb looked bored.

Or at least committed to looking bored.

Eli asked, "How has the week been?"

Jordan glanced at Caleb.

"Better in some ways. Hard in others."

Caleb stared at the floor.

Eli waited.

Jordan said, "We talked."

Caleb muttered, "You talked."

Jordan winced.

Eli looked at Caleb.

"What would you call it?"

Caleb shrugged. "He asked questions and then got sad at the answers."

Jordan closed his eyes.

Eli nodded slowly.

"That can happen."

Caleb looked up.

“You think that’s good?”

“I think honest answers are sometimes hard to receive.”

Caleb studied him.

Then he looked away.

Jordan said quietly, “I’m trying not to defend myself.”

“That is hard,” Eli said.

“Yes.”

Caleb’s voice was quieter when he spoke again.

“He did listen though.”

Jordan looked at him.

Caleb did not look back.

But the words had been said.

He did listen.

Eli felt the weight of that.

Not every breakthrough looked like a hug.

Sometimes it looked like a teenage boy giving reluctant credit.

Eli bowed his head.

“Can I pray for both of you?”

Jordan nodded.

Caleb shrugged.

Eli took that as permission.

He prayed simply.

“Lord, help Jordan listen without fear. Help Caleb speak without losing hope. Help their home become honest and safe. Heal what grief has damaged. Give them one faithful step this week.”

When he finished, Caleb said nothing.

But he did not put his earbuds in.

After the meeting, Pastor Brooks pulled Eli aside.

They stood near the sanctuary doors while people slowly left the building.

“This is growing,” Pastor Brooks said.

“Yes.”

“How are you?”

Eli knew by now not to give the easy answer.

“Concerned.”

“About?”

“Motives. Mine. Others. The room. The posts. People starting to think something is happening and then trying to make it happen faster.”

Pastor Brooks nodded.

“Good concerns.”

“You say good to a lot of uncomfortable things.”

“Comfort is not always my assignment.”

“That is clear.”

Pastor Brooks smiled slightly, then grew serious.

“We may need to move the prayer gathering to the fellowship hall.”

Eli looked toward the small classroom.

“That makes sense.”

“Yes. But I want to keep the spirit of the small room.”

“No stage.”

“No stage,” Pastor Brooks said. “No performance. No livestream. No turning prayer into content.”

Eli nodded.

“Agreed.”

“And Eli?”

“Yes?”

“If people begin coming because of what you wrote, you must keep pointing away from yourself quickly and consistently.”

“I am trying.”

“Try more deliberately.”

Eli absorbed that.

“How?”

“Use we more than I. Speak of Christ more than the posts. Share responsibility with the church. Let others lead prayer. Let silence remain silence. Do not become the required voice in the room.”

Eli wrote that last one in his mind.

Do not become the required voice in the room.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“If this is of God, it must not depend on your personality.”

Eli nodded.

That was both humbling and freeing.

“I don’t want it to.”

“I believe you. But movements can form around men who did not ask for them. That does not make the danger less real.”

Eli looked toward the parking lot, where Mason was helping Rachel buckle the kids into her car.

“I keep thinking about a book,” Eli said before he could stop himself.

Pastor Brooks looked at him.

“Tell me.”

Eli shook his head.

“I don’t know. People keep asking. Mason’s mom. Grace’s mom. Grace mentioned it. I wrote something in my notebook after the last prayer meeting.”

“What did you write?”

Eli hesitated.

“Who, Me? A story of ordinary obedience in a digital age.”

Pastor Brooks was quiet.

Eli wished he had not said it.

Then the pastor said, “That sounds like the right title.”

Eli looked at him.

“I’m not saying write it now,” Pastor Brooks said.

“Good.”

“I am saying do not dismiss it because you feel unqualified.”

Eli let out a humorless laugh.

“That seems to be a theme.”

“Yes.”

“What would I even write?”

“Not advice from above. Testimony from the road.”

Eli considered that.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“People do not need another voice pretending to have mastered family discipleship, digital wisdom, prayer, and revival. They need a faithful witness saying, ‘I am learning too. Come with me.’”

Eli looked back toward the small classroom.

That felt different.

Less like claiming authority.

More like inviting people to walk.

“I’ll pray about it,” Eli said.

“Good. And ask Grace.”

“I will.”

Pastor Brooks smiled.

“You are learning.”

“Slowly.”

“Slow learning often lasts longer.”

That night, Eli sat at the kitchen table long after everyone had gone to bed.

His notebook lay open.

The house was quiet.

No phone.

No posts.

No comments.

Only the low hum of the refrigerator and the distant sound of a train somewhere beyond town.

He wrote the title again.

Who, Me?

Then beneath it:

Not because I am enough. Because He is.

He stared at the page for a long time.

A thousand screens could carry a thousand sentences to a thousand people.

But a book?

A book asked for order.

It asked for reflection.

It asked him to slow down.

Maybe that was good.

Maybe the very thing that made a book harder than posts was what made it safer.

Posts were sparks.

A book required tending.

He turned to a fresh page and wrote possible chapter titles.

The Noise.

Not Someone Else's Fight.

The First Post.

Small Fire.

Grace at the Table.

Watchman.

Digital Babylon.

The Prayer Room.

The First Attack.

Who, Me?

He stopped.

There it was.

A path.

Not polished.

Not complete.

But visible.

He sat back, unsettled.

This was not the book.

Not yet.

It was only the shape of one.

Still, the sight of the chapter titles made something in him go quiet.

Then Grace's voice came from the doorway.

"You writing?"

Eli turned.

She stood there in a robe, sleepy-eyed but awake enough to know something was happening.

"Maybe."

She walked over and looked at the notebook.

Her eyes moved down the list.

For a moment, she said nothing.

Then she sat across from him.

"You know this cannot become another thing that takes you away from us."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

She looked at him carefully.

He corrected himself.

"I want to know. I will need help knowing."

That answer seemed to satisfy her more.

She looked back at the page.

"It is a good title."

"You think so?"

"Yes."

"I'm scared of writing something people treat like I have answers."

"Then write it like a man who knows he does not."

Eli leaned back.

That sounded right.

Grace touched the notebook.

"Write about repentance. Write about the family table. Write about the phone in the drawer. Write about Pastor Brooks and Ruth and Rachel and Mason."

“And you.”
She smiled faintly.
“Carefully.”
He smiled too.
She grew serious.
“Write about weakness. That may be what people need most.”
Eli looked at the words again.
Who, Me?
Maybe that was why the title worked.
It did not begin with confidence.
It began with disbelief.
It began where many people lived.
The parent who thought it was too late.
The believer who felt too ordinary.
The wounded person who assumed God had moved on.
The tired mother.
The ashamed father.
The sarcastic friend.
The lonely student.
The old couple praying for a daughter who would not call back.
The teenager still deciding whether to remove the other earbud.
Who, me?
Yes.
You.
Eli picked up the pen.
Grace sat with him.
He did not write the book that night.
He only wrote one line.
This is not the story of a man who was ready. It is the story of a
God who was already moving.
He underlined it once.
Then he closed the notebook.
Grace reached across the table and took his hand.
No screen captured the moment.
No one shared it.
No one counted it.
But somewhere beyond the quiet kitchen, the message kept moving
across a thousand screens.

And under that same roof, where the first post had been written, Eli Carter began to understand that God could use the screens without surrendering the story to them.

The fire was spreading.

But the roots had to grow deeper.

Chapter Twelve

Homes Awake

The first email came from a father in Ohio.

Eli almost missed it because it landed in a folder he rarely checked.

The subject line was simple:

One faithful step

He opened it before work while sitting in his truck outside the office.

The message was not long.

Eli,

You do not know me. My name is Aaron Whitlock. I am a father of four outside Columbus. A pastor here shared your post about Digital Babylon at a parent prayer night. I was irritated at first. I thought it was going to be another guilt session for parents already trying to survive.

But then he read the part about one faithful step.

That phrase stayed with me.

I have not led my home spiritually. I work hard. I coach baseball. I fix things. I provide. But I have left prayer and Scripture mostly to my wife.

Last night, I apologized to her. Then I prayed with my children. It was awkward. My oldest smirked. My youngest asked if we were in trouble. My wife cried.

It was not impressive.

But it was a start.

Thank you for speaking plainly without crushing us.

One faithful step.

Aaron

Eli read the message twice.

Then a third time.

He sat back in the driver's seat and looked through the windshield at the office building.

People were walking inside with coffee cups, lunch bags, laptops, and tired faces. Just another weekday morning. Nothing about the parking lot suggested that somewhere in Ohio, a father had apologized to his wife and prayed with his children for the first time in years.

No banner appeared in the sky.
No alarm sounded.
No headline announced it.
But heaven had seen.
Eli was starting to believe that most important things happened that way.

Quietly.
Under roofs.
Around tables.
Beside beds.
In living rooms where parents stumbled through prayers they should have started years earlier.

He opened a reply.
Then stopped.
He prayed first.
“Lord, strengthen that home.”
Then he typed:

Aaron, this matters. Do not despise the awkward beginning. Keep going. Not perfectly. Faithfully. I am praying for you, your wife, and your children today.

He sent it.
Then he placed the phone face down on the passenger seat.
For several minutes, he did not move.
One faithful step.
It had started as a sentence.
Now it was becoming a trail.

By lunchtime, Eli had received seven more messages like it.

One came from a mother in Tennessee who had started reading the Gospel of Mark with her teenage daughter before school.

One came from a grandfather in Kentucky who had removed the television from the dining room after realizing it had been on during nearly every meal for fifteen years.

One came from a single mother in Indiana who said she had no idea how to lead family prayer, so she and her children had started by saying the Lord’s Prayer together each night.

One came from a pastor in Pennsylvania who said their church had opened the altar after a parent meeting, and several mothers and fathers had come forward asking God to forgive their passivity.

The messages encouraged Eli.
They also frightened him.
He did not want to start thinking of them as proof.
Proof that he was right.
Proof that he was called.
Proof that he should speak more.
Proof that he should write the book.
Fruit was good.
But fruit could become dangerous if a man started picking it up and using it as a mirror.
Eli could feel that temptation.
He wanted to show Grace.
He wanted to show Pastor Brooks.
He wanted to say, "Look, this is real."
That was not wrong by itself.
But beneath it was another desire.
He wanted reassurance that he mattered.
He hated how often that motive returned.
At lunch, he called Pastor Brooks.
The pastor answered with the sound of papers moving in the background.
"Eli."
"Do you have a minute?"
"Yes."
"I'm getting messages from people in other states. Parents praying. Churches gathering. People making changes."
"That is good."
"It is."
"But?"
Eli smiled faintly. Pastor Brooks knew him now.
"But I can feel myself wanting to use the stories to feel important."
Pastor Brooks was quiet for a moment.
"That is good to confess."
"I do not like confessing it."
"Most useful confession is unpleasant."
Eli leaned back in his truck.
"What do I do with the messages?"
"Give thanks. Pray for them. Save what may be useful to remember. Do not feed on them."

“Do not feed on them?”

“Yes. Encouragement can nourish obedience, or it can feed pride. The difference is what you do with it.”

“How do I know which I’m doing?”

Pastor Brooks answered slowly.

“Ask yourself what the message causes in you. Gratitude or appetite? Prayer or self-importance? Humility or hunger for more?”

Eli closed his eyes.

Gratitude or appetite.

That was clear.

Painfully clear.

“I think it causes both,” Eli said.

“Then give the gratitude to God and starve the appetite.”

Eli nodded.

“How?”

“Tell the stories carefully. Share them with Grace. Bring them to prayer. But do not build your identity on them. And do not use them to pressure God into giving you more visible results.”

Eli wrote the words on a napkin.

Do not use fruit to pressure God.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Also, remember the homes that are not improving quickly. Not every prayer night ends in repentance. Not every child responds. Not every marriage softens. If you only celebrate the quick stories, you may unintentionally shame the people still waiting.”

Eli looked out at the rain beginning to dot the windshield.

That mattered.

There were parents praying with children who rolled their eyes.

There were marriages still cold.

There were teenagers still angry.

There were prodigals still gone.

There were homes where one parent wanted change and the other mocked it.

There were people taking one faithful step and seeing nothing yet.

They needed hope too.

Maybe especially them.

“Thank you,” Eli said.

“You’re welcome.”

“Can I read one of the messages tonight in the prayer room?
Without names?”

“Bring it. We will discern together.”

That was another good fence.

Together.

Not alone.

That evening, the prayer gathering moved to the fellowship hall.

No one called it a relocation.

Ruth called it “making room.”

The small classroom door remained open, almost like a reminder.
The Noah’s ark poster was still visible from the hallway. The scratched
children’s table still sat inside. Eli was glad for that.

He did not want to forget where the prayer room had started.

The fellowship hall felt larger, but Pastor Brooks and Ruth had
worked hard to keep it simple.

No stage.

No microphone.

No livestream.

No music setup.

Just chairs in a wide circle, a Bible on a table, and a box of tissues
placed where everyone could reach it.

Mason arrived early again.

This time he carried two cases of bottled water.

Ruth saw him and nodded with approval.

“Useful,” she said.

Mason looked at Eli. “I have been promoted.”

“To water bearer?”

“Hydration ministry.”

Eli smiled. “Very prestigious.”

Rachel came in behind him with Tyler and Emma. Tyler had his
hood down. Emma carried Mr. Pickles and a folded piece of paper.

Lily ran to greet her.

“What’s that?”

Emma held it out.

“A prayer list.”

Lily gasped like Emma had brought treasure.

Grace looked at Rachel.

Rachel shrugged. “She made it herself.”

Emma showed the list to Lily.

It included:

Mom

Tyler

Uncle Mason

Mr. Pickles

People with bad dreams

Dogs with no homes

God knows the rest

Lily nodded solemnly.

“That is a good list.”

Owen tried to grab it.

Emma pulled it back quickly.

“No. It is holy.”

Mason coughed into his hand to hide a laugh.

Eli looked at Grace.

Grace’s eyes were wet already.

The meeting had not even started.

More people came than expected.

Not a crowd.

But enough.

Thirty-one adults.

Nine children in the nursery.

Three teenagers who sat near the back wall and looked like they were only partly present.

Jordan and Caleb came again.

Caleb wore the same black hoodie, but both earbuds stayed in his pocket.

Eli noticed.

He told himself not to stare.

Pastor Brooks opened with Psalm 127 again.

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

Then he looked around the fellowship hall.

“We are seeing homes stirred. We are hearing stories from other towns, other churches, other families. That is encouraging. But encouragement must lead us to prayer, not pride.”

Eli felt that one directly.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Tonight, we are going to thank God for what He is doing, and we are going to pray for those who are still waiting. Some homes wake up with tears. Some wake slowly. Some resist. Some feel darker before dawn. We will not measure God’s work only by what happens quickly.”

Ruth nodded firmly.

Eli was grateful for the words.

They steadied the room.

Pastor Brooks asked Eli if he wanted to share the message from Ohio.

Eli looked at Grace.

She nodded.

He stood reluctantly.

Standing felt wrong at first. Too visible.

So he remained beside his chair and read from his phone, leaving out the name and location.

A father apologizing.

A family prayer.

An awkward beginning.

A wife crying.

One faithful step.

When Eli finished, the room was quiet.

Then Frank said, “Praise God.”

Several others whispered agreement.

Pastor Brooks bowed his head.

“Lord, strengthen that father. Strengthen his wife. Strengthen those children. Let awkward beginnings become holy habits.”

They prayed for a family whose last name most of them did not know, in a state many of them had not visited.

Then Pastor Brooks asked if anyone in the room needed prayer because their own home had not changed quickly.

A woman named Denise raised her hand.

Her husband sat beside her with his arms crossed.

“My husband does not want me to say anything,” she said.

The room tightened.

Her husband’s face hardened.

Pastor Brooks spoke gently.

“We do not want to expose what should be handled privately. Would it be better to speak after the meeting?”

Denise looked down.

Maybe embarrassed.

Maybe relieved.

Her husband stared at the floor.

Then he said, “No. She can talk.”

His voice was rough.

Denise looked surprised.

He kept his arms crossed.

“I don’t want to be here,” he said. “That’s not a secret.”

A few people shifted in their chairs.

He looked at Pastor Brooks.

“My name is Rob. My wife has been reading these posts and trying to change everything in our house overnight. No phones at dinner. Prayer before bed. Scripture after breakfast. Family meetings. All of it.”

Denise’s face flushed.

Rob continued.

“I work ten hours a day. I come home tired. Now I feel like I’m failing because I don’t want to turn my house into church camp every night.”

The honesty in the room was sharp.

Eli felt the sting of it.

Pastor Brooks did not rush.

“Thank you for saying that plainly,” he said.

Rob looked almost annoyed by the kindness.

“I’m not against God,” he said. “I’m just tired.”

Denise began to cry quietly.

“I was trying to help,” she said.

“I know,” Rob said, softer now. “But it feels like you read something online and decided our whole life was wrong.”

That sentence hit Eli harder than he expected.

He looked down.

His words had encouraged Denise.

Maybe they had also overwhelmed her.

Maybe she had taken conviction and turned it into a household renovation too fast for the people living there.

Maybe this was why Pastor Brooks kept saying slow down.

Denise wiped her face.

“I got scared,” she said. “I started thinking we had failed our kids, and I wanted to fix it.”

Rob’s arms loosened slightly.

Pastor Brooks leaned forward.

“This is important. Conviction from God should lead us to repentance and obedience, but panic often tries to control everyone around us. Those are not the same.”

Eli wrote that down.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Rob, your tiredness matters. Denise, your concern matters. The answer is not passivity, and it is not panic. Perhaps your faithful step this week is not a full family overhaul. Perhaps it is one meal. One prayer. One shared decision made together instead of one spouse dragging the other.”

Rob looked at Denise.

Denise nodded slowly.

“I can do one meal,” Rob said.

His voice was quiet.

Denise reached for his hand.

He hesitated.

Then let her take it.

The room prayed for them.

Eli prayed silently too.

Lord, help me not crush people with urgency.

After that, the tone of the night changed.

People became more honest about the difficulty of change.

A father admitted he felt embarrassed praying out loud because he did not know the right words.

A mother said she had tried to set screen limits and ended up yelling so much she wondered if the screen was less damaging than her anger.

A grandmother said her grandson told her church was boring and she had no idea how to answer without sounding defensive.

Jordan shared that Caleb had agreed to eat dinner without earbuds once that week.

Caleb looked mortified when his father said it.

But he did not deny it.

Mason leaned toward Eli and whispered, “Teenage revival.”

Eli whispered back, “Do not say that out loud.”

Mason nodded. “I do occasionally have survival instincts.”

When it was Mason’s turn, he surprised everyone.

He raised his hand slightly.

Ruth looked pleased before he even spoke.

“I don’t know if this counts,” Mason said.

Pastor Brooks smiled. “We’ll listen first.”

Mason rubbed his palms on his jeans.

“I used to think faith was mostly about people acting like they were better than everyone else. Some of that was because I saw hypocrisy. Some of it was because making fun of believers helped me avoid thinking about whether they were right.”

He glanced at Eli.

“And lately I’ve been watching people admit they failed, and somehow that’s harder to mock.”

Rachel looked at him.

Mason shrugged, uncomfortable.

“I’m not saying I have everything figured out. I don’t. But I prayed twice this week when nobody was around.”

The room stayed quiet.

Mason looked at the floor.

“It was weird. I did not feel anything. But I did it.”

Ruth leaned forward.

“God heard.”

Mason nodded once.

“I hope so.”

“He did.”

No one argued with Ruth when she said it that way.

Eli felt joy rise in him.

Not loud joy.

Deep joy.

Mason had prayed alone.

Twice.

That might not sound like much to someone counting crowds.

But Eli knew better.

A man who had hidden behind jokes had spoken to God when no one was watching.

That was not small.

When the meeting ended, people did not leave quickly.

They gathered in small circles around the fellowship hall.

Denise and Rob spoke with Pastor Brooks and Linda.

Jordan and Caleb stood near the back wall. Caleb was showing Noah something on his phone, but when Noah glanced at Eli, he said, "It's just a picture of a dog."

Eli held up both hands.

"No accusation."

Noah looked relieved.

Rachel and Dana made plans for dinner together.

Mason carried empty water bottles to the trash with the seriousness of a man fulfilling sacred office.

Grace stood beside Eli, watching the room.

"This feels different," she said.

"Bigger?"

"Not just bigger."

"What then?"

She thought for a moment.

"Shared."

Eli looked around.

She was right.

At first, the burden had felt like something pressing mainly on him.

Then on him and Grace.

Then on the small prayer room.

Now it was spreading across shoulders.

Pastor Brooks teaching.

Ruth praying.

Grace welcoming.

Mason carrying.

Rachel helping Dana.

Linda speaking wisdom.

Frank praying over fathers.

Bethany comforting tired mothers.

Even the children making prayer lists.

The work was not Eli's.

It never had been.

The relief of that nearly made him cry.

Pastor Brooks joined them.

He looked tired but grateful.

"We need more chairs next week," Grace said.

"Yes," he said. "And more restraint."

Eli looked at him.

Pastor Brooks smiled faintly.

“When things grow, people assume growth gives permission to do more. Sometimes growth requires us to simplify.”

Eli nodded.

“What do we simplify?”

“The center,” Pastor Brooks said. “Prayer. Scripture. Repentance. Homes. Christ. Keep returning there.”

Grace nodded.

“No stage.”

“No stage,” Pastor Brooks said.

Mason walked by carrying a trash bag.

“No stage,” he repeated. “But possibly matching ministry shirts for the hydration team.”

Ruth, who had appeared behind him without warning, said, “No.”

Mason kept walking. “The board has spoken.”

Eli laughed.

The laughter felt good.

Necessary.

The room was carrying heavy things.

Laughter helped people keep walking.

That night, Eli did not post.

He wanted to.

Not out of pride this time.

At least not mostly.

He wanted to tell people what he had seen.

Rob and Denise choosing one meal.

Mason praying alone.

Caleb sitting without earbuds.

Emma’s prayer list.

Dana and Rachel making plans.

He wanted to say, This is what homes waking up looks like.

But he waited.

At home, after the children were asleep, he and Grace sat at the kitchen table.

The notebook lay open between them.

Eli had written the chapter list again.

Now he added a new title.

Homes Awake

Grace looked at it.

“That fits.”

“I think so.”

He tapped the page with the pen.

“I realized tonight that I keep thinking awakening will look bigger.

But maybe it first looks shared.”

Grace nodded slowly.

“Like burdens moving from one set of shoulders to many.”

“Yes.”

“That is healthier.”

“It is.”

He leaned back.

“I also realized the posts can overwhelm people.”

Grace smiled gently.

“You are just now realizing this?”

“I knew it in theory.”

“Tonight gave it a face.”

“Rob and Denise.”

“Yes.”

Eli rubbed his forehead.

“I do not want people panicking their families into change.”

“Then say that.”

“I will. Carefully.”

Grace looked at him.

“Maybe tomorrow.”

He smiled.

“Yes. Tomorrow.”

Progress.

The old Eli might have posted immediately.

The newer Eli could sleep first.

Maybe.

He looked at the notebook.

“Pastor Brooks says if I write the book, it should be testimony from the road, not advice from above.”

Grace’s expression softened.

“That is right.”

“I don’t know how to write a book.”

“You know how to tell the truth.”

“That is not the same thing.”

“No. But it is where a good book starts.”

Eli looked at the page.

The titles formed a path.

The Noise.

Not Someone Else’s Fight.

The First Post.

Small Fire.

Grace at the Table.

Watchman.

Digital Babylon.

The Prayer Room.

The First Attack.

Who, Me?

A Thousand Screens.

Homes Awake.

He whispered, “It’s becoming something.”

Grace reached across the table and touched his hand.

“It already is.”

The next morning, Eli woke with the sentence clear in his mind.

He went downstairs, started the coffee, opened his Bible, and prayed before touching his phone.

Then he wrote:

Parents, do not panic your home into change. Conviction is not the same as fear. Repentance is not the same as control. If your family has been drifting, start with humility, not a hammer. Apologize where needed. Invite instead of merely demand. Choose one faithful step and take it together if you can. A home is not awakened by panic. It is awakened by grace, truth, prayer, and steady obedience.

He read it slowly.

He thought of Rob.

Denise.

Aaron in Ohio.

Rachel.

Jordan and Caleb.

His own family.

He posted it.

Then he placed the phone in the drawer and began making breakfast.

Noah came downstairs first.
He looked half awake.
“Morning,” Eli said.
Noah grunted.
“That was almost a word.”
Noah sat at the table.
“Is today school?”
“Yes.”
He groaned.
“Can we pray for a snow day?”
“There is no snow.”
“God can do miracles.”
Eli smiled. “True. But we are not using prayer to avoid spelling tests.”
Noah looked disappointed.
Lily came in carrying Mr. Bear.
Owen followed with one sock on and one sock missing.
Grace entered last, tying her robe.
She looked at Eli.
“You posted?”
“Yes.”
“And then drawer?”
He pointed to the drawer.
She smiled.
“Good.”
Breakfast was ordinary.
Cereal.
Toast.
A missing spoon.
Owen demanding the blue cup.
Lily explaining that Mr. Bear had become “emotionally available.”
Noah asking if emotional availability could get him out of math homework.
Grace saying no.
Eli watched them and felt the deep goodness of it.
Nothing looked historic.
Nothing looked like awakening from a distance.
But he was learning not to trust distance.
Homes were waking.

One prayer.
One apology.
One meal.
One honest conversation.
One phone placed in a drawer.
One father listening.
One mother slowing down.
One teenager removing an earbud.
One grandmother making it to seven minutes, then eight.
One sarcastic man praying when no one was watching.
One child writing a prayer list that included God knows the rest.
Maybe that was how mercy moved.
Not always in waves people could film.
Sometimes in quiet rooms.
Sometimes in kitchens.
Sometimes in fellowship halls with no stage.
Sometimes through a thousand screens.
And sometimes after the screens were turned off.
Eli bowed his head before eating.
The children quieted.
Grace took his hand.
“Lord,” Eli prayed, “wake our home again today.”
It was a small prayer.
But small prayers, he had learned, could open large doors.

Chapter Thirteen

The Cost

The cost came quietly.

That surprised Eli.

He had expected opposition to arrive loudly. A public accusation. A harsh article. A threat. A church conflict. A phone call that changed everything.

But the first real cost was smaller than that.

It came through Lily standing in the hallway with tears in her eyes, holding Mr. Bear by one arm.

Eli was at the kitchen table after dinner, answering a message from a pastor in Kentucky. The pastor wanted to know if Eli would join a video call with their church leaders to discuss family prayer gatherings.

It was a good request.

A reasonable request.

The kind of request Eli would have prayed about a month ago.

Now he was already halfway through typing yes.

Lily stood in the doorway.

“Dad?”

“One second, sweetheart.”

He kept typing.

The pastor had asked about structure, safeguards, and whether they should allow testimonies during prayer time. Eli wanted to answer carefully. He did not want another family or church to move too fast and hurt people.

He typed:

Keep prayer central. Avoid turning stories into performance. Make sure tired parents hear hope, not only correction.

“Dad?”

“Almost done.”

He added:

Also, no stage if possible. The room teaches people what matters.

Then he read the message again.

It was good.

Helpful.

True.

He hit send.

When he looked up, Lily was gone.

The hallway was empty.

Eli sat back.

A small discomfort moved through him.

He stood and walked toward the living room.

No Lily.

He checked the hallway.

No Lily.

Then he heard Grace's voice upstairs.

Soft.

Firm.

Motherly.

Eli climbed the steps and found Grace sitting on Lily's bed. Lily was curled against her, crying quietly. Mr. Bear was pressed between them.

Grace looked up at Eli.

Not angry.

That would have been easier.

Sad.

That was worse.

"What happened?" Eli asked.

Lily turned her face into Grace's side.

Grace stroked her hair.

"She wanted to show you something."

Eli looked at Lily's small desk.

A piece of paper sat on top of it.

He walked over and picked it up.

It was a drawing.

Five people stood in front of a house. Eli recognized the family by size more than artistic detail. Noah had been drawn with wild hair.

Owen was mostly a circle with legs. Grace had a blue dress. Lily stood beside Mr. Bear.

Eli was drawn with a rectangle in his hand.

A phone.

Above the picture, in uneven letters, Lily had written:

Family Awake

Eli stared at it.

His throat tightened.

Grace said quietly, "She wanted you to see it."
Lily sniffed. "You said one second."
Eli closed his eyes.
He had said that.
How many times had he said that?
One second.
Almost done.
Give me a minute.
Hold on.
Not now.
Later.
Words adults used when they meant to return but often did not.
He sat on the edge of the bed.
"Lily."
She did not look at him.
He set the drawing on his knee.
"This is beautiful."
"You didn't look."
"I know."
"I worked hard."
"I can tell."
"You were helping other people."
The sentence did not accuse him.
That was why it hurt.
Eli looked at Grace.
She said nothing.
Lily continued, still hiding against her mother.
"Are they more important?"
Eli felt the question go through him like a blade.
"No," he said quickly.
Too quickly.
Lily looked at him then.
Her eyes were red.
"They get your phone."
Eli had no answer.
Because she was right.
Not completely.
But enough.
He set the drawing carefully beside him and reached for her hand.

She let him take it, but barely.

“I am sorry,” he said.

His voice was quiet.

“I should have stopped and looked. You are more important than any message.”

She watched him.

“Then why didn’t you?”

There it was.

The question children ask when adult explanations are not enough.

Why didn’t you?

Eli could have said the pastor needed help. He could have said the message mattered. He could have said he was almost done. He could have said good work sometimes takes time.

All of that would have been partly true.

None of it would have been repentance.

“Because I made a wrong choice,” he said.

Lily’s face softened slightly.

“I let something good take me away from something better.”

Grace looked down.

Lily wiped her nose with her sleeve.

Grace reached for a tissue.

Eli continued.

“I am sorry. Will you forgive me?”

Lily looked at Mr. Bear, then back at him.

“Mr. Bear forgives you.”

Eli nodded seriously.

“That means a lot.”

She waited.

“I forgive you too,” she said.

Eli leaned forward and hugged her.

This time, he did not rush.

Grace placed a hand on his back.

For a moment, the three of them sat there quietly.

The phone downstairs buzzed on the table.

Once.

Then again.

No one moved.

Later that night, Eli placed Lily’s drawing inside his Bible.

Not because it belonged there in some sentimental way.
Because he needed to see it again.
Family Awake.
A father with a phone in his hand.
Children had a way of drawing the truth without asking permission.
After the kids were asleep, Eli and Grace sat at the kitchen table.
The phone was in the drawer.
Not because Eli had chosen wisely earlier.
Because Grace had picked it up and put it there.
He had not objected.
Now the silence between them carried weight.
Grace held a mug of tea with both hands.
Eli looked at the table.
“I’m sorry,” he said.
“I know.”
“I did exactly what I said I didn’t want to do.”
“Yes.”
The honesty stung.
Grace was not cruel, but she was not going to rescue him from the truth.
“I was helping someone.”
“I know.”
“It was a pastor.”
“I know.”
“It mattered.”
“Yes.”
Eli looked up.
Grace’s eyes were tired.
“That is what makes this hard,” she said. “If you were wasting time, it would be simple. But you are often doing good things. Helpful things. Things that may really matter.”
He nodded slowly.
“And good things can still get out of order.”
“Yes.”
The sentence hung between them.
Good things can still get out of order.
That had become the danger.
Not obvious rebellion.
Misordered obedience.

Public usefulness outrunning private faithfulness.

Eli rubbed both hands over his face.

“I need to pull back.”

Grace did not answer right away.

He looked at her.

She seemed relieved that he had said it first.

“Yes,” she said.

That hurt too.

“How much?”

“I do not know. But more than you have.”

He leaned back.

“Messages?”

“Limited.”

“Posts?”

“Less often.”

“Prayer room?”

“That is different. That is local. That is shared. But even there, you need to not carry it all.”

“I’m not trying to.”

Grace gave him a look.

He corrected himself.

“I am trying not to.”

“That is more honest.”

Eli nodded.

Grace reached across the table and touched Lily’s drawing where it rested beside the Bible.

“She asked if other people were more important.”

“I know.”

“She should never have to ask that.”

The words were not harsh.

They were worse.

They were true.

Eli looked at the drawing.

“No,” he said. “She shouldn’t.”

Grace’s voice softened.

“I believe God is using this. I do. But I will not let a public calling take the place of your calling here.”

Eli looked at her.

That was not rebellion.

That was protection.

Pastor Brooks had warned him about that.

Men sometimes hear caution from their wives as resistance when it is actually protection.

“I don’t want you to,” Eli said.

Grace searched his face.

“I mean it.”

“I think you do,” she said. “But wanting it is not enough. We need a structure.”

He reached for his notebook.

This time, Grace did not smile.

This was not a quote.

This was a boundary.

Together, they wrote it down.

No message responses during meals.

No message responses during family time.

No agreeing to calls, interviews, meetings, or outside requests without discussing it together.

Two set times per day for online messages.

One day per week with no public posting.

Prayer room responsibilities shared with Pastor Brooks, Ruth, and others.

Family night protected.

Bedtime protected.

Grace could call a halt without having to prove the emergency.

Eli looked at that last line.

“That one matters.”

“Yes,” Grace said.

“It gives you a lot of authority.”

“It gives our home protection.”

He nodded.

“You’re right.”

Grace leaned back.

“I do not want to control you.”

“I know.”

“I want to help guard what God gave us first.”

Eli looked toward the stairs.

Their children were asleep.

Under this roof.

In this house.
His first city.
His first wall.
He thought of watchmen.
A watchman who ignored the gate closest to him was not faithful.
He was negligent.
“I need to apologize to Noah too,” Eli said.
Grace nodded.
“And probably Owen, though he may only understand snacks.”
“Then apologize with snacks.”
Eli smiled faintly.
Grace did too, but the sadness remained.
The cost had entered the house.
Not as destruction.
As warning.
They needed to listen while it was still a warning.

The next morning, Eli woke early but did not go straight to his phone.

He went upstairs instead.

Noah was still asleep, one arm hanging off the side of the bed, blanket twisted around his legs. His room smelled faintly of laundry, pencils, and boyhood.

Eli sat carefully on the edge of the bed.

“Noah.”

Noah stirred.

“Noah, buddy.”

His eyes opened halfway.

“Is it school?”

“Not yet.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

Eli almost laughed.

“I need to talk to you.”

Noah blinked slowly and sat up against his pillow.

“Am I in trouble?”

“No.”

“Are we getting a dog?”

“No.”

Noah frowned. “This conversation is not starting well.”

Eli smiled, then grew serious.

“I need to apologize.”

That woke Noah more than anything else could have.

“For what?”

“For being distracted. I have been talking a lot about parents paying attention, and I have not always done that well here. You already called me out for phone-listening, and I have still done it some.”

Noah looked down at his blanket.

“Yeah.”

Eli nodded.

“I am sorry.”

Noah picked at a loose thread.

“Are you going to stop writing about God?”

“No.”

“Are you going to stop helping people?”

“No.”

Noah looked up.

“Then how are you going to stop?”

That was a wise question.

“I’m going to have rules. Better ones. Mom and I made them last night. I will only answer messages at certain times. Not during dinner. Not during family time. Not when you are talking to me.”

Noah considered this.

“What if it is an emergency?”

“Then Mom and I will talk about it.”

“What if someone says they need help right now?”

Eli sighed softly.

“That is hard. But I am learning that I cannot be God for people.”

Noah looked confused.

“I mean, I can care. I can pray. I can help sometimes. But I cannot answer every person right away. And I should not fail my own family while trying to help someone else’s.”

Noah nodded slowly.

“That makes sense.”

Then he asked, “Can I be in charge of catching you?”

Eli smiled.

“Respectfully?”

Noah nodded. “Respectfully.”

“Yes.”

Noah seemed satisfied.

Then he added, "If I catch you three times, we should get a dog."

"No."

"It was worth asking."

Eli hugged him.

Noah accepted the hug for about three seconds before pulling away like he had exceeded his limit.

As Eli stood to leave, Noah said, "Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"I think the posts are good."

Eli turned.

Noah looked embarrassed.

"Some kids at church said their parents are doing family night now."

Eli felt the weight again.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So don't stop. Just don't forget us."

Eli stood still.

Then he nodded.

"I won't."

But even as he said it, he knew the words had to become more than promise.

They had to become practice.

The next few days were harder than Eli expected.

Boundaries sounded peaceful when written in a notebook.

Living them felt like withdrawal.

At 7:30 Wednesday morning, he wanted to check messages while drinking coffee.

He did not.

At lunch, he checked for thirty minutes, answered what he could, prayed over what he could not, and stopped when the timer went off.

That felt ridiculous.

A grown man using a timer to stop himself from answering messages.

But the timer helped.

At 5:45, a pastor from Tennessee asked if Eli could join a video meeting that evening.

Eli almost said yes.

Then he wrote:

Thank you for asking. I cannot tonight. Evenings are protected family time. I can send some written thoughts tomorrow during my message window.

He stared at the phrase message window and hated how formal it sounded.

Then he sent it.

The pastor replied:

Respect. That is probably part of the message too.

Eli leaned back.

Yes.

It was.

On Thursday, a woman sent a long message about her teenage daughter and self-harm.

Eli's heart clenched.

That felt urgent.

He showed Grace.

She read it carefully.

"This is bigger than a message," she said.

"I know."

"What can you do?"

"Tell her to contact local emergency help if her daughter is in immediate danger. Encourage her to call her pastor, doctor, or counselor. Pray. But not try to counsel through a comment thread."

Grace nodded.

"That sounds right."

Eli wrote the response slowly.

He prayed for the girl by name.

Then he put the phone away and sat quietly for a long time.

The cost was not only distraction.

It was accepting his limits.

Some needs were too heavy for him.

Some wounds required people physically present.

Some cries for help needed pastors, counselors, doctors, elders, family, and emergency care.

Eli could point.

He could pray.

He could encourage.

But he could not carry every person through a screen.

That was not weakness.

That was reality.
Still, it hurt.

By Friday, the pull to post had grown strong.
Not because Eli had nothing to say.
Because he had too much.

The messages were full of stories.

Homes waking.

Homes resisting.

Parents panicking.

Parents repenting.

Churches gathering.

Critics accusing.

People asking if he would write the book.

People asking if he would speak.

People asking if he would lead something larger.

Something larger.

The phrase followed him around like a temptation wearing
respectable clothes.

A larger platform.

A larger ministry.

A larger prayer network.

A larger movement.

Part of him felt the pressure to build quickly before the moment
passed.

Another part of him remembered Pastor Brooks.

If the Lord is leading it, it will not become less obedient because you
waited a few days.

On Friday evening, the Carter family went to the park.

No phones except Grace's, kept in her bag for emergencies.

No posts.

No messages.

No momentum.

Just swings, slides, cold air, and children with more energy than
physics should allow.

Noah climbed higher than Grace preferred.

Lily collected rocks and named each one.

Owen went down the slide twenty-seven times and reacted with the
same surprise every time.

Eli pushed Lily on the swing.

“Higher,” she said.

“You are already high.”

“Higher than safe.”

“No.”

“Medium higher?”

“That I can do.”

She leaned back and laughed.

Eli watched her hair move in the wind.

No phone in his hand.

No rectangle in the drawing.

Just Dad.

Grace stood nearby watching Owen attempt to climb the slide from the bottom.

She looked over at Eli.

Their eyes met.

She smiled.

Not a big smile.

A relieved one.

That mattered.

Eli pushed Lily again.

For the first time in days, the burden felt ordered.

Still present.

Still serious.

But not ruling.

After the park, they picked up cheap pizza and ate it at home on paper plates. Owen got sauce in his hair. Noah argued that pepperoni was proof God loved children. Lily asked if rocks went to heaven.

No one knew how to answer that well.

Later, after bedtime, Eli checked his phone during the agreed window.

There were messages waiting.

There always were.

One from Pastor Brooks.

How are the boundaries?

Eli replied:

Hard. Needed.

Pastor Brooks wrote back:

Good. The cost of obedience must not be paid by your family alone.

Eli read that twice.
Then wrote it in his notebook.

Sunday brought another test.

After church, a man Eli had never met approached him in the fellowship hall.

He was in his forties, well-dressed, confident, and smiling in a way that made Eli cautious before the conversation began.

“Eli Carter?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Victor Hale. I run a media outreach network for Christian families.”

Eli shook his hand.

Victor’s grip was firm.

“I’ve been following what’s happening here,” Victor said. “Powerful stuff.”

Eli glanced toward Pastor Brooks, who was across the room speaking with Carol and Dennis.

“What exactly have you been following?”

“The posts. The prayer gatherings. The parent awakening message. Digital Babylon. All of it. You’ve tapped into something.”

Eli did not like that phrase.

Tapped into something.

It sounded like marketing.

Victor continued.

“I think this could be much bigger.”

There it was.

Something larger.

Eli kept his expression neutral.

“We’re trying to be faithful with what God puts in front of us.”

“Of course. Faithful stewardship. Exactly.”

Victor handed him a business card.

“We have distribution channels. Podcasts. Video platforms. Donor lists. Church contacts. If we package this right, we could get it in front of tens of thousands of parents quickly.”

Eli looked at the card.

Grace appeared beside him.

Not dramatically.

Just there.

Eli was grateful.

Victor smiled at her.

“You must be Grace.”

“I am.”

“I was just telling your husband this message needs broader reach.”

Grace smiled politely.

“Does it?”

Victor blinked, just slightly.

“Well, I believe so. Families are hungry for this.”

“They are,” Grace said. “But hungry people can still be fed badly.”

Eli nearly smiled.

Victor recovered quickly.

“Absolutely. That’s why structure matters. Branding, clarity, a scalable model—”

Pastor Brooks joined them then.

“Victor,” he said.

The two men clearly knew each other.

“Pastor Brooks,” Victor said. “Good to see you.”

“You too.”

The words were polite.

The air was not.

Victor looked between them.

“I was telling Eli I would love to sit down and talk about helping expand what’s happening here.”

Pastor Brooks nodded.

“Expansion is worth praying over slowly.”

“Of course,” Victor said. “Though sometimes windows close if we wait too long.”

Pastor Brooks’s face remained calm.

“If a window is opened by God, He is able to hold it open.”

Eli felt that sentence settle over him like a shield.

Victor smiled, but it tightened slightly.

“I agree. I only mean we should not bury what God is giving.”

“No,” Pastor Brooks said. “Nor should we sell it before we have tested it.”

Silence.

Grace looked at Eli.

Eli looked at the business card.

For a moment, he imagined it.

Podcasts.

Videos.

Conferences.

A book announcement.

A prayer movement for families across the country.

A website.

A speaking schedule.

The message reaching thousands.

It did not all feel wrong.

That was what made it dangerous.

Some of it might even be useful.

But as Eli stood in the fellowship hall, he saw Lily across the room showing Emma a drawing. He saw Noah talking to Caleb. He saw Owen trying to carry two cookies at once. He saw Rachel laughing with Dana. He saw Mason stacking chairs without being asked.

This was real.

This was slow.

This was embodied.

This was not a brand.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

Eli handed the card back.

Victor looked surprised.

“Keep it,” he said.

Eli shook his head.

“Thank you, but not right now.”

Victor’s expression changed.

“Not right now?”

“No. We are not ready to talk about expansion.”

Victor looked at Pastor Brooks, then Grace, then back to Eli.

“With respect, readiness is not always the point.”

Eli nodded.

“I agree. Obedience is. And right now, obedience looks like staying small enough to stay faithful.”

Grace’s hand found his.

Pastor Brooks said nothing, but Eli felt his approval.

Victor put the card back in his jacket pocket.

“Well. If you change your mind, I am not hard to find.”

“Thank you,” Eli said.

Victor left a few minutes later.

Mason appeared almost instantly.

“Who was suit guy?”

Eli exhaled.

“Someone who wants to help make this bigger.”

Mason looked toward the door Victor had exited.

“Do we like bigger?”

Grace answered before Eli could.

“Not today.”

Mason nodded.

“Good. Bigger usually means I have to park farther away.”

Eli laughed.

The tension broke.

But only partly.

That evening, Eli told the prayer room what had happened.

Not in detail.

Not with Victor’s name.

Just enough.

“We were offered help expanding this,” Eli said. “Media, distribution, broader reach.”

The room was quiet.

Mason sat beside Rachel, arms crossed.

Ruth’s face was unreadable.

Pastor Brooks watched Eli carefully.

Eli continued.

“I said no for now. Not because reach is bad. Not because the message should stay hidden if God wants it spread. But because we are still learning how to be faithful with what is already in front of us.”

Ruth nodded once.

Eli looked around.

“I also need to confess that part of me wanted to say yes.”

Grace lowered her eyes.

“Part of me wanted the reach. The opportunity. The sense that this was becoming something important.”

He paused.

“But this is already important. Not because it is large. Because people are praying. Parents are repenting. Homes are taking one faithful

step. And I do not want to trade that for something impressive before God tells us to.”

The room stayed quiet.

Then Rob spoke.

The same Rob who had resisted the changes Denise wanted.

“I’m glad you said no.”

Eli looked at him.

Rob shrugged.

“If this had turned into some big program, I probably wouldn’t come back.”

Denise looked at him with surprise.

Rob continued, “I can handle this. Chairs. Prayer. People being honest. No one trying to sell me a family revival package.”

Mason pointed at him. “That. Exactly.”

Ruth looked at Mason.

He lowered his hand.

“Sorry.”

But Ruth smiled faintly.

Pastor Brooks opened his Bible.

“Small does not mean insignificant,” he said. “Large does not mean unfaithful. The question is not size. The question is surrender.”

Eli wrote that down.

The question is surrender.

They prayed that night for protection from pride, fear, hurry, and opportunity that was not obedience.

That last one stayed with Eli.

Opportunity that was not obedience.

It was possible.

A door could open and still not be his to walk through.

At least not yet.

Later, at home, Eli sat on Lily’s floor while she explained every detail of the drawing he had missed.

Family Awake.

Grace was holding a Bible.

Noah was holding a notebook.

Owen was holding a cookie.

Lily was holding Mr. Bear.

Eli was holding the phone.

“But I can change yours,” Lily said.

Eli looked at her.

“To what?”

She picked up a crayon.

“What should you hold?”

He thought for a moment.

Then smiled.

“A chair.”

Lily frowned. “Why a chair?”

“Because sometimes helping means carrying chairs.”

She considered this seriously.

“Okay.”

She drew a brown rectangle with legs beside Eli’s hand. It looked nothing like a chair, but Eli knew what it meant.

“Now you’re helping,” she said.

Eli swallowed.

“Yes.”

She handed him the picture.

“You can keep it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. But don’t put it somewhere boring.”

“I won’t.”

He hugged her.

Downstairs, his phone buzzed.

He heard it.

So did Lily.

She looked at him.

“Aren’t you going to get it?”

Eli shook his head.

“No. Not right now.”

She smiled.

The cost had not disappeared.

It was still there.

Every yes would cost something.

Every no would too.

Saying yes to the message meant saying no to comfort.

Saying yes to his family meant saying no to constant availability.

Saying yes to prayer meant saying no to performance.

Saying yes to slowness meant saying no to momentum.

Saying yes to obedience meant saying no to opportunities that looked impressive but were not assigned.

Eli was beginning to understand that every calling came with a cross.

Not always dramatic.

Sometimes the cross looked like a phone left unanswered.

A business card handed back.

A child's drawing taken seriously.

A wife's warning received as protection.

A room kept simple when it could have become a stage.

He taped Lily's drawing above his desk that night.

Not hidden in a drawer.

Not tucked away.

Visible.

Family Awake.

The father no longer held a phone.

He held something that looked almost like a chair.

It was not the image Eli would have chosen for himself.

That was probably why it was right.

The fire was spreading.

But Eli was learning that if he let it burn through his own house, he had misunderstood the flame.

So he prayed before bed, not for greater reach, not for larger rooms, not for a thousand screens.

He prayed for order.

“Lord, keep first things first.”

And in the quiet, that prayer felt like both surrender and war.

Chapter Fourteen

False Light

Victor Hale did not disappear.

Eli had hoped he would.

That was not charitable, and Eli knew it. But it was honest.

For three quiet days after Eli handed the business card back, there was nothing. No calls. No messages. No surprise visits. No pressure.

The prayer room continued.

The Carters kept their family night.

Rachel and Dana had dinner together with their children.

Mason came to church again and helped move chairs without making more than two comments about starting a hydration ministry.

Rob and Denise made it through one full dinner without phones and without turning it into a fight. Denise messaged Grace afterward and said it was awkward but peaceful. Rob told Eli at church, “One meal was plenty for now,” and Eli answered, “Then one meal matters.”

Things felt ordered.

Not easy.

Ordered.

Then on Thursday morning, Victor sent Eli an email.

The subject line read:

A Kingdom Opportunity

Eli stared at it while sitting in his truck before work.

He had not given Victor his email.

That was the first problem.

The second problem was that part of him wanted to open it immediately.

He did not.

He put the phone face down and prayed.

“Lord, help me see clearly.”

Then he opened it.

The email was long, polished, and warm.

Victor thanked Eli for the conversation after church. He praised the message of calling parents back to spiritual responsibility. He said

America was in a “family discipleship crisis” and that God was raising up voices for the hour.

Then came the offer.

Victor’s organization wanted to help Eli launch a national initiative called Homes Awake.

The proposal included a weekly livestream, short-form video clips, a podcast, a downloadable family guide, email list growth, donor support, speaking opportunities, and a branded prayer network.

There was even a draft slogan:

Awaken the Home. Restore the Nation.

Eli read that line twice.

It was not a bad line.

That bothered him.

The email continued:

We believe your authenticity is your strength. You are not a celebrity pastor or polished ministry executive. You are an ordinary parent with a timely message. That is exactly why families trust you.

Eli’s stomach tightened.

Ordinary parent.

Timely message.

Families trust you.

The words sounded affirming.

They also sounded like packaging.

Victor closed with:

This moment should not be wasted. Movements require stewardship. We can help you steward what God has placed in your hands.

Eli locked the phone and set it on the passenger seat.

The frost on the windshield had begun to melt in thin lines.

He sat still.

Part of him felt suspicious.

Part of him felt flattered.

Part of him felt guilty for feeling flattered.

A kingdom opportunity.

That phrase worked on the conscience. It made hesitation feel like disobedience. It made caution sound like fear. It made slow faithfulness feel small.

Eli leaned his head back against the seat.

“Lord,” he whispered, “I do not trust myself with this.”

That was becoming one of his truest prayers.

He did not answer Victor that morning.

That was the first victory.

At lunch, he called Grace.

She answered on the third ring, sounding slightly out of breath.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes. Are you busy?”

“Owen spilled applesauce into a shoe, so define busy.”

Eli closed his eyes. “Do I want to know whose shoe?”

“Yours.”

“Of course.”

“What’s going on?”

“Victor emailed me.”

Silence.

Then Grace said, “The media man?”

“Yes.”

“What does he want?”

“To launch a national initiative.”

“Oh.”

“Called Homes Awake.”

Another silence.

“That sounds... smooth,” she said.

“Very.”

“Too smooth?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want it?”

Eli looked through the windshield at the parking lot.

That was the question.

Not whether the proposal was good.

Not whether Victor was sincere.

Not whether the message could reach people.

Do you want it?

“Yes,” Eli said finally.

Grace did not answer quickly.

He continued, “Part of me does. I hate that, but yes. A part of me wants to see this reach more families. A part of me wants resources to help people. A part of me thinks it could be useful.”

“And the other part?”

“The other part likes being called timely.”

Grace exhaled softly.

“Thank you for saying that.”

“I almost didn’t.”

“I know.”

A child shouted something in the background. Grace covered the phone and answered. Her voice returned a moment later.

“Do not answer him yet.”

“I won’t.”

“Talk to Pastor Brooks.”

“I will.”

“And Eli?”

“Yeah?”

“Do not let someone rename what God is doing before we have understood what He is doing.”

Eli sat forward.

“That is important.”

“Write it down.”

“I will.”

After they hung up, Eli wrote on a napkin:

Do not let someone rename what God is doing before we understand what He is doing.

Then he added:

Packaging can become possession.

He stared at that sentence.

He was not sure where it had come from.

But it felt true.

Pastor Brooks read the email that afternoon in his office.

Eli sat across from him, notebook open, hands folded tightly enough that his knuckles paled.

The pastor took his time.

That was one of his habits.

He did not skim important things. He read them slowly, as if speed might cause him to miss the spirit beneath the words.

When he finished, he set the printed pages on his desk.

“Well?” Eli asked.

Pastor Brooks leaned back.

“It is professionally written.”

“That sounds careful.”

“It is.”

“What do you think?”

“I think some of it is wise. Some of it is useful. Some of it is dangerous.”

Eli nodded slowly.

“That is what I was afraid of.”

“Good. Fear can be useful if it sends you to prayer instead of paralysis.”

“What parts are dangerous?”

Pastor Brooks touched the top page.

“The speed. The branding. The focus on your authenticity as a marketable asset. The assumption that reach equals stewardship. The subtle pressure that delay would waste the moment.”

Eli wrote quickly.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“The slogan concerns me too.”

“Awaken the Home. Restore the Nation?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it may be true in one sense, but it can easily shift the center. The message you have been carrying is repentance, prayer, faithfulness, and homes under Christ. That slogan bends toward national restoration. That may attract people who want Christian language for political or cultural power without first bending the knee at home.”

Eli looked up.

That put words to something he had felt but not named.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Revival can affect a nation. But if we aim first at restoring the nation, we may use homes as tools for an agenda. If we aim first at faithfulness to Christ, He may restore what He chooses.”

Eli wrote:

Do not use homes as tools for an agenda.

Then:

Aim at Christ, not influence.

Pastor Brooks watched him.

“What do you sense?”

Eli looked at the printed email.

“I sense a bright doorway.”

“Bright?”

“Yes. Exciting. Useful-looking. But maybe not clean.”

Pastor Brooks nodded slowly.

“False light often works that way.”

Eli looked at him.

The phrase settled in the room.

False light.

Not darkness.

That would be easier.

False light looked like opportunity. It sounded like urgency. It used the language of stewardship, impact, and calling. It did not ask Eli to deny God. It asked him to move faster than God had told him to move.

That was more subtle.

More dangerous.

“What do I do?” Eli asked.

“Pray. Fast if you are able. Talk with Grace. Bring it to the prayer room. Do not decide alone.”

“I wanted to just say no.”

“You may. But even a no should be obedient, not merely fearful.”

Eli sighed.

“That makes this harder.”

“Wisdom often does.”

Pastor Brooks folded the printed email and handed it back.

“One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Do not demonize Victor. He may be sincere. He may be mixed. So are we. The question is not whether he is a villain. The question is whether this offer is obedience.”

Eli nodded.

That mattered.

It would be easy to make Victor the enemy. The polished media man. The brand builder. The tempter.

But Victor was a person.

Maybe a brother.

Maybe wrong.

Maybe right in some ways.

Maybe also trying to serve God with the tools he understood.

Discernment did not require contempt.

Eli needed to remember that.

That night, Eli and Grace read the proposal after the children went to bed.

They sat at the kitchen table.

The same table where the first post had been written.

The same table where Rachel had cried.

The same table where Grace had warned him, corrected him, prayed with him, and helped him put boundaries around the work.

Eli read the email aloud.

Grace listened without interrupting.

When he finished, she sat back and folded her arms.

“Well?” he asked.

She looked at the page.

“It is impressive.”

“Yes.”

“That is part of the problem.”

“Yes.”

She tapped one line with her finger.

“Your authenticity is your strength.’ I do not like that.”

“Pastor Brooks said something similar.”

“Because authenticity can become a costume once people start selling it.”

Eli wrote that down.

Grace gave him a look.

“What?”

“I’m sorry. That was worth writing.”

She shook her head, but there was no anger in it.

Then she grew serious.

“I also do not like that they named it Homes Awake.”

“Why?”

“That phrase came from our children. Lily wrote Family Awake.

Then the prayer room started talking about homes waking up. It came from here. From repentance. From small things. In the email, it already feels like a product.”

Eli looked down.

She was right.

The name had moved from a child’s drawing to a branded initiative in less than two weeks.

Something about that felt wrong.

Not because words could not spread.

But because the roots mattered.

Grace continued.

“Eli, I am not against helping more people. I am not against writing. I am not against resources. I am not even against media if God clearly leads. But I am against letting someone package the hidden work before it has matured.”

Eli nodded.

“What do you think we should do?”

“I think we should say no.”

He looked at her.

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“Pastor Brooks said to bring it to prayer.”

“We can still bring the issue to prayer. But I do not need more prayer to know this proposal is not right for our family right now.”

Eli heard the firmness.

He had asked Grace for protection.

Now protection had spoken.

A month ago, he might have resisted.

Not openly maybe, but internally.

He might have thought she was afraid.

Or too cautious.

Or not seeing the opportunity.

Tonight, he saw it differently.

Grace was not trying to shrink the calling.

She was guarding its order.

“What if saying no limits the reach?” he asked.

“Then the reach was not ours to take.”

“What if we miss the moment?”

Grace looked at him.

“Then God is too small in our minds.”

That silenced him.

She continued.

“If God wants this message to reach people, He can do that without us surrendering it to the first polished man with a plan.”

Eli smiled faintly.

“Polished man with a plan.”

“That was not for the book.”

“It might be.”

“Do not.”

He laughed quietly.

Then he took her hand.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For not being impressed.”

Grace smiled softly.

“I am impressed by obedience. Not branding.”

That line was definitely going in the notebook.

On Tuesday, Eli brought the proposal to the prayer room.

Not the whole email.

Not Victor’s name.

Just the substance.

A national initiative.

A media network.

A branded family awakening campaign.

Livestreams.

Podcasts.

Donor lists.

Speaking opportunities.

Resources.

Reach.

The room was quiet when he finished.

They had moved fully into the fellowship hall now, but the chairs were still in a circle. The Bible still sat on the table. The tissues were still within reach. There was no microphone, though several people had suggested one because the room was growing.

Pastor Brooks had said no.

If people could not hear, the circle could get tighter.

Ruth sat with both hands folded over her Bible.

Mason leaned back in his chair, expression unreadable.

Rachel looked concerned.

Rob looked suspicious.

Denise looked thoughtful.

Jordan sat beside Caleb, who had come again and was now openly listening while pretending not to.

Pastor Brooks spoke first.

“We are not here to vote on Eli’s life. But we are here to pray and discern as a body, because what affects one part may affect others.”

Ruth nodded.

Then Rob spoke.

“I wouldn’t trust it.”

His bluntness startled a few people.

Pastor Brooks looked at him. “Why?”

Rob shrugged.

“Because I work in sales. That sounds like sales.”

Mason pointed at him. “Thank you.”

Ruth looked at Mason.

He lowered his hand again.

Rob continued.

“I’m not saying the guy is bad. But the second this becomes a package, people like me are out. I came here because nobody was trying to sell me anything or make me clap for a movement.”

Denise looked at him with affection.

“I agree,” she said.

Rachel spoke next.

“When I first came here, I was ashamed. If this had looked like some big branded thing, I would have assumed it was for people who had it together. The smallness helped me feel safe.”

Dana nodded.

“Same.”

Frank leaned forward.

“God can use large things. But I have seen men rush to build barns for harvests that were not yet planted.”

Everyone looked at him.

Mason whispered, “Frank has entered the chat.”

Eli looked down to hide a smile.

Frank continued, “If the Lord is growing something, let the roots grow before the sign goes up.”

Ruth said, “Amen.”

Then she spoke.

“That proposal may be for someone. It is not for this.”

The room went still.

Ruth rarely used extra words.

Pastor Brooks looked at her.

“Say more.”

Ruth adjusted her glasses.

“What is happening here is repentance. Prayer. Parents learning to be faithful. Wounded people learning they are not alone. Children seeing adults humble themselves. That is tender work. You do not put tender roots under stage lights.”

Eli felt that sentence deeply.

Tender roots under stage lights.

Ruth continued.

“If God wants a tree, He knows how to grow one. But if men keep digging it up to show everyone the roots, they may kill what they are trying to prove is alive.”

No one spoke.

Even Mason stayed quiet.

Pastor Brooks bowed his head.

“Let’s pray.”

And they did.

They prayed for Victor.

That surprised Eli, though it should not have.

They prayed for his motives, his ministry, his family, and his own obedience.

They prayed for Eli and Grace.

They prayed against pride and fear.

They prayed for patience.

They prayed that God would spread what He wanted spread and bury what needed to remain hidden.

They prayed for homes, not brands.

For parents, not platforms.

For children, not campaigns.

By the end, Eli knew what he had to do.

Not because the room had pressured him.

Because the room had helped him hear.

The next morning, Eli wrote Victor back.

He prayed first.

Then he typed slowly.

Victor,

Thank you for taking the time to write such a thoughtful proposal. I believe you are right that families are in a serious discipleship crisis, and I appreciate your desire to help parents and churches respond.

After prayer, counsel, and conversation with Grace and our church leadership, I do not believe this is the right step for us.

What is happening here is still small, local, and tender. We are trying to keep prayer, repentance, family faithfulness, and Christ at the center without moving faster than we can faithfully carry. I am not comfortable turning this into a branded initiative, livestream, donor-supported campaign, or national platform right now.

That is not a judgment against you personally. I am grateful for your concern for families. But for us, obedience right now looks like staying small enough to stay faithful.

May the Lord guide your work and keep all of us surrendered to Him.

Eli

He read it twice.

Then he showed Grace.

She read it and nodded.

“Send it.”

He did.

For several seconds, he felt relief.

Then fear.

Then grief.

Then relief again.

Saying no had a cost.

He had expected that.

But he had not expected grief.

He had turned down something that could have been useful. Maybe something that could have helped people. Maybe something that would have opened doors he could not open himself.

But he had also protected something.

His home.

The prayer room.

The pace.

The hidden work.

The tender roots.

His phone buzzed fifteen minutes later.

Victor had replied.

Eli opened it with Grace beside him.

Eli,

Thank you for your honesty. I respect your decision, though I admit I think you may be missing a significant opportunity. Doors like this do not stay open forever.

If you reconsider, reach out.

Victor

Eli read it once.

Then again.

Grace watched him.

“You okay?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

She smiled faintly.

“That may be more honest.”

Eli set the phone down.

Doors like this do not stay open forever.

The sentence worked on him.

It made him wonder.

It made him question.

It made the no feel smaller.

Then he remembered Grace’s words.

If God wants this message to reach people, He can do that without us surrendering it to the first polished man with a plan.

He remembered Pastor Brooks.

If a window is opened by God, He is able to hold it open.

He remembered Ruth.

You do not put tender roots under stage lights.

Eli picked up his notebook and wrote:

False light makes obedience feel like missed opportunity.

Then:

If God opens the door, I do not have to force it. If God closes the door, I must not pry it open.

Grace looked over his shoulder.

“That one can stay.”

He smiled.

“Thank you.”

That weekend, the prayer room did not shrink because Eli said no. It grew by four people.

No one advertised it.
No one launched anything.
No one created a logo.

People came because someone invited them. Because someone prayed for them. Because someone said, “You can come tired.” Because someone else said, “No one will make you speak.” Because a child told another child there were snacks in the nursery.

The fellowship hall circle widened again.

Mason carried chairs.

Rob helped.

That surprised everyone, including Rob.

Denise looked like she might cry watching him.

Caleb came with Jordan and sat closer to the circle.

Emma brought an updated prayer list. This time it included:

Mom

Tyler

Uncle Mason

Mr. Pickles

Mr. Rob because he looks grumpy

People who are scared

People who say no when it is hard

God knows the rest

Rob read the line about himself and snorted.

“I do look grumpy.”

Denise patted his arm.

Ruth said, “Then we will pray accordingly.”

Mason whispered, “No one is safe.”

Eli laughed.

During prayer, Carol shared that she and Dennis had written a letter to their daughter.

Not a letter asking her to come home.

Not a letter correcting her.

A letter confessing specific ways they had hurt her and asking forgiveness without demanding a response.

Dennis could barely speak when he described it.

Pastor Brooks prayed for the daughter by name.

Jordan asked for prayer because he and Caleb were going to visit his wife’s grave together for the first time in over a year.

Caleb stared at the floor but nodded when Pastor Brooks asked if that was okay to pray about.

Rachel said Tyler had prayed one sentence before bed.

“It was, ‘God, help Mom not be stressed,’” she said, laughing through tears. “So apparently my stress is obvious.”

Grace smiled. “Children are gifted observers.”

Eli did not share about Victor during the meeting.

He did not need to.

The no had already done its work.

The circle remained simple.

The roots remained covered.

The fire remained warm.

Later that night, Eli sat alone on the porch.

The air was cold enough that he could see his breath.

Inside, Grace was getting ready for bed. The children were asleep. The phone was in the drawer.

The street was quiet.

A porch light flickered across the road.

Eli thought about false light.

He had expected temptation to look darker.

But this temptation had come wrapped in Christian language, strategy, helpfulness, and urgency. It had offered reach, resources, and influence. It had told him he could help more people faster.

Maybe someday God would call him to something larger.

Maybe there would be a book.

Maybe there would be resources.

Maybe more churches would gather.

Maybe the message would travel farther than Eli could imagine.

But not by surrendering the center.

Not by outrunning prayer.

Not by letting someone turn repentance into a product.

Not by allowing attention to rename obedience.

Eli looked toward the window where Lily’s drawing hung above his desk.

Family Awake.

The father holding a chair.

He smiled faintly.

A chair was not impressive.

It was useful.

For now, that was enough.

Grace opened the front door and stepped onto the porch.

“You cold?”

“Yes.”

“Coming in?”

“In a minute.”

She sat beside him anyway.

They watched the street together.

“Do you regret saying no?” she asked.

Eli thought about it.

“Yes.”

Grace turned to him.

He smiled slightly.

“And no.”

“That sounds right.”

“I regret what might have been useful. I do not regret obeying.”

She nodded.

“That is probably how some right decisions feel.”

He reached for her hand.

“Thank you for helping me see.”

“Thank you for listening.”

They sat in silence.

Then Eli prayed quietly.

“Lord, protect us from false light.”

Grace squeezed his hand.

“Protect us from darkness too,” she added.

“And from ourselves,” Eli said.

Grace nodded.

“That too.”

The porch fell quiet again.

The world beyond their home still wanted speed, scale, outrage,
image, and control.

But inside, under their roof, something slower was being protected.

A family.

A prayer.

A small fire.

Tender roots.

And by the mercy of God, Eli was learning that not every bright
door was an open door.
Some were tests.
Tonight, the door was closed.
And peace remained.

Chapter Fifteen

The Night of Prayer

The night of prayer was not supposed to be large.

That was what Eli kept telling himself.

It was not an event.

Not a launch.

Not a rally.

Not a revival service.

Not a campaign.

Just prayer.

Pastor Brooks had announced it the Sunday before with plain words and no drama.

“Next Friday evening, we will open the sanctuary for prayer. Families are welcome. Singles are welcome. Grandparents are welcome. Those who are tired are welcome. Those who do not know how to pray are welcome. We will read Scripture, repent, pray for our homes, and seek the Lord.”

That was all.

No flyers.

No graphics.

No livestream.

No special speaker.

No band.

No countdown.

Just a church opening its doors.

Still, by Friday afternoon, Eli could feel that something was different.

Messages had been coming in all week.

People asking if they could come.

People asking if children were allowed.

People asking if divorced parents were allowed.

People asking if unbelieving spouses were allowed.

People asking if they had to speak.

People asking if they could sit in the back and leave early.

One woman asked if it was okay to come even though she had not been inside a church building in twenty years.

Eli answered as many as he could within his boundaries.

Yes, you can come.

No, you do not have to speak.

Yes, bring your children.

Yes, come tired.

No one will force you to pretend.

By Friday evening, the Carter house was full of unusual quiet.

The children sensed it.

Noah ate dinner without asking about the dog, which worried Eli more than a little. Lily dressed Mr. Bear in a small ribbon and announced that he was “ready for solemn things.” Owen wore mismatched socks and refused correction.

Grace moved through the kitchen calmly, but Eli knew her well enough to see the weight on her.

He helped clear the table.

Then he checked the clock.

5:42.

The prayer night started at seven.

Grace saw him looking.

“We do not need to leave for thirty minutes.”

“I know.”

“You have checked the clock five times.”

“I know.”

She walked over and touched his arm.

“Eli.”

He stopped moving.

“What?”

“Breathe.”

He did.

Slowly.

Once.

Then again.

“I don’t know what tonight is going to be,” he said.

“Neither do I.”

“What if too many people come?”

“Then we make room.”

“What if almost no one comes?”

“Then we pray.”

“What if someone tries to turn it into something strange?”

“Then Pastor Brooks will handle it.”

“What if—”

Grace raised one eyebrow.

Eli stopped.

She said, “This is not yours to control.”

He nodded.

“I know.”

She waited.

He corrected himself.

“I am trying to know.”

“That is better.”

From the living room, Noah called, “Dad, Owen is putting a toy dinosaur in his shoe!”

Grace closed her eyes.

Eli said, “I’ll handle it.”

As he walked away, Grace called after him, “Prayer begins at home.”

Eli smiled despite the tension.

“Yes, ma’am.”

They arrived at New Hope at 6:21.

The parking lot already had cars in it.

More than Eli expected.

Pastor Brooks stood near the front doors, speaking with Frank and two men from the church. Ruth Bell was inside at the welcome table, though no one had asked her to be there. She had a legal pad, several pens, a box of tissues, and the expression of a woman prepared for spiritual battle and logistical inconvenience.

Mason stood near the fellowship hall carrying a case of water bottles under each arm.

He saw Eli and lifted his chin.

“Hydration ministry has arrived.”

Eli smiled. “I see that.”

“We’re going to need more chairs.”

“How many more?”

Mason looked toward the sanctuary.

“All of them?”

That did not help Eli’s nerves.

Grace touched his back lightly.

“One thing at a time.”

Rachel came in behind Mason with Tyler and Emma. Emma held Mr. Pickles in one hand and her prayer list in the other.

Lily ran to her immediately.

“Is Mr. Pickles ready?”

Emma nodded. “He has been fasting.”

Rachel looked at Grace. “He skipped imaginary lunch.”

Grace nodded solemnly. “That is serious.”

Tyler walked over to Noah and Caleb, who stood near the hallway. The three boys exchanged the strange silent greeting of boys who had decided they were friends but did not want to make it obvious.

Owen tried to run toward the nursery.

Eli caught him by the back of his shirt.

“Not yet.”

Owen yelled, “Animals!”

“Soon.”

The church doors opened again.

A family Eli did not know stepped in.

Then another.

Then an older woman with a cane.

Then a young couple with a baby.

Then Rob and Denise.

Then Dana with her grandchildren.

Then Carol and Dennis.

Then Jordan with Caleb.

Then people from nearby churches.

Then people Eli recognized only from profile pictures.

The sanctuary began filling slowly.

Not packed.

Not overflowing.

But full enough that Pastor Brooks looked at the room, then at Eli, and gave a small nod.

Not alarm.

Recognition.

Something was happening.

Eli felt the old fear rise.

Then he remembered Victor.

False light.

Stage lights.
Tender roots.
He looked at the sanctuary.
There was no stage setup.
No screen.
No camera.
No platform beyond the ordinary pulpit.
The lights were soft.
The cross was plain.
The altar was open.
The room was not being prepared for performance.
It was being prepared for prayer.
That steadied him.

At seven, Pastor Brooks walked to the front.
People were still settling into pews. Children whispered. A baby fussed. Someone coughed. The old floor creaked under late arrivals.
Pastor Brooks waited.
He did not try to create atmosphere.
He simply waited until the room quieted.
Then he opened his Bible.
“Tonight is simple,” he said. “We are here to seek the Lord.”
No one moved.

“We are not here because our homes are perfect. We are here because they are not. We are not here because we know how to fix everything. We are here because God is merciful. We are not here to be seen. We are here because we need Him to see us rightly and change us deeply.”

Eli sat with Grace and the children near the middle.
Lily leaned against Grace.
Noah sat beside Eli, serious and alert.
Owen sat between them with a toy giraffe from the nursery, temporarily borrowed with permission after what Eli considered intense negotiations.

Pastor Brooks read from Joel.
“Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.”
He paused.

“Rend your hearts and not your garments. God is not asking for a performance of sorrow. He is calling for real repentance.”

The room was still.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Tonight, we will pray in three movements. First, we will repent. Second, we will pray for our homes. Third, we will ask God to awaken what only He can awaken.”

Eli wrote nothing.

For once, he did not take notes.

He wanted to be fully present.

Pastor Brooks bowed his head.

“Lord, begin with us.”

The room lowered with him.

The first movement was repentance.

It did not begin loudly.

It began with silence.

Long silence.

The kind modern people did not know what to do with.

A few children shifted.

Someone sniffed.

A baby made a soft sound.

But the silence held.

Eli felt exposed in it.

Without music, without words, without a screen, without something to react to, a man had fewer places to hide.

He thought about Lily standing in the hallway with her drawing.

He thought about telling Noah he would not phone-listen and then still feeling the pull.

He thought about liking attention.

He thought about wanting Victor’s offer.

He thought about the anger that still rose when people twisted his words.

He thought about every time he had confused concern for the world with avoidance of his own house.

His eyes burned.

Grace took his hand.

Pastor Brooks prayed first.

“Lord, forgive us for building busy homes and calling them faithful homes. Forgive us for giving our children what keeps them quiet while neglecting what helps them live. Forgive us for using truth without love, love without truth, and grace without repentance.”

A murmur moved through the room.

Not excitement.

Agreement.

Then Ruth prayed from the front pew.

She did not stand.

She did not need to.

“Lord, forgive the older saints for criticizing young families without carrying their burdens. Forgive us for shaking our heads at the next generation while failing to bend our knees for them.”

Several older people bowed their heads lower.

Frank prayed.

“Forgive us men for hiding behind work, anger, hobbies, and silence.”

Bethany prayed through tears.

“Forgive us mothers for believing exhaustion means we are alone.”

Rob prayed next.

That surprised Eli.

His voice was rough.

“Forgive me for treating spiritual leadership like my wife’s hobby instead of my responsibility.”

Denise began crying beside him.

Rob kept going.

“And forgive me for being annoyed by conviction when I needed it.”

The room was quiet.

Then Rachel stood.

Her hands trembled.

“I need to repent,” she said.

Pastor Brooks gave her space.

Rachel looked toward Tyler and Emma, who sat beside Mason.

“I checked out after the divorce. I told myself I was surviving, and maybe I was. But I also let survival become an excuse to stop leading, stop listening, and stop praying. I am sorry.”

Her voice broke.

Tyler looked down at his hands.

Emma leaned against Mason.

Rachel continued.

“I cannot fix everything. But I want our home to belong to God.”

She sat down quickly, as if her legs had nearly given out.

Grace wiped her eyes.

Eli looked at Mason.

Mason stared forward, jaw tight.

Then Mason stood too.

Everyone looked at him.

He seemed to regret it immediately.

But he stayed standing.

“I don’t know how to say this,” he began.

A few people smiled gently.

He looked at Rachel.

“I was useless when I should have helped. I made jokes because it was easier than loving people. I am sorry.”

He sat down.

It lasted less than twenty seconds.

It may have been the bravest thing Eli had seen him do.

Rachel reached for his hand.

Mason let her take it.

No joke.

No escape.

The room prayed quietly.

Then Caleb stood.

Jordan looked startled.

So did Eli.

Caleb wore his black hoodie, but the hood was down. His hands were shoved into the front pocket. He stared at the floor.

“I don’t want to talk long,” he said.

No one laughed.

He swallowed.

“My mom died.”

The room became painfully still.

“I know people know that. But everyone acts like if they say it, I’ll break. I’m already broken.”

Jordan covered his mouth with one hand.

Caleb’s voice shook, but he kept going.

“My dad disappeared after. Not all the way. He was there. But not really.”

He looked at Jordan then.

Jordan nodded through tears.

Caleb continued.

“I got mad. I stayed mad. I still am, I guess. But he listened last week. Outside. He didn’t fix it. He listened.”

His eyes moved toward Pastor Brooks.

“I don’t know what I believe about God right now. But I know I don’t want to hate my dad forever.”

That broke something in the room.

Jordan stood and moved toward his son.

He stopped halfway, as if asking permission.

Caleb looked at him.

Then gave one small nod.

Jordan crossed the space and hugged him.

At first Caleb stood stiff.

Then his shoulders dropped.

He hugged his father back.

No one clapped.

No one dared cheapen it.

The room simply prayed.

Some wept silently.

Eli bowed his head and felt tears fall.

This was not spectacle.

This was holy.

A wound had opened, and God had met it with mercy.

After a while, Pastor Brooks moved to the second movement.

Prayer for homes.

Families gathered in small groups around the sanctuary.

Some knelt at the altar.

Some stayed in pews.

Some stood in circles holding hands.

Some sat alone.

Pastor Brooks invited people to pray for their own homes first, then for others.

Eli turned to Grace and the children.

Noah looked serious.

Lily held Mr. Bear.

Owen had fallen asleep against Grace, still holding the giraffe.

Eli looked at them and felt the weight of the question Lily had asked days earlier.

Are they more important?

He lowered himself to one knee in front of his family.

Noah's eyes widened.

"Dad?"

"I need to pray for us."

Grace's eyes filled.

Eli took her hand first.

Then Noah's.

Lily placed Mr. Bear between them, apparently included in the circle.

Eli bowed his head.

"Lord, forgive me for every time I made my family feel second to the work You gave me. Forgive me for hearing strangers while missing my children. Forgive me for making Grace carry burdens alone. Help me love this home first. Help me lead with humility, listen quickly, repent honestly, and put the phone down when love requires it."

Noah squeezed his hand.

Eli continued.

"Make our home awake. Not loud. Not impressive. Awake to You."

Grace prayed next.

"Lord, protect us from hurry. Protect us from pride. Protect us from fear. Help our children see faith that is real, not performed. Help Eli and me walk together, not ahead of each other."

Noah prayed after her.

"God, help Dad not phone-listen. Help Mom not be tired. Help Lily not be dramatic about everything. Help Owen stop throwing food. And help us maybe get a dog if it is Your will."

Grace pressed her lips together.

Eli whispered, "Strong ending."

Lily prayed next.

"God, help our family be awake. Help Mr. Bear too, but mostly us. Help the people crying. Help Caleb. Help Emma. Help parents not forget kids."

That last line finished Eli.

Help parents not forget kids.

He bowed his head lower.

This was why the order mattered.
Not theory.
Not platform.
Children.
Souls.
Homes.
Grace placed her hand on his shoulder.
Around them, the sanctuary filled with prayer.
Not organized perfectly.
Not polished.
But real.

Across the room, Carol and Dennis knelt together.
They had brought a copy of the letter they had written to their daughter. Dennis held it in both hands.
Pastor Brooks prayed over them.
Not that their daughter would respond the way they wanted.
Not that everything would be restored quickly.
He prayed that their repentance would remain true even if reconciliation was slow.

Dana knelt with her grandchildren.
The angry boy who had resisted screen-free dinners stood stiffly at first. Then, when Dana began crying, he put one hand on her back.
Small.
But not small.
Rob and Denise prayed together near the back.
Rob did not use many words.
But he prayed out loud.
That was enough.
Rachel prayed with Tyler and Emma.
Tyler did not say much, but he did not pull away.
Emma prayed from her list.
“God, help Mr. Rob because he looks less grumpy now.”
Rob heard it and laughed through tears.
Mason stood alone near the side wall.
Eli saw him and started to move toward him, but Ruth got there first.
Of course she did.
She stood beside Mason without saying anything.

After a moment, Mason bowed his head.
Ruth did too.
Eli did not know what they prayed.
He did not need to.

The third movement began almost without announcement.
Pastor Brooks returned to the front and read from Acts.
“In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my
Spirit on all flesh.”

Then he closed the Bible.

“We cannot manufacture awakening. We cannot market it into
existence. We cannot organize the Spirit of God. But we can ask. We
can repent. We can surrender. We can make room.”

He looked over the sanctuary.

“So let us ask.”

No one needed more instruction.

The room prayed.

For children.

For prodigals.

For marriages.

For schools.

For churches.

For pastors.

For single parents.

For grandparents.

For fathers who were present but passive.

For mothers who were exhausted and ashamed.

For teenagers numb from grief and screens.

For homes ruled by anger.

For homes ruled by silence.

For homes ruled by distraction.

For homes that looked fine from a distance but were breaking
quietly.

Eli prayed until he ran out of words.

Then he sat in silence.

That was when the singing began.

No one planned it.

No one started from the front.

Somewhere near the middle, an older woman began singing softly.

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus.”

Another voice joined.

Then another.

Soon the room was singing.

No instruments.

No screen.

Not perfectly in tune.

But with a depth Eli had never heard from a polished stage.

He looked at Grace.

She was singing with tears on her face.

Noah leaned against him.

Lily held Mr. Bear and sang the words she knew.

Owen slept through the entire thing.

The song filled the sanctuary.

Eli did not sing at first.

He listened.

A week earlier, Victor had offered reach.

Tonight, God had given presence.

There was no comparison.

Eventually, Eli joined in.

Quietly.

Honestly.

The line came again.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

That was the whole answer.

Not Eli.

Not the posts.

Not the prayer room.

Not Homes Awake.

Not a thousand screens.

Jesus.

If the eyes moved anywhere else and stayed there, the work would rot from the center.

Eli sang with his family beside him and the church around him.

For the first time in weeks, he did not feel the need to manage anything.

He simply worshiped.

The prayer night lasted nearly three hours.

No one seemed to know how to end it.

Pastor Brooks finally closed with a simple blessing.

“Go home slowly. Love one another. Continue what God began here under your own roof.”

People lingered afterward.

Not chatting lightly.

Not rushing.

Holding each other.

Praying in corners.

Exchanging phone numbers.

Offering meals.

Offering rides.

Offering to sit with children.

Offering to help begin one faithful step.

Eli stood near the back with Grace.

He felt emptied.

In the best way.

Mason walked over with red eyes and an expression that warned Eli not to comment on them.

Eli wisely did not.

Mason cleared his throat.

“Ruth prayed for me.”

“I saw.”

“She asked God to make me a man who stays.”

Eli looked at him.

Mason swallowed.

“Rude, honestly.”

Eli smiled gently.

“Accurate?”

Mason looked toward Rachel and the kids.

“Yeah.”

Then he said, “I think I want that.”

Eli nodded.

“That is a good prayer.”

Mason looked back.

“I also helped stack chairs, so spiritually and practically, I am advancing.”

“There may be no stopping you.”

“Let’s not get dramatic.”

They smiled.
Then Mason hugged him.
Quickly.
Awkwardly.
But real.
Eli hugged him back.

On the drive home, the children were quiet.
Owen slept.
Lily leaned against the window, holding Mr. Bear.
Noah stared out into the dark.
Grace sat beside Eli, her hand resting near his on the console.
For a while, no one spoke.
Then Noah said from the back seat, “Dad?”
“Yeah?”
“Was that revival?”
Eli looked at Grace.
She looked back.
He thought before answering.
“I don’t know.”
Noah frowned. “How do you not know?”
“Because revival is not just people crying or praying one night. It is God bringing people back to life. Sometimes you only know by the fruit that grows after.”
Noah considered that.
“So we have to wait?”
“Yes.”
He sighed.
“I don’t like waiting.”
Eli smiled.
“Neither do I.”
Lily spoke sleepily.
“I think it was something.”
Grace turned slightly.
“What do you mean?”
“I don’t know. Just something.”
Eli looked through the windshield at the road ahead.
That felt right.
Something.

Not a label.
Not a claim.
Not an announcement.
Something holy had happened.
That was enough.

When they got home, Eli carried Owen inside.
Grace helped Lily.
Noah walked in quietly and went straight to his room.
After getting the children settled, Eli returned downstairs.
His phone sat on the counter.
He had not touched it all night.
There were notifications.
Messages.
Missed calls.
People had posted about the prayer night already. He could see previews on the screen.
He turned the phone face down.
Grace saw him.
“You’re not checking?”
“Not tonight.”
“You sure?”
“Yes.”
He looked toward the stairs.
“I want to remember it before the internet tells me what it was.”
Grace’s face softened.
“That is wise.”
They sat at the kitchen table.
No tea.
No notebook at first.
Just silence.
Then Eli opened his Bible to Acts and read quietly.
Not to prepare a post.
Not to find a line.
Just to receive.
After a while, he opened his notebook and wrote:
The Night of Prayer
Under it, he wrote:
Do not name too quickly what God is still forming.

Then:

Presence is better than reach.

Then:

If eyes turn to me, I have failed. If eyes turn to Jesus, the work is alive.

He set the pen down.

Grace read the lines.

“The last one matters.”

“Yes.”

“Keep it close.”

“I will.”

They prayed together before bed.

Not long.

Not eloquent.

Mostly gratitude.

Mostly surrender.

When Eli finally lay down, he expected his mind to race.

It did not.

The room was quiet.

Grace fell asleep beside him.

The children slept down the hall.

The phone remained untouched downstairs.

And in the deep stillness after a night of repentance, prayer, tears, and worship, Eli understood something he had not understood before.

Awakening was not proven by how many people talked about it the next day.

It was proven by whether people obeyed God when they went home.

The night of prayer was over.

The real test would begin in the morning.

PART FOUR
The Awakening

Chapter Sixteen

No Famous Men

By morning, people were already trying to name what had happened.

Eli saw it before breakfast.

He had not meant to check his phone that early. He had come downstairs to start coffee, opened the drawer to get a clean dish towel, and saw the screen light up.

A message preview sat at the top.

Last night was revival.

Another appeared beneath it.

People need to hear about what happened.

Then another.

You should post a recap while it's fresh.

Eli stood in the kitchen, drawer half open, phone glowing beside the folded towels.

For a moment, he reached for it.

Then he stopped.

The house was still quiet. Grace and the children were asleep. The sky outside the window was pale and gray. The coffee maker had not even finished brewing.

He could feel the pull.

Not only curiosity.

Responsibility.

People had come. People had prayed. People had wept. Families had taken steps. Caleb had hugged Jordan. Mason had been prayed over by Ruth. Carol and Dennis had confessed. The sanctuary had filled with voices singing to Jesus without anyone planning it.

Surely that was worth telling.

Surely people needed to know.

Surely a careful post could encourage families who had not been there.

Surely silence would waste the moment.

The phrase made Eli's hand freeze.

Waste the moment.

That sounded familiar.

Too familiar.

Victor had used different words, but the spirit was the same.

Doors like this do not stay open forever.

This moment should not be wasted.

Eli closed the drawer.

The phone buzzed again from inside it.

He left it there.

Instead, he poured coffee, opened his Bible, and sat at the kitchen table.

For several minutes, he did not read.

He just sat.

His heart still carried the night before, but he wanted to hold it rightly. Not like a trophy. Not like proof. Not like content.

Like a gift.

Gifts could be shared.

They could also be mishandled.

He turned to Acts and read about the believers gathering, praying, breaking bread, and giving as anyone had need.

No branding.

No famous men.

No one trying to own the fire.

The work belonged to God, and the people belonged to each other.

Eli underlined one phrase.

And the Lord added to their number.

The Lord added.

Not Peter's strategy.

Not a media plan.

Not a man protecting momentum.

The Lord added.

Eli closed his eyes.

“Lord, keep us from touching what belongs to You.”

That was the prayer he needed before breakfast.

Grace came downstairs twenty minutes later wearing her robe and carrying Lily's blanket over one arm.

“Why do you have Lily's blanket?” Eli asked.

“She said it was too heavy to carry downstairs and then came downstairs without it.”

“Seems efficient.”

Grace dropped it on a chair and walked to the coffee.

“Have you checked your phone?”

“No.”

She turned and looked at him.

“Really?”

“It buzzed.”

“And?”

“I closed the drawer.”

Grace smiled faintly. “That is progress.”

“It did not feel like progress. It felt like withdrawal.”

“Sometimes those are related.”

She sat across from him.

For a few moments, they drank coffee in quiet.

Then she asked, “How are you feeling about last night?”

Eli looked toward the window.

“I don’t want to name it too quickly.”

Grace nodded.

“That seems wise.”

“People are already calling it revival.”

“Maybe it was.”

“Maybe.”

“But you are afraid of the word?”

“I’m afraid of using the word before the fruit proves it.”

Grace looked down into her mug.

“That sounds right.”

“I’m also afraid of not telling people what God did.”

“Those are different fears.”

“Yes.”

“Which one is louder?”

Eli thought for a moment.

“The fear of mishandling it.”

“Then listen to that.”

He nodded.

From upstairs, Owen shouted something that sounded like a battle command.

Grace closed her eyes.

“The army is awake.”

A second later, Noah yelled, “Owen has my sock!”

Lily shouted, “That is not your sock, it is Mr. Bear’s sleeping bag!”
Eli stood.
“I’ll go.”
Grace smiled.
“Welcome to the real test after the night of prayer.”
Eli headed for the stairs.
She was right.
The real test had begun.

At church the next morning, the sanctuary still felt different.
Not because anything physical had changed. The pews were the same. The cross was the same. The carpet was the same. The piano was still covered with the same cloth. The bulletin still had the same simple layout, and someone had still misspelled the name of the potluck committee.

But the people were different.

Or maybe Eli was seeing them differently.

Carol and Dennis sat together near the front. Carol’s hand rested on top of Dennis’s. They looked tired but peaceful.

Jordan and Caleb arrived together. Caleb still wore the hoodie, but he walked beside his father instead of behind him.

Rob and Denise came in with their children. Rob held the youngest child’s hand and looked mildly uncomfortable, which seemed to be his normal expression when doing something emotionally healthy.

Dana came with her grandchildren. The angry boy held the door open for Ruth Bell, then pretended it had been accidental.

Rachel arrived with Tyler and Emma. Mason came separately but entered with them, carrying a box of doughnuts.

Eli looked at the box.

Mason held it up.

“Hospitality ministry.”

“What happened to hydration ministry?”

“I am expanding carefully.”

“Did Ruth approve this?”

Mason looked across the room. Ruth was already watching him.

“Pending review,” he said.

Eli laughed.

Grace stood beside him, greeting people as they came in.

That had become natural for her. Not official. Not assigned. She simply made room for people.

A young couple Eli did not know approached them.

The woman held a baby on her hip. The man looked nervous.

“Are you Eli?” the man asked.

Eli nodded.

“I’m Eli.”

The man held out his hand.

“I’m Aaron.”

Eli’s eyebrows lifted.

“From Ohio?”

Aaron smiled awkwardly. “Yeah.”

Eli looked at the baby, then back at him.

“You came all the way from Ohio?”

“My wife’s sister lives about an hour from here,” Aaron said. “We were visiting anyway. After Friday night, we decided to come.”

His wife smiled.

“I’m Rebecca.”

Grace greeted her warmly.

Eli felt the strange weight again.

A message from a screen had become a family standing in front of him.

Aaron looked around the church.

“I expected something bigger,” he said, then quickly added, “Not in a bad way.”

Eli smiled.

“No offense taken.”

Rebecca looked toward the sanctuary.

“This is better,” she said quietly.

Grace nodded.

“Yes.”

Aaron looked back at Eli.

“I wanted to thank you in person.”

Eli shifted.

“I’m grateful the posts helped.”

Aaron shook his head.

“Not just the posts. The way you keep saying you are learning too. That made it harder for me to dismiss.”

Eli did not know what to say.

Grace did.

“We are all learning,” she said.

Aaron nodded.

“That’s why we came.”

Pastor Brooks walked over then, and Eli introduced them.

The pastor welcomed them without surprise, as if families from Ohio walked in every Sunday because of internet posts.

Maybe pastors developed that skill.

Or maybe Pastor Brooks simply believed God could arrange things men could not.

The service began with a hymn.

The singing was stronger than usual.

Not louder in a forced way.

Fuller.

People sang like the words had weight.

Eli stood between Grace and Noah, holding the hymnal but not needing it. Lily stood beside Grace, helping Owen hold his own hymnal upside down.

Mason stood two rows ahead with Rachel and the kids.

Eli saw him singing.

Not confidently.

Not loudly.

But singing.

That alone nearly undid him.

Pastor Brooks preached from First Corinthians.

God choosing what is weak.

God choosing what is low.

God choosing what is despised.

So that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Eli listened with both hands folded tightly around the bulletin.

It felt like the sermon had been aimed directly at him.

Then Pastor Brooks said, “When God moves, men often rush to identify the central human figure. We want a name, a face, a leader, a personality, a brand, a voice. But true awakening does not create famous men. It creates humbled people.”

Eli lowered his eyes.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“If a work of God depends on one man’s gift, one man’s platform, one man’s energy, or one man’s personality, then it is more fragile than we want to admit. But when the Spirit of God begins stirring ordinary believers to repent, pray, forgive, serve, and obey, then the work spreads in ways no one can own.”

Eli wrote one line on the bulletin.

No famous men. Humbled people.

Pastor Brooks seemed to look directly at him then, though maybe Eli imagined it.

“The church does not need celebrities of repentance. It needs examples of it.”

Grace reached over and touched Eli’s wrist.

He breathed slowly.

No famous men.

That was safety.

That was freedom.

That was also death to something in him that still wanted to be seen.

After the service, people gathered in the fellowship hall.

The room was louder than usual.

Doughnuts helped.

So did the fact that several families who had attended the night of prayer returned for Sunday service. Some looked uncertain. Some looked relieved. Some looked like they were waiting to be told where they fit.

Ruth Bell moved through the room like a general with cookies.

She introduced people to each other with alarming precision.

“Dana, this is Rebecca. She has a baby and needs to know which door leads to the nursery. Bethany can help her.”

“Rob, help Frank with the folding table.”

“Mason, the doughnuts need napkins.”

Mason saluted once.

Ruth stared.

He lowered his hand.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Eli watched from near the coffee.

Pastor Brooks came beside him.

“You look thoughtful.”

“I’m watching Ruth run the church.”

Pastor Brooks smiled. “She has allowed me to pastor here for years.”

“That is generous of her.”

“Very.”

They stood quietly for a moment.

Then Pastor Brooks said, “What did you hear this morning?”

Eli looked at him.

“No famous men.”

Pastor Brooks nodded.

“I hoped you would.”

“You were talking to me.”

“I was talking to all of us.”

“But also me.”

“Yes.”

Eli appreciated the honesty.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Eli, people may start wanting you to become the face of this.”

“I know.”

“Do not.”

“I don’t want to.”

Pastor Brooks gave him a familiar look.

Eli sighed.

“Part of me wants to.”

“That is the part we must keep bringing to the cross.”

Eli nodded.

“How?”

Pastor Brooks looked around the room.

“Start by telling fewer stories where you are the key figure.”

Eli frowned slightly.

“What do you mean?”

“When people ask what is happening, talk about what God is doing through the body. Tell them about Ruth praying. Grace welcoming. Mason serving. Rachel helping Dana. Rob praying with Denise. Jordan listening to Caleb. Children making prayer lists. Churches gathering. Do not make yourself the doorway in every story.”

Eli let that settle.

Do not make yourself the doorway.

That was important.

Painful.

Needed.

Pastor Brooks added, “And when you write, write in a way that multiplies obedience, not dependence.”

Eli nodded slowly.

“I think I understand.”

“Good. Understanding must become practice.”

That was always the harder part.

Aaron from Ohio found Eli after the service.

He held a cup of coffee and looked less nervous than before.

“Can I ask you something?” Aaron said.

“Sure.”

“How did you start the prayer room?”

Eli almost answered automatically.

Then stopped.

Pastor Brooks’s words were still fresh.

Do not make yourself the doorway in every story.

He smiled.

“Ruth Bell started it.”

Aaron looked confused.

“Who is Ruth Bell?”

Eli pointed across the room.

Ruth was telling Mason how many napkins belonged on each table.

“That woman.”

Aaron looked over.

“She did?”

“Yes. Pastor Brooks gave it shape. Grace helped make it welcoming. A handful of tired people showed up. We prayed. That is about it.”

Aaron looked back at him.

“So there was not a plan?”

“There was a burden. That is not the same thing.”

Aaron nodded slowly.

“I think our church wants to start something similar.”

“Then start small.”

“With what?”

“Scripture. Confession. Prayer for actual homes by actual name. No stage. No performance. No pressure to speak. Make room for awkward people.”

Aaron smiled. “That last one we can do.”

“Good. And do not build it around one person.”

Aaron looked at him.

Eli continued.

“If God is calling your church to pray for homes, then the work should belong to the body, not to the person who first felt the burden.”

Aaron seemed to receive that.

“Thank you.”

“And ask the older saints to pray,” Eli added.

Aaron looked back at Ruth.

“Like her?”

“Yes. Especially like her.”

Across the room, Ruth looked toward them as if she sensed she was being discussed.

Eli turned away quickly.

Aaron laughed.

“She is intimidating.”

“She is helpful.”

“Both can be true.”

“Yes.”

That afternoon, the Carters hosted Mason, Rachel, and the kids for lunch.

It had become less unusual now.

The children ate grilled cheese, tomato soup, and too many crackers. Owen dumped crackers into his soup and called it “boat.” Lily and Emma held a quiet funeral for a broken crayon. Noah, Tyler, and Caleb, who had come with Jordan for the afternoon, went outside to throw a football badly and argue about rules none of them fully understood.

Mason sat at the kitchen table with Eli while Grace and Rachel talked in the living room.

“You heard Pastor Brooks this morning?” Mason asked.

“Most of it.”

“No famous men.”

Eli nodded.

“That one was for you.”

“I know.”

Mason leaned back.

“It was good.”

“Yes.”

“You disappointed?”

Eli looked at him.

Mason held up one hand.

“I’m not accusing. I’m asking.”

Eli considered lying.

Then decided not to.

“A little.”

Mason nodded.

“Figured.”

“That sounds bad.”

“It sounds human.”

Eli looked through the back window at the boys in the yard.

Caleb caught the football and actually smiled.

Eli watched Jordan see it from the porch.

That smile probably meant more to Jordan than a thousand shares.

Mason followed Eli’s gaze.

“Caleb’s doing better.”

“Seems like it.”

“Jordan too.”

Eli nodded.

Mason looked down at his hands.

“I’ve been thinking about what Ruth prayed.”

“That God would make you a man who stays?”

Mason grimaced.

“You remembered.”

“Yes.”

“Unfortunately, so did I.”

Eli smiled.

Mason grew serious.

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“Stay?”

“Yeah.”

Eli waited.

Mason rubbed his thumb along the edge of the table.

“When things get heavy, I leave without leaving. I joke. I get busy. I change the subject. I make people think I’m around, but I’m not really there.”

Eli nodded slowly.

“That sounds familiar.”

“You too?”

“Yes.”

“Phone?”

“Phone. Work. News. Helping other people. Anything that makes absence look productive.”

Mason sat with that.

Then he said, “Rachel asked if I’d come over every Thursday to help Tyler with math.”

“That’s good.”

“I said yes.”

“That’s very good.”

“I immediately regretted it.”

Eli smiled.

“But are you going?”

“Yeah.”

“Then that is staying.”

Mason looked toward the living room, where Rachel was laughing at something Grace said.

“I can do Thursdays.”

“One faithful step.”

Mason pointed at him.

“Do not overuse your catchphrase.”

“It is not my catchphrase.”

“It is absolutely your catchphrase.”

Eli laughed.

Then Mason’s face softened.

“Thanks.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. Not making me feel stupid for trying late.”

Eli shook his head.

“I’m trying late too.”

Mason looked at him.

They both knew it was true.

No famous men.

Just men learning to stay.

That evening, Eli finally wrote a post.

He waited until after dinner.

After dishes.

After playing with the kids.

After bedtime prayers.

After Grace sat with him and read the draft.

He wrote:

If God is waking homes, no one person owns the work. Look for the hidden servants. The grandmother praying. The pastor teaching patiently. The wife welcoming tired people to the table. The friend carrying chairs. The parent apologizing. The teenager speaking honestly. The child making a prayer list. Do not look for famous men. Look for humbled people taking one faithful step toward God.

Grace read it twice.

“This is good,” she said.

“You sure?”

“Yes. It points away from you.”

“That was the goal.”

“Then post it.”

He did.

Then he put the phone away.

Not because he did not care how people responded.

Because he did.

And that was why the phone needed to go away.

Later, after Grace went upstairs, Eli remained at the table with his notebook.

He wrote the chapter title:

No Famous Men

Below it, he wrote:

If the work depends on me, it is too small to be revival.

Then:

The body must carry what no platform can.

He stared at that line.

The body.

The church.

The actual people of God.

Not followers.

Not an audience.

Not viewers.

Not subscribers.

People.

Hands.

Voices.
Meals.
Rides.
Apologies.
Prayers.
Chairs carried.
Children watched.
Dishes washed.
Letters written.
Fathers listening.
Mothers resting.
Grandparents standing in the gap.
Teenagers slowly trusting.

A thousand screens could spread a message, but they could not become the body of Christ.
Only people could do that.
Eli closed the notebook.

The next Tuesday prayer gathering proved the point.
Eli arrived late.
Not very late.
Eight minutes.
But late enough that the meeting had already begun.

Owen had thrown up on the way out the door, which turned out to be more about spinning in circles after dinner than actual sickness. Still, it had required cleanup, clothing changes, and Grace deciding to stay home with him just in case.

Eli almost canceled.
Grace told him to go.
“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes. But you are not rushing me or the children to preserve your image of being on time.”

That was fair.

By the time Eli arrived, he expected the room to feel like it had been waiting for him.

It had not.
That was the gift.

Pastor Brooks was seated in the circle, listening while Denise prayed for a mother Eli did not know. Ruth sat beside Dana’s granddaughter,

helping her follow along in a children's Bible. Mason stood in the back holding a sleeping toddler that did not belong to him and looking mildly trapped. Rachel sat with a new woman who was crying quietly. Rob was handing out tissues.

No one looked relieved when Eli entered.
No one announced him.
No one needed him to begin.
The work was already happening.
Eli stood near the door for a moment.
At first, a small part of him felt left out.
Then a larger, healthier part of him felt free.
No famous men.
He found a chair near the back and sat down.
Mason leaned over carefully, not waking the toddler.
"You're late."
"Owen threw up."
Mason nodded toward the child in his arms.
"This is not mine."
"I assumed."
"Good."
"Need help?"
"Yes. But Ruth told me holding babies builds character."
"It probably does."
"I am becoming dangerously holy."
Eli smiled and settled into the circle.
No one asked him to pray.
No one asked him to speak.
For nearly forty minutes, he simply listened.
And the work continued.
Better, maybe, because he was not leading it.
That humbled him.
It also healed something.

When Eli came home, Grace was on the couch with Owen asleep against her.

The house was dim.
Noah and Lily were already in bed.
Eli sat beside her carefully.
"How was it?" she whispered.

“Good.”

“Did you lead?”

“No.”

“Did that bother you?”

He paused.

“At first.”

She smiled faintly.

“And then?”

“Then I was glad.”

Grace rested her head against the couch.

“That sounds healthy.”

“It felt like the work was safer without needing me.”

“Good.”

He looked at Owen sleeping against her.

“How is he?”

“Fine. Dramatic, but fine.”

“That is his gift.”

Grace smiled.

Eli brushed Owen’s hair back gently.

“I think I learned something tonight.”

“What?”

He looked at his sleeping son.

“If God is really doing this, my absence will not stop Him.”

Grace watched him.

“That is true.”

“And if my absence would stop it, then we built it wrong.”

She nodded.

“That is also true.”

Eli sat with that.

It was both comforting and humbling.

The phone buzzed in his pocket.

He took it out, turned it off, and set it on the coffee table.

Grace noticed.

No comment.

No praise.

Just a small smile.

They sat together in the quiet living room.

The hidden work was still happening.

In the fellowship hall.

In Rachel's house.
In Dana's kitchen.
In Aaron's church in Ohio.
In homes Eli would never see.
And here, on this couch, with a sleeping child between them.
No famous men.
No owned fire.
No single face.
No required voice.
Only ordinary people being made faithful by an extraordinary God.
Eli leaned back and closed his eyes.
For the first time in weeks, the thought did not frighten him.
It relieved him.
The work did not need his fame.
It needed his surrender.

Chapter Seventeen

The Breaking Point

Eli did not break when people attacked him.

That would have made more sense.

He did not break when the screenshot spread.

He did not break when Victor offered him the polished doorway and he had to say no.

He did not break during the night of prayer, when the sanctuary filled with tears, repentance, and the sound of people singing without music.

He broke on a Thursday night in his own kitchen over a cereal bowl.

It started small.

Most breaking points do.

Grace had asked him to handle bedtime because she had a headache. Not a dramatic headache. Not the kind that sent anyone rushing for medicine or concern. Just the kind that settled behind her eyes after a long day of children, laundry, school papers, phone calls, dishes, and the thousand small tasks that kept a family alive.

“I need thirty minutes,” she said.

Eli was at the kitchen table with his notebook open.

He had not been scrolling.

That was what made him feel defensive before anyone accused him.

He had been writing.

The book had begun taking shape. Not fully. Not officially. But enough that it had become real in his mind.

Who, Me?

A story of ordinary obedience in a digital age.

He had written that line more than once.

Now he was drafting notes for a section about no famous men. The sentence at the top of the page read:

The work does not need my fame. It needs my surrender.

It was a good sentence.

True.

Clean.

Useful.

Then Grace asked him to put the kids to bed.

He looked up.

“Right now?”

She stood by the counter, one hand pressed against her temple.

“Yes.”

“I’m in the middle of something.”

Grace looked at the notebook.

Then at him.

“I know.”

“I just need ten minutes.”

Her expression changed.

Not much.

Enough.

“Eli.”

He heard the warning in her voice but did not receive it.

That was the first failure.

“I’m writing about the book,” he said.

“I can see that.”

“This matters.”

The second failure was that he said it like she did not know that.

Grace’s face grew still.

“I did not say it doesn’t matter.”

“I know, but I finally have time to think clearly, and if I stop now, I may lose the thread.”

She looked toward the hallway where the children were arguing over something involving toothpaste.

“I am asking for help.”

“I said I need ten minutes.”

“No,” Grace said quietly. “You said the work matters.”

Eli leaned back, frustrated.

“That is not fair.”

She stared at him.

The kitchen seemed to grow quieter, even though the children were still making noise down the hall.

“Not fair?” she said.

Eli knew he should stop.

He did not.

“I am trying to steward this carefully. I’m trying not to rush. I’m trying not to post constantly. I’m trying to write while things are quiet. I’m trying to obey what God is putting in front of me.”

Grace’s voice stayed low.

“So am I.”

That should have ended it.

It did not.

Eli gestured toward the notebook.

“This could help people.”

Grace’s eyes filled with something that was not tears yet.

“What do you think I am trying to do?”

He froze.

The question entered the room and stood there.

What do you think I am trying to do?

Eli looked toward the sink.

A cereal bowl sat there.

One bowl.

Milk dried around the edge.

A spoon stuck to the inside.

He had passed it three times since dinner and not moved it.

Grace had asked him to handle bedtime, and he had defended a sentence about surrender.

The hypocrisy arrived before repentance did.

But pride spoke first.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” he said.

Grace nodded slowly.

“I know.”

Her voice was tired.

That was worse than anger.

She continued, “But that is how you are living right now.”

Eli stood.

“No, it isn’t.”

The words came too fast.

Too sharp.

The children went quiet down the hall.

That silence hit harder than the argument.

Grace looked toward the hallway, then back at him.

“Lower your voice.”

Eli breathed hard through his nose.

“I’m sorry.”

But the apology was not clean.

It was still carrying defense.

Grace knew it.

“I am going upstairs,” she said. “I need quiet.”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

She walked past him.

He watched her go.

The kitchen remained.

The notebook remained open.

The sentence remained on the page.

The work does not need my fame. It needs my surrender.

Eli stared at it.

Then at the cereal bowl.

Then at the hallway where the children had gone silent because Dad had raised his voice.

That was when something inside him cracked.

Not loudly.

Not dramatically.

But completely enough that he could no longer pretend.

He was writing about surrender while refusing to get up from the table.

He was calling parents to wake up while resenting the interruption of parenting.

He was warning against public usefulness outrunning private faithfulness while making Grace ask twice for help.

He was not being attacked.

He was being exposed.

And this time, the enemy was not online.

It was not Victor.

It was not a critic.

It was not a cropped screenshot.

It was the pride in his own heart wearing the language of calling.

Eli walked to the sink and picked up the cereal bowl.

The milk had dried enough that it took effort to rinse.

He stood there with hot water running over his hands, staring out the dark window above the sink.

His reflection stared back.
He looked tired.
Not noble.
Not called.
Tired.
And wrong.
From the hallway, Lily whispered something to Noah.
Noah whispered back.
Eli turned off the water.
For a moment, he considered going upstairs to explain himself to Grace first.
Then he knew better.
The children had heard enough to need him now.
He dried his hands and walked down the hall.
Noah stood outside the bathroom holding a toothbrush.
Lily sat on the floor with Mr. Bear in her lap.
Owen was in the bathroom wearing pajama pants but no shirt, with toothpaste on his chin.
All three looked at Eli cautiously.
That look hurt.
A child should not have to study a parent's face to know which version of them had entered the room.
Eli crouched in the hallway.
"I was wrong," he said.
Noah's eyes widened slightly.
Lily hugged Mr. Bear.
Owen said, "Toofpaste."
"Yes, buddy. Toothpaste."
Eli looked at Noah and Lily.
"I spoke sharply to Mom. I was selfish. I made what I was doing seem more important than helping her and taking care of you. That was wrong."
Noah looked down at his toothbrush.
"You were writing about God."
"I know."
"Isn't that good?"
"It can be. But doing something good does not excuse being unkind."
Lily asked softly, "Are you and Mom fighting?"

Eli's chest tightened.

"We had a hard conversation. But we love each other. And I need to apologize to her too."

"Are you mad?" Noah asked.

Eli told the truth.

"I was. But mostly because I did not want to be corrected."

Noah nodded like that made sense.

It probably did.

Children understood not wanting correction.

Eli continued.

"I am sorry you heard me raise my voice."

Lily stood and hugged him.

Noah hesitated, then leaned in too.

Owen, not understanding but unwilling to miss contact, pressed his toothpaste face against Eli's shoulder.

Eli closed his eyes.

This was the real work.

Not the sentence in the notebook.

This.

The hallway.

The apology.

The toothpaste.

The small hearts learning what repentance looked like by watching whether their father would practice it when it cost his pride.

He helped Owen finish brushing his teeth.

He read Lily a story.

He listened while Noah explained a school assignment he had forgotten to mention until bedtime.

He prayed with them.

Not long.

Not polished.

"Lord, help me be quick to repent. Help our home be full of truth and grace. Help me love Mom and the kids better than I love being right. Amen."

Noah said amen.

Lily said amen.

Owen yelled, "Men!"

Eli kissed their foreheads and turned off the lights.

Then he stood in the hallway for a long moment before going upstairs.

Grace was sitting on the edge of the bed.

The lamp was on.

Her Bible was open beside her, but she was not reading.

Eli stopped in the doorway.

She looked up.

Neither of them spoke at first.

Then Eli said, "I was wrong."

Grace's face did not change.

He stepped into the room.

"I was not just wrong in how I spoke. I was wrong in what I was defending."

Grace listened.

He continued.

"You asked for help. I treated it like an interruption. I made the book sound more important than you. More important than the kids. More important than obedience in the moment."

His voice tightened.

"I was writing about surrender while refusing to surrender."

Grace looked down.

Eli sat carefully in the chair near the bed, not beside her yet.

"I am sorry."

The words stood alone this time.

No explanation attached.

No defense.

No mention of how tired he was.

No reminder that the book mattered.

Just apology.

Grace took a slow breath.

"I forgive you."

Eli nodded, but the relief did not come right away.

She looked at him.

"I need to say something, and I need you to hear it without preparing an answer."

He folded his hands.

"Okay."

Grace's eyes were tired.

“I believe God is using you. I believe the posts matter. I believe the prayer room matters. I even believe the book may matter. But I am scared that you know how to confess pride better than you know how to kill it.”

That landed deep.

Eli stared at the floor.

Grace continued.

“You say the right things. You write the right things. You pray the right things. And then sometimes you still act like the work is more important than the people the work is supposed to serve.”

His throat tightened.

She was not finished.

“I do not need a husband who writes beautifully about repentance and then makes me fight for help with bedtime. I do not need you to become a voice to parents while your own children learn to wait until you are done being important. I do not need a book about ordinary obedience if the writing of it becomes disobedience here.”

Eli closed his eyes.

Every sentence was clean.

No exaggeration.

No cruelty.

Truth.

“I know,” he whispered.

Grace’s voice softened, but only slightly.

“I am not asking you to quit. I am asking you to actually surrender.”

He opened his eyes.

There it was.

Actually surrender.

Not write about it.

Not post about it.

Not pray eloquently about it.

Do it.

“How?” he asked.

Grace’s expression softened further.

“I do not know all of it. But I know some.”

He nodded.

She continued.

“The book cannot be written whenever inspiration hits if it costs the family. It needs boundaries like the phone. Scheduled time. Agreed time. And when the time is over, it is over.”

“Yes.”

“And if I ask for help during writing time because something real is happening, you stop.”

“Yes.”

“And you do not treat that as me interrupting God.”

Eli winced.

Grace saw it.

“I know you may not say it that way. But I need you not to feel it that way either.”

He nodded slowly.

“That may take work.”

“I know.”

“I will do it.”

Grace looked at him carefully.

“I believe you want to.”

He accepted that.

It was fair.

Wanting was not yet doing.

“I need help,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Not just from you. From Pastor Brooks too.”

“Yes.”

“And maybe I need to pause writing for a few days.”

Grace did not answer immediately.

“Maybe.”

“I think I do.”

She looked relieved and sad at the same time.

“That might be wise.”

Eli stood and walked to the dresser.

His notebook lay there, carried up earlier with his Bible.

He picked it up.

For a moment, he held it in both hands.

Then he placed it in the top drawer and closed it.

Grace watched him.

“Not forever,” he said.

“I know.”

“But long enough to prove it is not master.”

Grace’s eyes filled.

That was the first time she cried.

Eli crossed the room and sat beside her.

She let him take her hand.

For a while, they sat in silence.

Then she leaned against him.

The apology had not fixed everything.

It had opened the door to the next faithful step.

That had to be enough.

The next morning, Eli called Pastor Brooks.

He did not wait until he could make the story sound better.

He told it plainly.

The notebook.

Grace’s headache.

His frustration.

The argument.

The cereal bowl.

The children going quiet.

The apology.

Grace’s warning.

The closed drawer.

Pastor Brooks listened without interrupting.

When Eli finished, there was a long silence.

Then the pastor said, “That is mercy.”

Eli almost laughed bitterly.

“It did not feel like mercy.”

“Exposure before collapse is mercy.”

Eli sat with that.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Many men are not corrected until after they have done great damage. You were corrected by a cereal bowl, your wife’s honesty, and your children’s silence. Receive that as mercy.”

Eli closed his eyes.

“Yes.”

“What do you plan to do?”

“Pause the book for a few days. Set writing hours. Ask Grace before adding anything. Stop when the time is over. Bring it to you too.”

“Good.”

“I feel ashamed.”

“That is not surprising. But shame alone will not make you holy.”

“What will?”

“Repentance with obedience.”

Eli wrote that down.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“Do not turn this failure into another dramatic spiritual moment that makes you feel clean because you cried over it. Change.”

Eli swallowed.

That was blunt.

Needed.

“Yes, sir.”

“And Eli?”

“Yes?”

“This chapter belongs in the book, if the book is ever written.”

Eli opened his eyes.

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

“People do not need a story where you only fail in acceptable ways.”

Eli looked toward the closed drawer where the notebook sat.

“This one makes me look bad.”

“Good.”

Eli let out a breath.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“If the book is called *Who, Me?*, then readers need to see why the question is honest.”

Eli nodded slowly.

The story of ordinary obedience could not skip ordinary sin.

Not if it was going to tell the truth.

For three days, Eli did not write the book.

He still went to work.

He still answered messages during the set windows.

He still attended prayer room.

He still prayed with the children.

But the notebook stayed in the drawer.

At first, he felt restless.

Sentences came to him while driving.

He did not write them down.

Chapter ideas formed while washing dishes.

He let them pass.

Once, while putting away laundry, he thought of a line so clear he almost ran downstairs to capture it.

Then Owen walked in carrying two unmatched shoes and asking, “Park?”

Eli looked at him.

The sentence could wait.

Owen would not be two forever.

So they went outside.

It was too cold for the park, but they kicked a ball in the yard until Owen lost interest and began collecting sticks.

That afternoon, Grace watched from the porch.

When Eli looked over, she smiled.

Not relieved exactly.

But healing.

That mattered more than the sentence he had let go.

On the second night, Noah asked if they could read David and Goliath again.

Eli did.

This time, when Noah asked if David was scared, Eli answered differently.

“I think courage is not only facing giants,” Eli said. “Sometimes courage is admitting when you were wrong.”

Noah looked at him.

“Like you and Mom?”

Eli nodded.

“Yes.”

Noah thought about that.

“Did you beat the giant?”

Eli smiled faintly.

“I think I hit it with a small rock.”

Noah seemed satisfied.

“Good.”

Lily asked, “Was the giant your attitude?”

Grace covered her mouth.

Eli nodded solemnly.

“Yes. The giant was my attitude.”

Owen shouted, “Rock!”

The lesson was complete.

At the next prayer gathering, Eli did something he did not want to do.

He confessed.

Not every detail.

Not in a way that exposed Grace or the children unnecessarily.

But enough.

He stood near his chair after Pastor Brooks opened the room for prayer requests.

“I need to confess something,” Eli said.

The room quieted.

Grace sat beside him.

He had asked her permission first.

She had said yes.

“I have been calling parents to put first things first. I have been telling people that public usefulness should not outrun private faithfulness. But this week, I let the work get out of order in my own home.”

He looked down.

“I treated my family like an interruption. I hurt Grace. I made my children feel the tension. I had to repent. I still have to change.”

The room was silent.

“I am sharing this because I do not want to stand in this room as if I am above the message. I need it too. Maybe more than anyone.”

He sat down.

His face burned.

No one rushed to rescue him from the discomfort.

That was good.

Then Rob spoke.

“Same.”

Eli looked up.

Rob stared at the floor.

“Not with a book. But with work. I come home and act like everyone should leave me alone because I provided. Then I say I’m leading because I’m tired. I need to repent too.”

Denise wiped her eyes.

Then Bethany spoke.

“I do it with exhaustion. I use being tired as a reason to disappear emotionally.”

Then Jordan.

“I do it with grief.”

Then Dana.

“I do it with resentment.”

Then Mason, quietly.

“I do it with jokes.”

The room softened.

Not because sin was small.

Because repentance had opened the door.

Pastor Brooks bowed his head.

“Lord, save us from becoming messengers untouched by our own message.”

That prayer filled the room.

Eli bowed his head.

He had feared confession would make people trust him less.

Maybe it should, in the wrong way.

Maybe people needed to trust him less as a man and trust God more as the one doing the work.

No famous men.

Humbled people.

This was what that looked like.

On Sunday afternoon, Eli opened the notebook again.

Not because the pause was over automatically.

Because he and Grace had agreed to one hour after lunch while Owen napped and the older kids played outside.

The timer sat on the table.

Sixty minutes.

Grace had approved it.

The house was quiet.

Eli opened to a blank page.

For several minutes, he did not write.

Then he wrote the chapter title:

The Breaking Point

He stared at it.

Then beneath it:

I did not break because the world attacked me. I broke because God showed me I could speak truth publicly while resisting it privately.

He set the pen down.

That was enough for a moment.

The sentence hurt.

It was also honest.

He continued.

A calling is not proven by how strongly I defend it. It is proven by whether I surrender when God corrects me through the people closest to me.

He looked at the timer.

Fifty-two minutes left.

He almost kept going.

Then Lily ran in from outside.

“Dad! Noah says my fort is not structurally sound.”

From the yard, Noah shouted, “It is a fact!”

Eli looked at the notebook.

Then at Lily.

His writing time had not ended.

This was not an emergency.

He could have told her to wait.

Instead, he asked, “Do you need an inspection?”

Lily nodded urgently.

“Yes.”

Eli looked at Grace, who stood in the doorway watching.

She smiled faintly.

He closed the notebook.

“Timer paused,” he said.

Grace nodded.

“Good call.”

He followed Lily outside.

Noah stood beside a crooked arrangement of sticks, chairs, and a blanket.

“It will collapse in wind,” Noah said.

Lily crossed her arms.

“It has beauty.”

Eli studied the fort with great seriousness.

“You are both right.”

Noah looked offended.

Lily looked victorious.

Eli helped them rebuild it stronger.

It took twenty minutes.

When he came back inside, he resumed the timer and wrote for the remaining forty minutes.

The work did not vanish because he paused.

The sentence did not disappear.

The book did not die because his daughter needed him.

That simple fact felt like freedom.

A false calling demanded constant protection.

A true calling could survive obedience.

That night, after the children were asleep, Grace read the first page of the chapter.

Eli sat across from her, waiting.

He felt more nervous than when strangers criticized him online.

Grace read slowly.

When she finished, she looked up.

“This is hard to read.”

“I know.”

“But it is true.”

“Yes.”

She touched the page.

“This needs to stay.”

Eli nodded.

“I thought so.”

“And Eli?”

“Yeah?”

“This cannot become a beautiful chapter about an ugly moment unless the change remains real.”

He looked at her.

There was no anger in her voice.

Only truth.

“I know.”

She folded the page gently.

“I believe change is beginning.”

That meant more than praise.

More than shares.

More than invitations.

More than Victor's opportunity.

Grace had seen the worst of the moment and still saw beginning.

That was mercy.

Eli took her hand.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"I am sorry."

"I know."

"I am changing."

Grace squeezed his hand.

"Keep changing."

They sat in the quiet kitchen where so much had begun and so much had been exposed.

The cereal bowl was washed.

The notebook was open.

The phone was in the drawer.

The family was asleep.

The work remained.

But now it had gone deeper.

The awakening Eli had been praying for had turned inward again.

That was the part he kept forgetting.

God was not only using him to call others awake.

God was waking him too.

Chapter Eighteen

Ashes and Altars

The change after Eli's breaking point was not dramatic.

That was how he knew it might be real.

There was no sudden glow over the Carter house. No perfect schedule. No children who obeyed the first time. No marriage without tension. No morning routine that looked peaceful enough to photograph.

There were still missing socks.

Still dishes.

Still bills.

Still Owen shouting "No!" at unreasonable things, like pants.

Still Noah trying to negotiate for a dog with the persistence of a courtroom attorney.

Still Lily asking questions no adult was prepared to answer before coffee.

Still Grace getting tired.

Still Eli feeling the pull of the phone, the notebook, the messages, and the growing work beyond his house.

But something had changed.

Not everything.

Something.

Eli started noticing interruptions differently.

Not perfectly. But more honestly.

When Noah talked, Eli put the phone down.

When Lily came to him with a drawing, he looked at it before saying anything else.

When Owen wanted to show him a rock, Eli examined the rock like it had national importance.

When Grace asked for help, Eli tried to hear the request without silently measuring it against his own plans.

He did not always succeed.

But he repented faster.

That was new.

On Wednesday morning, he failed before eight.

Grace was trying to get the children ready when Owen spilled orange juice across the kitchen floor. Noah could not find his library book. Lily announced that she could not wear her shoes because one of them “felt emotionally wrong.”

Eli had a work call in fifteen minutes.

His laptop was open.

His coffee was untouched.

His mind was already at the office.

Grace looked at him from across the kitchen.

“Can you help with the juice?”

He almost sighed.

Almost.

He felt it rise in him.

The irritation.

The sense that he was being pulled away from something important.

Then he saw Grace’s face.

Not angry.

Tired.

He closed the laptop.

“I’ve got it.”

No speech.

No visible sacrifice.

No dramatic holiness.

Just a towel and the floor.

As he wiped up the juice, Owen crouched beside him.

“Mess,” Owen said.

“Yes,” Eli answered. “Mess.”

Owen patted Eli’s shoulder with a sticky hand.

“Good job.”

Eli laughed.

Grace looked over.

Their eyes met.

Something passed between them.

Not celebration.

Trust, maybe.

Small trust, rebuilding.

That mattered more than the work call.

He still made the call on time.

Barely.

The world did not end.
That was another lesson.

At the next prayer gathering, Pastor Brooks opened with Joshua.
Not the famous line at first.
Not “as for me and my house.”

He began earlier.

He read the call to put away foreign gods and incline their hearts to the Lord.

Then he closed the Bible and looked around the fellowship hall.

“Many of us want restored homes,” he said. “But we are slower to remove the idols that helped disorder them.”

The room was quiet.

The chairs were fuller again, but the room still felt simple. No microphone. No stage. No performance. Just people in a circle, some tired, some hopeful, some afraid of what obedience might require.

Pastor Brooks continued.

“An altar is not only a place where we ask God for blessing. It is a place of surrender. If we want homes awakened, we should expect God to ask what needs to be laid down.”

Eli sat beside Grace.

Noah, Lily, and Owen were in the nursery with the other children. Eli had almost brought Noah into the meeting, but Grace had gently reminded him that not every adult burden needed to be placed on a child’s shoulders.

She was right.

Again.

Pastor Brooks asked the room a question.

“What has been forming your home that needs to be removed, reordered, or surrendered?”

No one answered quickly.

These were not the kinds of questions people rushed to answer honestly.

Then Rob cleared his throat.

Denise looked at him.

He leaned forward, elbows on knees.

“The television,” he said.

Several people looked up.

He rubbed his hands together.

“Not because television is evil. I don’t mean that. But in our house, it’s always on. I come home, turn it on, and disappear. News. Sports. Shows. Doesn’t matter. It keeps me from talking.”

Denise’s eyes filled.

Rob looked at her briefly, then kept going.

“I told Denise we could take it out of the bedroom.”

The room stayed quiet.

Denise nodded.

“He did.”

Rob looked uncomfortable.

“And maybe no television during dinner. Not just one meal. All dinners.”

Mason whispered, “Rob has entered the arena.”

Ruth looked at him.

Mason sat straighter.

Pastor Brooks smiled faintly but did not let the moment turn into a joke.

“That is a faithful step,” he said.

Rob nodded.

“It feels stupid that it’s hard.”

“It is not stupid,” Pastor Brooks said. “Habits become household liturgies. Changing them feels like loss before it feels like freedom.”

Eli wrote that down.

Habits become household liturgies.

Then Rachel spoke.

“I think mine is shame.”

The room shifted.

Not because anyone was surprised.

Because the word itself carried weight.

Rachel held her hands tightly in her lap.

“I keep saying I want our home to change. But every time I try, I remember all the years I didn’t try. Then I either overdo it or quit. Shame keeps acting like it is protecting me from failing again, but really it is keeping me stuck.”

Grace nodded softly.

Rachel looked at her.

“I think I need to stop agreeing with it.”

Pastor Brooks leaned forward.

“How?”

Rachel took a breath.

“I wrote an apology to Tyler and Emma. Not a dramatic one. Just honest. I want to read it to them this week. Then I want to start fresh without promising them I will be perfect.”

Mason looked down.

Eli could see the emotion on his face.

Ruth said, “That is not small.”

Rachel wiped one eye.

“It feels terrifying.”

“Most true repentance does,” Ruth said.

Then Mason raised his hand halfway.

“I have one.”

Everyone looked at him.

He immediately regretted the hand.

“I don’t know why I raised my hand. This isn’t school.”

A few people laughed.

Then he continued.

“My thing is escape.”

No one laughed now.

Mason stared at the floor.

“When stuff gets serious, I leave. Sometimes physically. Usually with jokes. Or I say I’ll help and then keep it vague enough that no one can count on me.”

Rachel watched him.

He did not look at her.

“I told Tyler I’d help with math on Thursdays. I went once. Then last week I almost canceled because I didn’t feel like dealing with it.”

Eli did not know that.

Mason continued.

“I went. It was awful. He hates fractions. I also hate fractions. Nobody grew spiritually. But I went.”

Rachel laughed through tears.

Mason smiled faintly.

“So I guess I’m laying down the right to disappear when things are annoying.”

Ruth nodded.

“That is a strong altar.”

Mason looked at her.

“Are altars supposed to be annoying?”

“Yes,” Ruth said.

Mason sighed. “Of course.”

As more people shared, the room became less polished and more holy.

A mother admitted she needed to remove an app she used to numb herself at night.

A father confessed he had been using work as an excuse to avoid conflict at home.

A grandmother said bitterness had become her comfort.

A young man said pornography had shaped his view of women and he needed help, not secrecy.

The room grew still at that.

Pastor Brooks handled it carefully.

No shame.

No softening.

Truth with a path toward accountability.

A woman named Carla admitted that political outrage had taken over her home. She said the news was always on, and her children knew which public figures she hated but could not remember hearing her pray for their neighbors.

That one struck Eli hard.

Carla looked embarrassed.

“I tell myself I am informed,” she said. “But I think I am just angry all the time.”

Ruth said quietly, “Many people call anger discernment because it sounds holier.”

Eli wrote that down too.

He knew that temptation well.

Then Jordan spoke.

His voice was quiet.

“I took Caleb to his mom’s grave.”

The room softened immediately.

Caleb was not there that night. He had gone to the youth group meeting reluctantly after Noah had talked him into it.

Jordan looked down.

“I had not gone in over a year. I told myself it was because it hurt too much. That was true. But it was also because I did not want to face what her death had done to us.”

He swallowed.

“Caleb cried. I cried. We did not say much. But on the way home, he asked if we could go again sometime.”

Pastor Brooks nodded gently.

“That is an altar too.”

Jordan looked confused.

“Grief surrendered to God instead of hidden from Him,” Pastor Brooks said.

Jordan’s face tightened.

Then he nodded.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “That.”

Eli looked around the room.

Ashes and altars.

That was the phrase that came to him.

People were bringing burned things.

Regret.

Addiction.

Distraction.

Anger.

Shame.

Silence.

Grief.

Control.

Escape.

They were not bringing them to admire them.

They were bringing them to lay down.

Maybe awakening was not only light breaking into darkness.

Maybe it was also families carrying the ashes of what had failed and building altars where those ashes could finally be surrendered to God.

After the sharing, Pastor Brooks invited people to pray in groups of two or three.

Not for show.

Not to force intimacy.

But because some confessions needed a witness.

“Do not share details that should remain private,” he said. “But do not leave alone if God has made clear that you need help.”

People moved slowly.

Rob and Denise prayed with Frank.

Rachel prayed with Grace and Dana.

Mason stood awkwardly near the wall until Ruth pointed at him and then at Paul Reeves.

Mason obeyed.

Jordan asked Pastor Brooks to pray with him.

Eli stayed seated for a moment.

He did not know where to go.

Then Carla, the woman who had spoken about political outrage, approached him.

“Can I ask you something?” she said.

“Sure.”

She sat in the chair beside him.

“I read your posts because someone shared the one about Digital Babylon. I thought it was about screens and kids. I did not expect God to use it on me.”

Eli waited.

She continued.

“I have spent years angry. At the country. At politicians. At schools. At media. At everyone. Some of it is righteous, I think. A lot of it is not.”

Eli nodded slowly.

“I understand that more than you know.”

She looked relieved by that.

“I started noticing my son repeats my anger. He is eleven. He talks about people he does not know like they are enemies.”

That hit Eli hard.

Carla’s eyes filled.

“I taught him that.”

Eli did not answer quickly.

He had learned that silence could be respect.

Carla wiped her face.

“What do I do?”

Eli thought about his own home.

His own tone.

The moments when concern had become anger and anger had started sounding like faithfulness.

“I think you start by repenting in front of him,” Eli said.

She looked afraid.

“Tell him the truth,” he continued. “That some things in the world are wrong and worth caring about, but hatred is not the same as holiness. Tell him you have let anger lead too often. Then show him what it looks like to pray for people instead of only rage about them.”

Carla nodded slowly.

“That will be hard.”

“Yes.”

“Will it confuse him?”

“Maybe,” Eli said. “But it may also teach him that Christians can admit when their zeal got polluted.”

She looked down.

“That is what it feels like. Polluted zeal.”

Eli knew he would write that phrase down later.

But not now.

Now he prayed with Carla.

He prayed for her home.

For her son.

For her anger to be cleansed instead of merely hidden.

For truth and love to both remain.

For a home where the news did not disciple the children more than Scripture did.

When the prayer ended, Carla looked tired but lighter.

“Thank you.”

“I need that prayer too,” Eli said.

She looked at him, then nodded.

“I figured.”

That made him laugh softly.

Fair enough.

Across the room, Grace sat with Rachel and Dana.

Rachel held a folded paper in both hands.

Her apology to Tyler and Emma.

Grace could see the crease marks where Rachel had folded and unfolded it too many times.

“I do not know if I can read it,” Rachel said.

“You do not have to do it tonight,” Grace said.

“I know. But if I wait too long, I might not do it.”

Dana nodded.

“That is true sometimes.”

Rachel looked at the paper.

“What if it makes them feel worse?”

Grace answered carefully.

“Repentance can stir pain before it brings healing. But children often already feel what adults are afraid to name.”

Rachel swallowed.

Dana reached over and touched her arm.

“My grandson was angry before I admitted anything,” Dana said. “I think my honesty scared him less than my pretending.”

Rachel looked at her.

Dana smiled sadly.

“Pretending makes children lonely.”

Grace felt that line in her chest.

Rachel unfolded the paper.

“Can I read it to you first?”

“Of course,” Grace said.

Rachel read quietly.

It was not long.

She told Tyler and Emma she was sorry for disappearing into survival.

She told them the divorce was not their fault.

She told them she had let screens and silence fill spaces where her attention should have been.

She told them she could not change the past, but she wanted to walk differently now.

She did not demand forgiveness.

She did not promise perfection.

She promised to keep showing up.

By the end, Rachel was crying.

Dana was too.

Grace took Rachel’s hand.

“That is honest.”

“I hate it.”

“I know.”

“Do you think it is too much?”

“No,” Grace said. “I think it tells the truth without making them carry your guilt.”

Rachel folded the paper carefully.

“I’ll read it tomorrow.”

Dana squeezed her hand.

“We’ll pray.”

Grace nodded.

“And we will keep praying after.”

Rachel closed her eyes.

“Thank you.”

Grace looked across the room at Eli.

He was praying with Carla.

Mason was awkwardly bowing his head with Paul.

Rob was wiping his face while Frank spoke.

Jordan was kneeling near the front with Pastor Brooks.

The room was full of ashes.

But also altars.

That night, Eli and Grace drove home quietly.

The children were in the back seat.

Noah was half-asleep.

Lily whispered to Mr. Bear.

Owen was fully asleep, head tilted at an angle that looked uncomfortable but apparently was not.

After several minutes, Grace said, “Rachel is going to read an apology to the kids tomorrow.”

Eli glanced over.

“That is big.”

“Yes.”

“Mason talked about escape.”

“I heard.”

“Carla talked to me about anger.”

Grace nodded.

“I saw.”

Eli looked back at the road.

“A lot of ashes tonight.”

Grace turned toward him slightly.

“What?”

“That phrase came to me. Ashes and altars.”

Grace was quiet for a moment.

“That is good.”

“I think that is what happened. People bringing burned things to God.”

“And building something holy there?”

“Yes.”

Grace looked out the window.

“That belongs in the book.”

Eli smiled faintly.

“I thought you might say that.”

“I am right.”

“You often are.”

“Remember that.”

He laughed softly.

Then Noah spoke from the back seat without opening his eyes.

“Are ashes bad?”

Eli looked in the rearview mirror.

“I thought you were asleep.”

“I’m resting.”

Grace smiled.

Eli answered carefully.

“Ashes are what is left after something burns.”

“Like a fire?”

“Yes.”

“So why would God want ashes?”

Eli thought for a moment.

“I don’t think He wants us to pretend burned things are not burned. I think He wants us to bring Him what is broken, failed, or ruined so He can begin something new.”

Noah was quiet.

Then he said, “Can He fix ashes?”

Eli looked at Grace.

Her eyes were wet.

“Yes,” Eli said. “He can.”

Noah seemed satisfied.

“Good.”

A few minutes later, he was asleep.

Eli drove through the dark, thinking about the question.

Can He fix ashes?

That was what everyone was asking, whether they used those words or not.

Can God heal what burned?

Can He restore what was wasted?

Can He forgive what was done?
Can He rebuild what collapsed?
Can He make an altar out of ashes?
Eli believed the answer was yes.
Not quickly always.
Not painlessly.
Not by pretending the fire had not happened.
But yes.

The next day, Rachel read the letter.
She told Grace afterward by phone.
Eli was outside with Owen when Grace stepped onto the porch holding the phone, tears already in her eyes.
He looked up.
“What happened?”
Grace covered the phone.
“Rachel read it.”
“And?”
Grace’s voice broke.
“Tyler asked if he could keep the letter.”
Eli stood still.
Grace wiped her face.
“Emma asked if they could pray after.”
Eli looked toward the yard, where Owen was filling a toy dump truck with leaves.
The world looked ordinary.
Leaves.
Grass.
Porch steps.
A child with dirt on his knees.
But somewhere across town, a mother had apologized, a son had kept the letter, and a little girl had asked to pray.
Ashes and altars.
Grace returned to the call.
Eli picked up Owen’s toy shovel and helped him load leaves.
His phone buzzed in his pocket.
He did not check it.
Not yet.
Some things deserved to be held without interruption.

That evening, Eli wrote during his scheduled hour.
The timer sat beside the notebook.
Grace was upstairs helping Lily organize stuffed animals by what
Lily called “emotional category.” Noah was reading. Owen was asleep.
Eli wrote the chapter title:
Ashes and Altars
Then beneath it:
Awakening is not only people seeing the light. Sometimes it is
people bringing God what has already burned.
He paused.
Then wrote:
An altar is where surrender becomes visible.
He thought of Rob and the television.
Rachel and the letter.
Mason and Thursdays.
Carla and polluted zeal.
Jordan and the grave.
Dana and the screen-free dinners.
His own cereal bowl.
His own closed notebook.
His own need to keep surrendering.
He wrote:
God does not ask us to pretend the ashes are not real. He asks us to
bring them to Him.
The timer had twenty-four minutes left.
He kept writing.
When it went off, he stopped mid-sentence.
That was hard.
The thought was still alive.
The old Eli would have kept going.
Just ten more minutes.
Just finish the paragraph.
Just capture the thought.
But Grace had asked him to honor the boundary even when it felt
inconvenient.
Especially then.
He put the pen down.
Closed the notebook.

And went upstairs.

Grace looked up from Lily's floor, surrounded by stuffed animals.

"Timer?"

"Yes."

"You stopped?"

"Yes."

She smiled.

Lily held up two stuffed rabbits.

"Dad, which one looks more spiritually mature?"

Eli sat on the floor.

"That is a serious question."

Grace laughed softly.

Eli looked at the rabbits with proper attention.

The sentence in the notebook could wait.

The altar was here too.

In the stopping.

In the choosing.

In the ordinary obedience that nobody else would call important.

But God saw.

And that was enough.

Chapter Nineteen

Why Not Me?

The question changed slowly.

At first, Eli had asked it with disbelief.

Who, me?

Then he had asked it with fear.

Who, me?

Then with confession.

Who, me?

Then with surrender.

Who, me?

But by the time spring began pressing green through the cold ground, the question had started to change.

It did not happen in one dramatic moment.

It happened in pieces.

In the prayer room.

At the kitchen table.

Beside Lily's drawings.

In the yard while Owen carried sticks like treasure.

In the truck after hard phone calls.

In church pews.

In quiet apologies.

In messages from parents he would never meet.

In the sound of Mason praying without joking first.

In Rachel reading Scripture with her children.

In Rob removing the television from the bedroom and then admitting he slept better without the noise.

In Caleb asking Jordan if they could visit his mother's grave again.

In Carol and Dennis mailing the letter to their daughter and then choosing not to send five follow-up texts demanding a response.

In Dana making it through a full dinner with her grandchildren and no screens.

In Grace telling Eli the truth and Eli finally learning not to treat truth as opposition.

The question changed because Eli changed.

Not completely.

Not permanently in every way.

But truly.

One morning, while he sat at the kitchen table before anyone else was awake, he opened his notebook and saw the title again.

Who, Me?

He stared at it for a long time.

Then he wrote underneath it:

Why not me?

The pen stopped.

The words looked dangerous.

Too confident.

Too close to pride.

He almost crossed them out.

Then he sat with them.

Why not me? did not mean Eli was worthy.

It did not mean he was ready.

It did not mean he had mastered the message.

It did not mean he had become the man people sometimes imagined him to be.

It meant something quieter.

If God used ordinary people, why would Eli be excluded?

If God used weak people, why would weakness disqualify him?

If God used people who had failed, repented, and stood back up, why would Eli's failures be the end of the story?

If God gave him a wife who told the truth, children who exposed his distractions, a pastor who corrected him, a church that prayed, and a burden he could not shake, why should he keep acting as if obedience belonged to someone else?

The old question had sometimes been humility.

Sometimes it had been fear wearing humility's clothes.

That morning, Eli could finally see the difference.

True humility said, I am not enough, but God is.

False humility said, I am not enough, so I will not obey.

He wrote that down.

False humility can become disobedience.

Then he closed the notebook and sat back.

The house remained quiet.

The world had not changed because of one sentence on a page.

But Eli had.
A little.
And a little mattered.

Grace came downstairs a few minutes later.
She found him staring at the closed notebook.
“That looks serious,” she said.
“It might be.”
She poured coffee and sat across from him.
“What did you write?”
He hesitated.
Then opened the notebook and turned it toward her.
Grace read the two lines.
Who, Me?

Why not me?

She looked up.
Eli waited.
“I know how that sounds,” he said.
“How does it sound?”
“Proud.”

Grace looked back at the page.
“Not necessarily.”
“No?”

“No. Not if it means what I think it means.”
“What do you think it means?”

She rested both hands around her mug.
“That you are finally beginning to accept that being unqualified is not the same as being excused.”

Eli sat still.
Grace continued.

“You have been afraid of pride, and you should be. But you can also become proud of refusing to move. Like your caution is proof that you are safer than other men.”

That sentence found him.
He did not like it.
Which usually meant he needed it.
Grace softened her voice.

“I am not telling you to rush. I am not telling you to say yes to everything. I am not telling you to forget the boundaries. But maybe the

question is not only, ‘Who am I to do this?’ Maybe it is, ‘Who am I to refuse if God is asking?’”

Eli looked down at the notebook.

Who am I to refuse?

That had weight.

“Do you think I’ve been refusing?” he asked.

“Not exactly.”

She thought for a moment.

“I think you have been obeying while still keeping one hand on the emergency exit.”

Eli almost smiled, but the truth of it stopped him.

“You think I’m still ready to run?”

“Yes.”

“From what?”

“From being responsible for what God actually gave you. Not responsible for outcomes. Not responsible for everyone. But responsible to obey.”

Eli nodded slowly.

Grace reached across the table and touched his hand.

“Eli, I do not want you chasing platforms. But I also do not want fear making your decisions while calling itself wisdom.”

He looked at her.

That was the balance.

Not pride.

Not fear.

Obedience.

“Then what do I do?”

Grace smiled slightly.

“You pray. You ask Pastor Brooks. You keep your boundaries. You write during writing time. You keep helping at home. You keep saying no when it is not obedience. And when something is obedience, you stop hiding behind ‘Who, me?’”

Eli sat with that.

Then he nodded.

“Why not me?” he whispered.

Grace squeezed his hand.

“Exactly.”

That night, the prayer room felt lighter.

Not shallow.

Lighter.

The kind of lightness that came after many weeks of confession, tears, honesty, and slow obedience. People still carried burdens into the room. That had not changed. But they were no longer carrying all of them alone.

The fellowship hall circle had become familiar.

Chairs in a wide ring.

Bible on the table.

Tissues nearby.

Water bottles in the back.

No stage.

No microphone.

No pressure.

Mason arrived with a pack of napkins and a bag of oranges.

Eli looked at the oranges.

Mason held them up.

“Nutrition ministry.”

“What happened to doughnuts?”

“Ruth said hydration and sugar were not a complete theology of hospitality.”

“She is probably right.”

“I hate when that happens.”

Rachel came in behind him, smiling.

She looked different these days.

Still tired.

Still carrying a life that was not easy.

But less buried.

Tyler walked beside her instead of behind her. Emma carried Mr. Pickles and a new prayer list. The paper was folded carefully and decorated with hearts, crosses, and what appeared to be a carrot.

Rob and Denise came next. Rob nodded at Eli.

“The television is still out of the bedroom,” he said.

“That’s good.”

“I miss it less than I expected.”

Denise smiled.

“Don’t let him sound too spiritual. He replaced it with snoring.”

Rob looked at her.

“That is a medical slander.”

Mason leaned over. "Marriage ministry is thriving."

Grace laughed.

Jordan and Caleb arrived just before the meeting started.

Caleb was carrying a Bible.

Eli noticed.

Caleb noticed him noticing.

"It's my dad's," Caleb said quickly.

Eli nodded.

"Okay."

"I'm just holding it."

"Understood."

Caleb paused.

"Maybe reading some."

Eli kept his face calm.

"That's good."

Caleb shrugged and walked away.

Jordan looked at Eli with eyes full of things he did not say.

Eli nodded once.

Some joys were too fragile to name too loudly.

Pastor Brooks opened with 1 Corinthians.

"God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

He closed the Bible slowly.

"We have spent many weeks confessing weakness. Tonight, I want us to consider this: weakness does not excuse disobedience. God does not reveal our weakness so we can hide behind it. He reveals it so we will depend on Him."

Eli looked down.

Grace glanced at him.

Of course.

Pastor Brooks continued.

"Many people say, 'Who am I?' when God calls them. Moses said it. Gideon said something like it. Jeremiah believed he was too young. Isaiah knew he was unclean. Peter knew he was sinful. Paul knew he was unworthy. Scripture is full of people who had reasons to step back."

He looked around the room.

"And yet God called."

The room was quiet.

“Humility is good. Fear is not humility. Delay is not always wisdom. Refusal is not surrender.”

Eli felt each sentence.

Pastor Brooks asked the group to share, if they were willing, where they sensed God asking them to take a step they felt unqualified to take.

No one spoke at first.

Then Dana raised her hand.

“I think I’m supposed to start a small prayer time at my church for grandparents raising grandchildren.”

Ruth smiled before anyone else moved.

Dana continued.

“I don’t know how. I don’t like talking in front of people. I’m tired. Half the time I feel like I’m barely keeping my own house together. But I know there are others like me.”

Pastor Brooks nodded.

“What is the first faithful step?”

Dana smiled nervously.

“Ask my pastor.”

“Good.”

Ruth leaned forward.

“And do not talk yourself out of it in the parking lot.”

Dana laughed.

“I needed that.”

Then Rob spoke.

“I think I need to pray out loud at dinner.”

Denise looked at him.

He looked uncomfortable.

“I know that sounds small.”

“It does not,” Pastor Brooks said.

Rob nodded.

“I’ve prayed with Denise a couple times now. But not with the kids. I keep thinking I’ll sound fake.”

Frank said, “You might.”

Everyone looked at him.

Frank continued, “Do it anyway.”

Rob stared at him for a moment, then laughed.

“Fair.”

Pastor Brooks smiled.

“Sometimes the only way to stop sounding fake is to practice being real.”

Rob nodded slowly.

“I can do that.”

Mason lifted one hand halfway.

“I have one.”

Ruth said, “Go on.”

Mason looked toward Rachel.

“I think I’m supposed to take Tyler fishing.”

Rachel blinked.

Tyler, who was sitting near Caleb, looked over.

Mason continued.

“Not because fishing is holy.”

Frank muttered, “It can be.”

Mason pointed at him. “Thank you, Frank.”

Then he looked back down.

“I told Ruth I wanted to be a man who stays. I’ve been helping Tyler with math. It is terrible for both of us.”

Tyler said, “True.”

People laughed.

Mason smiled, then grew serious.

“But I think we need something that isn’t just me helping because things are broken. Something normal. Something steady. So, fishing.”

Rachel’s eyes filled.

Tyler looked at the floor.

Pastor Brooks nodded.

“That is a faithful step.”

Mason exhaled.

“Good. Because I already bought bait.”

Ruth looked at him.

“Then it is settled.”

Then Carol spoke.

Dennis sat beside her.

They had mailed the letter to their daughter two weeks earlier.

No response had come.

Not a call.

Not a text.

Not even a mailed reply.

The waiting had been painful.

Everyone could see it.

Carol held a tissue in one hand.

“I think God is asking me to stop checking the mailbox like it is an altar,” she said.

The room went still.

Dennis reached for her other hand.

Carol continued.

“I want my daughter to answer. I pray she does. But I have realized I keep looking for relief more than repentance. I keep wanting her response to tell me whether my obedience mattered.”

Eli wrote that sentence down.

Do not ask results to validate obedience.

Carol wiped her face.

“So my step is to keep praying for her and keep my heart soft without demanding that God prove He is working on my schedule.”

Dennis nodded.

“My step is the same,” he said quietly.

Pastor Brooks bowed his head.

“That is costly faithfulness.”

They prayed for Carol and Dennis.

Not for immediate results only.

For endurance.

For peace.

For repentance that did not become manipulation.

For a daughter who may or may not have been ready.

Eli thought of how often he wanted responses too.

Not from a daughter.

From the internet.

From people.

From fruit.

From visible signs that obedience mattered.

Carol had named something that belonged to many of them.

Maybe all of them.

Near the end of the meeting, Pastor Brooks looked at Eli.

Not in a way that pressured him.

But Eli knew.

There was something he needed to say.

He stood slowly.

Grace watched him with steady eyes.

“I wrote something this morning,” Eli said.

The room quieted.

He almost sat back down.

Then he continued.

“For months, the question in my heart has been, ‘Who, me?’ Who am I to speak? Who am I to call parents to wake up? Who am I to write? Who am I to help? Who am I to pray over hurting people?”

He looked around the room.

“I still think those are fair questions if they lead me to humility. But I am starting to see they can also become excuses.”

Ruth nodded.

Eli continued.

“If God only used people who were qualified in themselves, none of us would move. No one would pray at dinner. No one would apologize. No one would start a prayer room. No one would help with math. No one would write the letter. No one would ask a pastor about starting something. No one would tell the truth after years of silence.”

Mason looked down.

Rachel wiped her eyes.

Eli’s voice grew quieter.

“So maybe the question is changing. Not ‘Who, me?’ as an excuse. But ‘Why not me?’ Not because I am enough. Because He is.”

The room stayed still.

Eli looked at Grace.

She gave a small nod.

He continued.

“Why not us? Why not this church? Why not these homes? Why not tired parents, awkward uncles, grieving fathers, ashamed mothers, stubborn husbands, praying grandmothers, confused teenagers, and children with prayer lists? Why not ordinary people taking one faithful step because God is merciful?”

He stopped.

The room was quiet for a long moment.

Then Rob said, “That one needs to be in the book.”

Mason groaned.

“Don’t encourage him. He’s already got notebooks.”

People laughed.

The laughter released something in the room.

Then Pastor Brooks prayed.

“Lord, deliver us from pride, and deliver us from false humility. Make us small in our own eyes and bold in obedience. Teach us to say yes when You call, no when You forbid, and wait when You have not spoken.”

Eli bowed his head.

That prayer felt like a map.

Yes.

No.

Wait.

All under God.

After the meeting, Caleb approached Eli.

That did not usually happen.

Normally Caleb spoke if spoken to, and even then with the careful minimum required by politeness.

Tonight he walked over holding the Bible.

“My dad said you wrote stuff before you posted it,” Caleb said.

“Sometimes.”

“In a notebook?”

“Yes.”

Caleb shifted his weight.

“Is that weird?”

Eli smiled slightly.

“Probably.”

Caleb almost smiled back.

“I’ve been writing some things.”

Eli kept his expression calm.

“That’s good.”

“Not, like, religious posts.”

“That’s okay.”

“Mostly angry stuff.”

“That can still be honest.”

Caleb looked surprised.

“I thought Christians weren’t supposed to be angry.”

“Christians are not supposed to be ruled by anger. That is different.”

Caleb looked down at the Bible.

“I wrote something about my mom.”

Eli waited.

Caleb swallowed.

“I don’t want my dad to read it yet.”

“You do not have to show anyone before you are ready.”

“But is it wrong to write it if some of it is mad at God?”

Eli felt the weight of the question.

He thought before answering.

“No. God already knows what is in your heart. Writing it honestly may be part of bringing it into the light.”

Caleb’s grip tightened around the Bible.

“What if it sounds bad?”

“Then bring the bad-sounding truth to God. He is not fragile.”

Caleb looked at him.

That answer seemed to matter.

Then he nodded.

“Okay.”

He started to leave, then stopped.

“Do you think God gets tired of people being mad at Him?”

Eli’s throat tightened.

“I think God is patient with wounded people.”

Caleb looked away quickly.

“Okay,” he said again.

Then he went back to Jordan.

Eli stood there for a moment, unable to move.

Grace came beside him.

“What did he say?”

Eli told her.

Grace’s eyes filled.

“Why not Caleb too?” she whispered.

Eli looked across the room.

Caleb stood beside Jordan, Bible under one arm, hoodie sleeves pulled over his hands.

Why not Caleb?

Why not the grieving teenager?

Why not the angry boy?

Why not the one still unsure what he believed?

God was not finished with him either.

The next Saturday, Mason took Tyler fishing.

Eli knew because Mason sent a picture at 6:43 in the morning.
Not to social media.

To Eli and Rachel.

The photo showed Tyler standing beside a pond holding a small bluegill with both hands. His face carried the strained seriousness of a boy trying not to smile too much.

Mason's message read:

The fish is tiny. The victory is enormous.

Rachel replied with crying emojis.

Eli smiled and showed Grace.

She looked at the picture for a long moment.

"That is beautiful."

"It is."

"Who would have thought Mason's ministry would involve worms?"

Eli smiled.

"Frank, probably."

Later that day, Dana texted to say she had asked her pastor about starting a grandparents' prayer time.

He said yes.

Rob texted that he prayed before dinner.

It lasted twenty-two seconds.

His youngest asked why Dad sounded nervous.

Rob considered that a fair review.

Carol messaged Grace, not Eli, to say she had gone one full day without checking the mailbox.

Grace replied that one day mattered.

Caleb did not message anyone.

But Jordan texted Eli that Caleb had asked if they could buy a notebook.

Eli sat with that one for a long time.

Homes awake.

Not all at once.

Not without pain.

But awake.

That evening, the Carters had family night outside.

The weather had warmed enough for the children to run through the yard without coats. The grass was still patchy from winter, and the

garden beds needed work, but the air carried the promise of new growth.

Noah had built a small fort from sticks and old boards.

Lily had declared a section of the yard “the prayer garden” and placed rocks in a circle.

Owen mostly moved rocks out of the circle and into his pockets.

Grace sat on the porch steps with a cup of tea.

Eli sat beside her.

His phone was inside.

His notebook was inside.

For once, his mind was mostly outside too.

Noah ran over.

“Dad, inspect the fort.”

Eli stood.

“I accept.”

The fort was structurally questionable but emotionally significant.

He gave it a passing grade with recommendations.

Lily then demanded that he inspect the prayer garden.

The rocks formed a crooked circle around a dandelion.

“This is where people can pray if they are overwhelmed,” she said.

Eli crouched beside it.

“That is a good use of space.”

Owen dropped another rock into the center.

“Mine.”

Lily sighed. “He is not respecting the atmosphere.”

Grace laughed from the porch.

Eli looked at the dandelion.

A weed, technically.

But bright.

Stubborn.

Alive.

Pushing through ground no one had prepared.

He thought about the question again.

Why not me?

Why not us?

Why not here?

Why not in homes that felt ordinary, messy, tired, and late?

Why not in a church with no stage and not enough chairs?

Why not through children, grandparents, awkward men, grieving teenagers, and mothers learning to pray again?

Why not through a small fire God kept breathing on?

The old Eli might have feared the question.

Now he received it carefully.

Not as a crown.

As an invitation.

After the children were in bed, he opened the notebook during his scheduled hour and wrote:

Why Not Me?

Then:

The question is not whether I am enough. I am not. The question is whether God is free to use what I keep offering Him.

He paused.

Then wrote:

Ordinary obedience becomes extraordinary only because God breathes on it.

The timer had thirty minutes left.

He kept writing.

When it rang, he stopped.

Not because the thought was finished.

Because obedience was not measured by how much he produced.

He closed the notebook and went to find Grace.

She was in the living room folding laundry.

He sat beside her and picked up a towel.

She looked over.

“Done?”

“For tonight.”

“You stopped mid-thought?”

“Yes.”

She smiled.

“That still impresses me.”

“It still annoys me.”

“Good.”

They folded laundry together.

No one applauded.

No one shared it.

No one called it ministry.

But Eli knew better now.

This counted too.
Maybe especially this.
The question had changed.
The work had not become easier.
The calling had not become lighter.
But Eli was no longer looking for a better man to carry it.
God had not asked for a better man.
He had asked for surrender.
And by grace, Eli was learning to answer.

Chapter Twenty

The Open Door

The book did not end with a crowd.

That felt right to Eli.

There had been crowds, at least small ones. Fuller prayer rooms. Packed fellowship halls. The night of prayer when the sanctuary had filled with repentance and song. Messages from other states. Pastors asking questions. Parents taking steps. Churches opening rooms. Screens carrying sentences farther than Eli had expected.

But the story did not end there.

It ended on a quiet morning at the kitchen table.

Or maybe it did not end at all.

Maybe that was the point.

Eli sat with his Bible open, coffee cooling beside him, and his notebook resting closed near his elbow.

The house was still.

Grace had not come downstairs yet. The children were asleep, though probably not for long. Outside, early sunlight touched the porch rail and the yard beyond it. The grass had grown greener over the past few weeks. The crooked prayer garden Lily had built around the dandelion was still there, though Owen had relocated several rocks for reasons no one understood.

Eli looked at the notebook.

On the cover, in simple black ink, he had written:

Who, Me?

Underneath, smaller:

A story of ordinary obedience in a digital age.

The words no longer frightened him the way they had at first.

They still sobered him.

That was good.

He had stopped asking whether he was worthy. He was not.

He had stopped asking whether he was enough. He was not.

He had stopped asking whether he could control what God was doing. He could not.

But he had also stopped using those truths as excuses to avoid obedience.

That was new.

The old question had not disappeared.

It had been redeemed.

Who, me?

Yes.

Not because Eli was ready.

Because God was faithful.

Not because Eli had answers.

Because God had mercy.

Not because Eli could carry the work.

Because God could.

He opened the notebook and read the last line he had written the night before.

The open door is not always a platform. Sometimes it is a home finally willing to let God enter every room.

He sat with the sentence.

It felt true.

The world loved visible doors.

Invitations.

Stages.

Microphones.

Campaigns.

Numbers.

Announcements.

But God had opened other doors first.

The door to repentance.

The door to the nursery in the middle of the night.

The door to the kitchen table.

The door to the prayer room.

The door to Rachel's home.

The door between Jordan and Caleb.

The door in Mason's heart.

The door in Carol and Dennis's waiting.

The door in Rob's stubbornness.

The door in Dana's tired courage.

The door in Grace's honest warnings.

The door in Eli's own pride, once God had broken it open.

Those were the doors that mattered most.
A phone buzzed in the drawer.
Eli looked toward it.
Then back at the Bible.
Not yet.
That was still a daily decision.
Maybe it always would be.

Grace came downstairs a few minutes later.
She wore her robe and carried one of Owen's socks.
"Found this in the hallway," she said.
"Only one?"
"Of course."
"We may never understand his methods."
Grace placed the sock on the counter and poured coffee.
She looked at the notebook.
"Writing?"
"Reading."
"That can be safer."
He smiled.
She sat across from him.
For a while, they said nothing.
Then Grace asked, "Do you think it's finished?"
Eli looked at the notebook.
"The book?"
"Yes."
"No."
She smiled faintly. "Good."
"But I think the first part is."
"What is the first part?"
He thought for a moment.
"How God woke me up while I thought He was using me to wake
up everyone else."
Grace nodded slowly.
"That sounds right."
"I thought the story was about the message spreading."
"It partly is."
"Yes. But mostly I think it's about God putting things back in
order."

Grace held her mug in both hands.

“Starting here.”

“Starting here,” he agreed.

The phone buzzed again in the drawer.

Grace glanced toward it.

“Still not checking?”

“Not yet.”

“Good.”

From upstairs, Owen shouted, “Mooooom!”

Grace closed her eyes.

“The rooster has crowed.”

Eli stood.

“I’ll go.”

Grace looked pleased but did not overpraise him.

That was good too.

He walked upstairs and found Owen standing in the hallway, holding the missing sock.

“I found it!” Owen shouted.

Eli looked at the sock in his mother’s hand downstairs, then the sock in Owen’s hand.

“Buddy, that is a different sock.”

Owen looked at it.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

Eli picked him up.

“We will let the sock committee decide.”

Owen seemed satisfied with that.

Noah’s door opened.

He stepped out with his hair flattened on one side and wild on the other.

“Is today Saturday?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I was about to protest.”

Lily came out next, holding Mr. Bear and a folded paper.

“Dad, I wrote a prayer.”

Eli stopped in the hallway.

“You did?”

She nodded.

“Can I read it at breakfast?”

“Yes.”

“Should I use a loud voice?”

“A clear voice.”

“Mr. Bear says loud.”

“Mr. Bear does not live with the consequences.”

Lily considered that.

“Clear loud.”

Eli smiled.

“That works.”

He carried Owen downstairs while Noah followed and Lily marched behind with her prayer.

Grace looked at the group entering the kitchen.

“Everyone alive?”

“So far,” Eli said.

Breakfast was cereal, toast, and Owen’s continued belief that forks were acceptable for everything.

When everyone settled, Lily unfolded her paper.

“I will now pray,” she announced.

Noah whispered, “This is going to be long.”

Lily ignored him.

She bowed her head.

“Dear God, thank You for our family. Thank You for Mr. Bear, but not more than people. Help parents listen to kids. Help kids listen to parents. Help phones stay in drawers when they need to. Help people who are sad. Help Caleb. Help Emma. Help Uncle Mason stay. Help churches not be boring, but if they are boring, help us learn anyway. Help Dad write the book but not too much. Amen.”

Grace covered her mouth.

Noah nodded. “That was actually good.”

Owen shouted, “Amen!”

Eli stared at Lily.

She folded the paper carefully.

“Can I have toast?”

He laughed softly.

“Yes.”

Grace looked at him across the table.

Her eyes were wet.

Eli knew why.

Help Dad write the book but not too much.
Even a child knew the balance now.
Maybe that was grace too.

Later that morning, Eli finally checked the phone.
He did it at the table, after breakfast was cleaned up and after telling
Grace he was going to answer messages for thirty minutes.

The boundaries were no longer perfect.

But they were real.

Most messages were ordinary now.

Not unimportant.

Ordinary.

A pastor asking if their church should start with prayer or a class.

A mother asking how to apologize to a teenager without making it
about herself.

A father saying he had prayed before dinner three nights in a row
and felt less fake the third time.

A grandmother reporting that her grandchildren had made it
through a whole meal with no screens and only one argument.

Then Eli saw a message from Caleb.

That surprised him.

Caleb had never messaged him directly before.

It read:

My dad said you write stuff down when you don't know what to do.
I wrote something. You don't have to answer fast.

Eli smiled at that last sentence.

You don't have to answer fast.

Maybe people were learning his boundaries too.

Below the message was a photo of a notebook page.

The handwriting was uneven but clear.

God, I am still mad.

I miss Mom.

I do not know why You let her die.

I do not like when people say she is in a better place because I want
her here.

Dad is trying.

I am trying too, I think.

If You are real, help me not hate everything.

Eli stared at the photo for a long time.

His eyes burned.

He looked across the room where Grace was helping Owen build something with blocks.

“Grace.”

She looked up.

He handed her the phone.

She read the message, then closed her eyes.

“Oh, Caleb,” she whispered.

Eli looked back at the notebook page on the screen.

No polished prayer.

No church language.

No performance.

Just a grieving boy telling God the truth.

That was not small.

Eli typed carefully.

Caleb, this is honest. God can receive honest. I am praying for you today. You do not have to clean up grief before bringing it to Him.

He paused.

Then added:

And yes, your dad is trying. I believe you are too.

He sent it.

Then he put the phone down and bowed his head.

“Lord, meet Caleb in the truth.”

That was the whole prayer.

It felt enough.

That afternoon, the Carters went to the church.

Not for a service.

Not for a meeting.

For a workday.

Spring had revealed all the things winter had hidden. Leaves in the fence line. Branches near the playground. Mulch that needed spreading. Flower beds that needed clearing. A storage closet that had apparently not been organized since the days of the minor prophets.

At least, that was how Mason described it.

He arrived wearing work gloves and carrying two rakes.

“Groundskeeping ministry,” he announced.

Rob stood nearby with a wheelbarrow.

“We are not calling every task a ministry.”

Mason looked offended.

“That sounds like something someone outside the ministry would say.”

Ruth walked past with a trash bag.

“Both of you, stop naming things and start working.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they said together.

Eli laughed.

The church yard filled with people.

Rachel and Dana pulled weeds near the sign. Denise and Linda organized the nursery supplies. Frank repaired a loose handrail. Jordan and Caleb worked along the fence line. Tyler helped Mason rake leaves and complained only half the time. Emma and Lily collected sticks in small piles. Noah and Owen attempted to help and mostly spread dirt from one place to another.

Grace worked beside Bethany near the flower bed.

Pastor Brooks moved from group to group, helping where needed but not controlling everything.

Eli carried mulch.

For three hours.

No one asked him to speak.

No one asked him to post.

No one asked him what the movement meant.

They asked him to carry bags, hold a shovel, move a table, and help Owen stop filling his pockets with gravel.

It was excellent.

Near the end of the workday, Eli stood beside Mason at the edge of the playground.

Both men were dirty and tired.

Mason leaned on a rake.

“I think I like this better than emotional growth.”

“Mulch?”

“Mulch asks less questions.”

Eli smiled.

Across the yard, Tyler laughed at something Caleb said.

Mason watched him.

“He’s doing better.”

“Yes.”

“Rachel read them the letter.”

“I heard.”

“He kept it in his drawer.”

“Tyler?”

Mason nodded.

“He didn’t say much. But he kept it.”

“That matters.”

“Yeah.”

Mason looked down at the rake.

“I took him fishing again.”

“How did it go?”

“He talked more.”

“About what?”

“School. His dad. How he worries his mom is sad all the time.”

Eli listened.

Mason’s voice softened.

“I didn’t fix it.”

“You weren’t supposed to.”

“I know that now.”

They stood quietly.

Then Mason said, “I prayed with him.”

Eli looked over.

Mason kept his eyes forward.

“Not fancy. Barely English. But I did.”

Eli smiled.

“How did he respond?”

“He said amen and then asked if we could get tacos.”

“That sounds right.”

Mason nodded.

“Yeah.”

After a moment, he added, “Why not me, right?”

Eli looked at him.

Mason shrugged.

“I heard you.”

Eli smiled.

“Right.”

Mason looked back at the yard.

“Still sounds dangerous.”

“It is.”

“But maybe good.”

“Yes.”

Mason nodded slowly.

“Why not me?”

He said it quietly.

Not as a joke.

Not as a slogan.

As a man testing whether the words could bear his weight.

Eli said nothing.

He did not need to.

At the end of the workday, everyone gathered in the sanctuary.

Not planned.

People simply drifted there to cool down, wash hands, sit, and breathe.

The sanctuary was dusty with footprints and grass clippings. Children whispered too loudly. Someone had tracked mulch near the back pew. Owen fell asleep against Grace, exhausted by his important gravel work.

Pastor Brooks stood near the front, not behind the pulpit.

“Before we leave, let’s pray.”

People bowed their heads.

Pastor Brooks did not make a speech.

“Lord, thank You for hands that can serve. Thank You for homes that are learning to wake. Thank You for children, for tired parents, for grandparents, for repentance, for laughter, for work. Keep us humble. Keep us faithful. Keep our eyes on Jesus. Amen.”

“Amen,” the room answered.

Simple.

Ordinary.

Enough.

As people began leaving, Carol approached Eli.

Dennis stood beside her.

Carol held her phone in both hands.

“We got a message,” she said.

Eli stopped.

“From your daughter?”

Carol nodded, tears already falling.

Dennis looked like he was holding himself together by force.

“What did she say?” Eli asked gently.

Carol looked at the screen.

“She said she read the letter.”

That was all she could manage.

Dennis continued.

“She said she is not ready to talk yet.”

He swallowed hard.

“But she said thank you for saying sorry.”

Eli felt his eyes burn.

Carol pressed the phone to her chest.

“She said thank you.”

Grace came beside Eli and put a hand over her mouth.

Pastor Brooks joined them.

No one offered quick promises.

No one said everything would be fine now.

No one rushed the wound.

But gratitude filled the space.

A door had opened.

Not fully.

Not dramatically.

But enough to let in a line of light.

Pastor Brooks prayed with Carol and Dennis right there in the aisle.

Eli bowed his head with them.

Thank You for the open door, Lord.

Thank You for even this much.

That evening, the Carters returned home dirty and tired.

No one wanted a complicated dinner, so they made sandwiches and ate them at the table with chips and apple slices.

Owen nearly fell asleep in his chair.

Lily said the church looked “more loved” after the workday.

Noah said he was “basically staff now” because he helped move sticks.

Grace said staff still had to shower.

After dinner, Eli carried Owen upstairs.

The boy’s head rested on his shoulder, warm and heavy with sleep.

For a moment, Eli stood in the hallway holding him.

The same hallway where he had apologized to the children after the argument with Grace.

The same hallway where he had learned that repentance at home mattered more than being understood by strangers.

He carried Owen into his room and laid him in the crib.

Owen stirred.

“Dad?”

“I’m here.”

“Church giraffe?”

“At church.”

“Mine?”

“No.”

Owen sighed like a disappointed old man and fell asleep.

Eli smiled and pulled the blanket over him.

Then he walked down the hall.

Noah was in bed reading.

Lily was arranging Mr. Bear and two rabbits under a blanket.

Grace stood in the doorway watching them.

Eli came beside her.

She leaned against him.

“Good day,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“Hard?”

“Yes.”

“But good.”

He nodded.

The children were not perfect.

The house was not perfect.

The work was not finished.

But there was peace.

Not the peace of no problems.

The peace of order returning.

The peace of first things being first.

Later, Eli sat at the kitchen table.

The notebook was open.

The phone was in the drawer.

Grace sat across from him, reading.

The timer was set for one hour.

He wrote:

The Open Door

Then beneath it:

The open door is not always a platform. Sometimes it is a home finally willing to let God enter every room.

He paused.

Then wrote:

Awakening continues when ordinary people stop waiting to feel qualified and start obeying where they are.

He thought of Caleb's notebook prayer.

Mason praying with Tyler.

Carol's daughter texting thank you.

Rob praying before dinner.

Rachel reading the apology.

Dana asking her pastor.

Grace guarding the home.

Lily praying that Dad would write the book but not too much.

Noah reminding him not to phone-listen.

Owen and the church giraffe.

He smiled.

The story had not become smaller by returning home.

It had become truer.

For a while, he wrote steadily.

When the timer rang, he finished the sentence he was on and stopped.

Grace looked up.

"Stopped?"

"Yes."

"Even at the end?"

He looked at the notebook.

"Yes."

She smiled.

"That may be the ending."

"What?"

"Stopping when obedience says stop."

Eli leaned back.

Maybe she was right.

He closed the notebook.

Not because the work was over forever.

Because the work for that hour was over.

That mattered.

He carried his mug to the sink and rinsed it.

No cereal bowl left behind.

Not tonight.

Then he opened the drawer and checked his phone one last time.

There was a new message from Aaron in Ohio.

We had our first prayer night. Twelve people came. It was awkward and quiet. One father prayed out loud for the first time. We kept it simple. No stage. Thank you.

Eli smiled.

He showed Grace.

She read it and nodded.

“Good.”

He typed back:

Praise God. Keep it simple. Keep your eyes on Christ. One faithful step.

Then he put the phone away.

Before bed, Eli stepped onto the porch.

The night was cool and still.

Across the street, porch lights glowed.

Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked.

The same world remained.

Still noisy.

Still broken.

Still full of deception, distraction, grief, corruption, and fear.

But Eli no longer saw only the darkness.

He saw porch lights.

Small ones.

Scattered.

Ordinary.

Homes where parents were praying awkward prayers.

Tables where phones stayed in drawers.

Children hearing apologies.

Marriages trying again.

Grandparents standing in the gap.

Teenagers writing honest words to God.

Churches opening rooms without stages.

Friends carrying chairs.

Men learning to stay.

Women learning they did not have to carry everything alone.

The fire had spread.
Not everywhere.
Not fully.
Not in a way anyone could control.
But it had spread.
And it no longer depended on Eli knowing where.
Grace came to the door.
“You coming in?”
“In a minute.”
She stepped beside him.
They stood together under the porch light.
“Do you still wonder why God used you?” she asked.
Eli smiled faintly.
“Yes.”
“And?”
He looked at the quiet street.
“And I think that is the wrong place to stare.”
Grace waited.
“The better question is whether I will keep saying yes.”
She took his hand.
They stood in silence.
Then, from inside the house, Lily called, “Dad! Mr. Bear fell off the bed and needs emotional support!”
Eli closed his eyes.
Grace laughed softly.
“The ministry continues.”
“Yes,” he said.
He opened the door.
Before stepping inside, he looked once more at the street.
At the homes.
At the small lights.
At the open doors only God could see.
Then he whispered, “Why not us?”
Grace squeezed his hand.
Together, they went back inside.
The awakening continued.

Later that night, after the house had gone quiet, Eli returned to the kitchen table.

The notebook was closed.

The phone was in the drawer.

But the laptop sat open in front of him, its screen dim in the dark kitchen.

Grace stood in the doorway.

“You’re still awake?” she asked.

Eli looked up.

“For a few minutes.”

She walked closer and looked at the screen.

A blank page waited there.

At the top were two words:

The Open Door

Underneath, Eli had typed one sentence.

Truth, prayer, and one faithful step in a digital age.

Grace read it quietly.

Then she looked at him.

“I thought you said the open door was not always a platform.”

“It isn’t.”

He looked back at the screen.

“And this cannot become one. Not like Victor wanted. Not with my name. Not with my face. Not with people gathered around me.”

Grace sat across from him.

“Then what is it?”

Eli thought for a moment.

“A tool.”

The word felt plain enough to be safe.

“A place for parents to find help. A place for prayer. A place for testimonies without turning people into products. A place to expose darkness without feeding outrage. A place to remind people that their homes can still belong to God.”

Grace studied him carefully.

“And anonymously?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because if my name has to be on it, then I have not learned anything.”

She did not answer right away.

The refrigerator hummed softly.

Somewhere upstairs, Owen shifted in his sleep.

Eli continued.

“The darkness is not staying offline. It is discipling through screens, algorithms, entertainment, fear, and lies. We cannot pretend the digital world does not matter. But we also cannot bow to it.”

Grace looked again at the screen.

“The Open Door,” she read.

“It may not be the right name.”

“It might be.”

“I would not launch anything without prayer. Without you. Without Pastor Brooks. Without guardrails.”

“You better not.”

He smiled faintly.

“I know.”

Grace leaned back.

“Is this obedience or excitement?”

Eli appreciated the question.

A few months ago, it might have offended him.

Now he knew it was love.

“I do not fully know yet,” he said. “But I think it may be the next faithful step.”

Grace nodded slowly.

“Then we pray first.”

Eli closed the laptop halfway.

“Yes.”

They bowed their heads at the kitchen table.

No announcement.

No logo.

No audience.

No name attached.

Just a husband and wife asking God to guard the next door before they walked through it.

When they finished, Grace stood and kissed him on the forehead.

“Come to bed,” she said.

“In a minute.”

She gave him a look.

He closed the laptop completely.

“Now,” he corrected.

Grace smiled.

Together, they turned off the kitchen light.
But inside the closed laptop, one sentence waited in the dark.

Truth, prayer, and one faithful step in a digital age.

The platform had not launched.

The name had not spread.

No one knew it existed.

But Eli knew.

Grace knew.

And God knew.

The next door had opened.