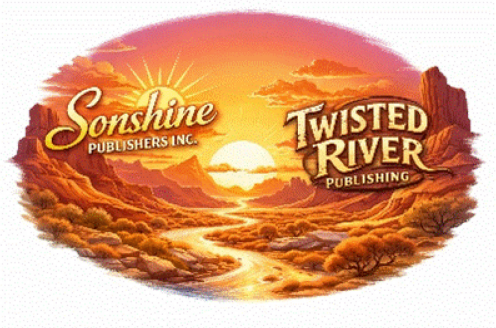
MAPLE RIDGE
REDEMPTION
Book Sixteen
Under the Summer Revival
WHERE LOVE IS restored
KATHERINE KNELLS

Under the Summer Revival

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 16

Katherine Knells

Romance



A SMALL-TOWN CHRISTIAN ROMANCE SERIES

Maple Ridge Redemption

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Published by

Sonshine Publishers Inc.

Printed in Canada

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A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Maple Ridge began with a church that needed repair — but what I discovered as I wrote was that beams and bricks are rarely the only things in need of rebuilding.

This series is about the quiet miracles of ordinary faith. It is about families fractured and restored, prodigals returning, second chances granted, and love that grows stronger with time. It is about a small town that learns, again and again, that redemption is not a moment — it is a lifelong work of grace.

You will meet couples young and old. You will walk through storms and weddings, droughts and revivals, doubts and declarations. And by the final pages, I hope you will feel what the people of Maple Ridge come to understand:

God is faithful.

Community matters.

And love — when rooted in Christ — endures.

Thank you for stepping beneath the steeple with me.

With gratitude,

Katherine Knells

Prelude

The evening light stretched low across the hills like a promise never rushed. Caleb's car slowed at the edge of the ridge where Maple Ridge first came into sight, its white church steeple rising above fields still golden with late summer grain. He rolled the window down. The air smelled of warm earth and the faint sweetness of wildflowers. It felt the way he remembered, gentle, familiar, but now it carried the weight of years he had tried to outrun.

Farther down, the narrow streets of the town unfolded in quiet succession: bike racks outside the café, a fire engine parked in its bay, the bakery with its door propped open against the cooling evening. He had passed through towns like this on his drives west, but none of them had this, this ache. Maple Ridge, resting steady on its foundations, asked nothing from him. Perhaps that was why coming back felt harder than leaving ever had.

The road twisted, and the church came into view more fully. White boards weathered by decades stood firm, accented by rows of crepe myrtles in pale bloom. He saw the revival field then, nestled beside the prayer garden. The canvas tent lifted half-assembled, its edges rippling in the breeze. People lingered around the perimeter, setting chairs, tying off ropes, carrying work forward as if nothing pressing waited beyond this summer.

Caleb let the car idle longer than necessary. Voices carried faintly, men laughing over some shared effort, younger ones talking quick like they could not hold still, a soft-spoken woman counting aloud. The sound wove through him more deeply than he wanted it to. He pressed his hand to the steering wheel as if steadying himself.

Naomi Reyes had always said revivals started quietly, long before the first song or sermon. There was truth in that, though he had once dismissed it.

When he finally pulled forward, his heart felt heavier than his hands.

Chapter 1

The Tent Goes Up

The first pole leaned in the hands of four men, light as it looked from a distance and heavy as soon as Caleb Monroe put his shoulder under it. Canvas snapped in the warm breeze. Ropes slid through callused palms. The field beside Maple Ridge Community Church smelled of cut grass and sunbaked earth.

Someone shouted numbers, slow and steady, to keep the lift even.

Caleb looked up, squinting. The white church sat behind the work like it always had in his memory. The steeple rose clean against a wide blue sky. The windows stood open. He saw no movement inside, only shadow and the hint of a ceiling fan turning.

He shifted his grip. The pole rose another foot.

“Hold. Hold,” a man said. “Let the rope take it.”

Caleb eased back. The rope tightened. The pole settled into its base with a dull thud. The men around him breathed out at the same time, as they had rehearsed it.

Caleb wiped sweat off his temple with the back of his hand. He wore an old gray T-shirt and jeans he did not mind ruining. He had driven in from campus that morning. He still felt the drive in his shoulders, the long hours and the straight roads, the way his mind had run ahead of the car.

He had told himself it was simple. Come home for the summer. Help with revival week. Lead worship. Work a few shifts at his uncle’s shop. Save money. Keep moving in August.

Simple.

He looked across the field. More poles lay on the grass. Metal stakes glittered. The canvas tent sprawled like a pale animal waiting to wake.

A woman's laugh carried from near the folding tables set up at the edge of the churchyard. It sounded quick and surprised, like someone had said something kind and she had not expected it.

Caleb turned his head without meaning to.

Two women stood by a stack of coolers and boxes. One had gray hair and a shirt that read MAPLE RIDGE COMMUNITY CHURCH in faded letters. The other stood with her hair pulled back, and her sleeves rolled, holding a clipboard to her chest as she spoke.

The younger woman wore a simple navy cotton dress with small white dots. It hit her knees. She wore sneakers, practical, scuffed at the toe. She looked like she belonged in the middle of any workday. Like she had done this before. Like she would do it again next year.

She noticed him looking. Her expression stayed calm. Her eyes did not.

They widened a fraction, then settled. She nodded once, polite, like he was any volunteer who had arrived to help.

Caleb faced forward again. He told himself he did not know her.

He did know her.

Naomi Reyes.

He had not seen her in years, not close. Only in the background of old photos and a glance once, last Christmas, in the back row of the sanctuary when he had visited for one service and left before anyone could talk to him.

Now she stood twenty yards away with a clipboard as she belonged to the plans.

Caleb let out a breath he had not realized he held.

Someone slapped him on the shoulder. “Mercer. Good to have you.”

Caleb turned. A broad man with a red face and sunburned arms grinned at him. He wore a work belt and a baseball cap. Caleb recognized him from childhood, even though the man’s beard had gone gray.

“Mr. Dalton,” Caleb said.

“Glen,” the man corrected, same as always. “You are grown. I blinked, and you got tall.”

Caleb smiled, small. “It has been a while.”

“It has. Your uncle said you would come help.” Glen lifted his chin toward the tent. “We put you to work fast.”

“That is why I am here.”

Glen nodded, like he respected that answer. He reached for a coil of rope and handed it to Caleb. “Take this to the south corner. Eli wants the lines measured before we set the next pole.”

Eli.

Caleb’s chest eased at the name. Eli Brooks had been older than him, steady and quiet, the kind of man who never asked for attention and always got the work done. Caleb had watched him as a boy. He had seen him after, too, when he came back from college for short visits. Eli never changed.

Caleb took the rope. “Where is he?”

Glen pointed. “By the stakes.”

Caleb walked across the grass. The heat rose off the ground in a shimmer. Cicadas buzzed in the trees along the cemetery fence. A few kids chased each other around the old oak near the fellowship hall, their sneakers thudding softly on dirt.

Eli stood with a tape measure and a small notebook, bent over a stake line. He wore a tan shirt and worn work boots. His hair looked sun-lightened, the way it did by August. He did not look up until Caleb’s shadow fell across the grass near his feet.

Eli straightened. His eyes met Caleb’s, and Caleb saw no surprise, only a calm welcome. Like Eli had known all along Caleb would show.

“Caleb,” Eli said.

“Eli.”

Eli’s mouth lifted at one corner. “You drove in this morning.”

“Yes. I left early.”

Eli nodded, then looked past him at the tent. “We need the south corner anchored before the wind picks up.”

Caleb held up the coil of rope. “Glen sent this.”

“Good.” Eli took the end of the rope and walked with Caleb to the marked corner. “Tie a bowline. Then pull it tight.”

Caleb crouched by the stake. The metal felt hot. He looped the rope, hands sure. He had tied knots with Eli before, on church projects and campouts. Muscle memory carried him.

Eli watched, quiet.

Caleb finished the knot. He pulled until the line went taut, the canvas edge lifting slightly.

Eli leaned down and checked the tension. “Good.”

Caleb stood. Sweat ran down his back. He looked toward the folding tables again without thinking.

Naomi had moved closer, clipboard still in hand. She spoke with Mrs. Alder, the retired widow who always seemed to run church kitchens like a captain. Naomi pointed toward the tent entrance, then toward the fellowship hall. Mrs. Alder nodded and made a note on a small pad.

Eli followed Caleb’s gaze. He did not comment right away. He only said, “You are here for the music.”

“Yes.” Caleb kept his voice even. “Pastor Whitaker asked.”

“He did.” Eli glanced at Caleb. “You said yes.”

Caleb shrugged. “It felt like the right thing.”

Eli’s eyes held him for a moment. “The right thing has weight.”

Caleb looked away. “I will do my part.”

Eli reached for the tape measure again. “Then do it well.”

A truck backed into the field, tires crunching gravel. Someone honked twice. A few men waved and walked toward it. Boxes of folding chairs sat in the truck bed. The sound of metal legs clanking came as they started unloading.

Eli pointed to another stake line. “We need more hands. Grab one of those poles when they lift.”

Caleb nodded and moved.

He kept busy for the next hour. He lifted. He braced. He pulled ropes. The tent rose inch by inch, then foot by foot, until the main ridge pole sat high and the canvas draped clean. The sun climbed. The air grew thicker. Sweat soaked his shirt and clung at his ribs.

He liked the work. It kept his mind from wandering too far.

Still, it wandered.

Naomi stayed in his line of sight more than once. She walked from table to cooler, from cooler to the church steps, from steps to the side yard where a few teenagers arranged strings of lights in tangled piles. She did not hover. She did not bark orders. She spoke low and clear. People listened.

At one point, a little boy ran into the field with a plastic cup of lemonade. He tripped on the grass and spilled it. He froze, then his face crumpled.

Naomi crouched beside him. She wiped his hands with a napkin she pulled from her pocket. She spoke to him, too quiet for Caleb to hear. The boy's shoulders eased. She handed him the cup and walked him back to his mother.

Caleb looked down at the rope in his hands. He pulled harder than he needed.

Eli noticed. "Easy," he said. "If you snap it, we redo it."

Caleb loosened his grip. "Sorry."

Eli looked at him again, longer. "You all right?"

Caleb swallowed. "Yes."

Eli did not push. He shifted his attention to the tent line and the pole's angle. He gave a nod, satisfied.

Pastor Whitaker walked out from the church with a jug of water in each hand. He moved with the calm pace Caleb remembered. He wore a short-sleeved button-down and slacks, like he had come from a meeting and stepped into the work anyway.

“Water break,” Pastor Whitaker called. “Everyone come get some.”

The men stepped back from the tent. They wiped faces and drank deep. Pastor Whitaker greeted each person by name. When he reached Caleb, his face softened.

“Caleb Monroe,” he said.

Caleb held the paper cup. Cold water shocked his throat. “Pastor Whitaker.”

“I am glad you are here.” Pastor Whitaker’s eyes held warmth and something else. A careful watch. “Your uncle said the drive went well.”

“It did.”

Pastor Whitaker glanced toward the tent. “You remember revival week.”

Caleb did. He remembered the smell of grass at dusk and the sound of voices singing with the windows open. He remembered being twelve and sitting with his cousins, swinging his legs, half bored and half stirred. He remembered older men praying at the altar with their hands on each other’s shoulders.

He remembered a night he had promised God things he did not keep.

“Yes,” Caleb said.

Pastor Whitaker rested a hand on Caleb’s shoulder, firm. “You are older now. God uses grown men too.”

Caleb's throat tightened. "I hope so."

Pastor Whitaker nodded once, like he accepted the honesty. "The worship team meets tomorrow evening for a quick run-through. Naomi will coordinate the schedule."

Caleb's fingers tightened on the cup. "Naomi."

Pastor Whitaker watched him. "Yes. Naomi Reyes. She has done a good job helping. She has kept us on track."

Caleb forced his voice to stay normal. "She seems organized."

"She is," Pastor Whitaker said. "She loves the Lord. She loves His people. She has been steady."

Caleb nodded. He did not trust himself to say more.

Pastor Whitaker released his shoulder. "Finish strong today. We start hanging lights after lunch."

He moved on, offering water to another group. Caleb stood still for a moment, the cup crushed in his hand. He tossed it into a trash bag near the tables and returned to the ropes.

Work carried them closer to noon. The tent took shape. Poles stood straight. Sidewalls tied down. Stakes held firm. When the main entrance flap lifted and fell in the breeze, it looked as if it were breathing.

Caleb stood under the edge of canvas for a moment and looked up. The light dimmed under the tent, cooler. He heard the men talk around him, the scrape of a ladder, the metallic clink of a carabiner on a rope.

He felt small in a good way, like he stood under something meant for more than him.

He stepped out into the sun again and almost ran into Naomi.

She stood with her clipboard and a pen stuck in her hair like she had forgotten it there. Her cheeks looked flushed from the heat. A small smear of dirt marked her calf, like she had knelt on the ground earlier.

She stopped short. Her gaze met his.

Up close, she looked older than Caleb remembered, in the quiet way adulthood settled on a face. Her eyes held less softness than the Naomi he had known in Sunday school. More steadiness. Her mouth stayed calm, but her fingers tightened around the clipboard.

“Caleb Monroe,” she said.

He did not know if she meant it as a greeting or as a reminder like she had said his name to keep herself from stepping back.

“Naomi Reyes,” he said.

She nodded once. “Pastor Whitaker said you would come.”

“He asked me.”

“I heard you are leading worship for revival.”

“Yes.”

A pause settled between them. It held more than the simple words they spoke. Caleb heard the hum of cicadas. He smelled sunscreen and grass. He felt sweat dry on his skin.

Naomi shifted her weight. “Eli asked me to check the supply list. We need more zip ties and two more extension cords. The lights will reach the trees, but the plug-in points do not line up.”

Caleb blinked, caught off guard by the sudden practical turn. “Okay.”

She lifted the clipboard a little, like it gave her courage. “Your uncle’s shop has those, I think.”

“It does.” Caleb rubbed the back of his neck. “I can pick them up.”

Naomi studied him, like she tried to decide if he meant it or if he spoke to end the moment.

“I will be going into town later,” she said. “I can get them too.”

Caleb heard what she did not say. She did not need him.

“I will do it,” he said. “It is fine.”

Naomi’s eyes narrowed slightly, then relaxed. “All right. Thank you.”

Caleb waited for her to step aside. She did not. She looked down at her clipboard, then back up.

“How long are you staying?” she asked.

He felt the question land in his chest. It held more weight than it should have. He could have answered with a simple timeline. He did not.

“Through the summer,” he said.

“And after?”

He swallowed. “Back to school.”

Naomi’s face did not change much, but something in her eyes dimmed, then steadied again. “Right.”

He wanted to say more. He wanted to tell her he did not know what came after. He wanted to tell her he had thought about Maple Ridge more than he admitted. He wanted to tell her he had driven past the church once last fall and kept going because he could not stand the pull in his chest.

He did not say any of it.

Naomi nodded as if he had given a full answer. “We will need you at the run-through tomorrow. Seven o’clock in the sanctuary.”

“I will be there.”

She stepped aside, finally. “Good. We have a lot to cover.”

Caleb started to move past her, then stopped. “Naomi.”

She looked back.

He did not know what to say. An apology sat on his tongue, old and sour. A question sat behind it. Why did she look like she had been braced for him?

He chose the only safe thing. “You have done a lot already.”

Her eyes softened, quick. Then she hid it. “It is church. Everyone does something.”

He nodded. “See you tomorrow.”

Naomi turned and walked toward the tables, her clipboard pressed tight to her chest.

Caleb stood still a beat longer than he meant to. Then he forced his feet to move.

After lunch, the sun turned harsh. The volunteers ate sandwiches in the shade of the fellowship hall. Someone brought watermelon in a

cooler packed with ice, the sweet smell cut through the heat. Caleb ate without tasting much.

He sat on the edge of the church steps with his plate on his knees. He watched teenagers untangle strings of lights, their heads bent close. He watched Mrs. Alder pour tea into paper cups, scolding a man who tried to take two cookies. He watched Pastor Whitaker talk with a couple from a neighboring town, his hands open as he spoke.

Naomi sat on a low stone wall near the prayer garden, eating quietly with a few young women Caleb recognized from years ago. They laughed, heads tipped close. Naomi listened more than she spoke.

Caleb told himself to keep his distance.

Eli sat down beside him on the steps with a sandwich in his hand. He chewed, then swallowed. “You saw Naomi.”

Caleb stared at his plate. “Yes.”

“She is part of the team.” Eli’s voice stayed neutral. “She has been for a while.”

Caleb nodded. “I can tell.”

Eli took a drink of water. “You two were friends.”

Caleb’s jaw tightened. “We were kids.”

Eli looked at him, patient. “You left.”

Caleb felt heat rise in his face that had nothing to do with the sun. “Yes.”

Eli waited.

Caleb stared at the field where the tent now stood tall. “I did what I thought I needed to do.”

Eli's voice stayed low. "And what did Naomi need?"

Caleb flinched. He looked down, then away. "I do not know."

Eli nodded like he had expected that answer. "You will see her a lot this week."

Caleb swallowed. "I know."

Eli stood and dusted crumbs off his jeans. "Then ask the Lord for steady hands. Same as with this tent."

He walked back toward the work, leaving Caleb alone on the steps with the sting of truth.

Caleb sat until the heat pushed him up. He threw away his plate and joined the group hanging lights.

They worked in pairs with ladders. Caleb climbed and clipped the string lights to ropes stretched between poles and trees. The bulbs looked small in daylight, but he knew how they would glow at night. He imagined dusk. He imagined people sitting in folding chairs, faces turned toward the small platform they would build at the front.

He imagined himself with a guitar strap across his shoulder.

His stomach tightened.

He climbed down and moved the ladder. His hands stayed busy.

Near mid-afternoon, Naomi walked to the tent entrance with Pastor Whitaker. She pointed toward the stage area, then toward the side where a small prayer corner would be set up with hay bales and lanterns. Pastor Whitaker nodded, then said something that made Naomi smile, quick and soft.

Caleb looked away and focused on the next hook.

A man on the other end of the rope line called out, “Hey Caleb, pull your side tighter.”

Caleb pulled.

By late afternoon, the work slowed. The tent stood firm. Lights hung in neat lines. Folding chairs stacked near the entrance waited for evening.

The sky stayed bright, but the sun had started to drift toward the trees. The air softened. A breeze moved through the field and lifted the edge of the canvas, sending a hush through it like a held breath.

Caleb carried a box of extension cords toward the fellowship hall. He had already driven into town and back during a quick lull, picked up supplies at his uncle’s shop, and dropped them with Naomi without much talk. She had thanked him, quietly. Her fingers had brushed the box as she took it, and the touch had felt like a spark he did not want.

Now he returned the empty box to storage.

Inside the fellowship hall, the air smelled like old coffee and lemon cleaner. Stacked tables leaned against the wall. A row of hymnals sat on a cart.

Naomi stood near the kitchen doorway with Mrs. Alder, sorting paper goods and checking a list.

Caleb tried to slip past without drawing attention.

Mrs. Alder saw him anyway. “Caleb Monroe. Come here.”

He stopped. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Alder wiped her hands on a dish towel. Her eyes looked sharp. “You look hungry. You eat enough?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good. Naomi, tell him what we need carried.”

Naomi lifted her eyes to Caleb. Her face stayed neutral, but her shoulders tightened. “We need the bottled water moved to the tent. Two cases. Also the trash bins.”

Caleb nodded. “I will do it.”

Mrs. Alder smiled, satisfied. “Good boy. Naomi has kept us from forgetting half the items. She has a mind like a ledger.”

Naomi’s cheeks flushed. “Mrs. Alder.”

“It is praise,” Mrs. Alder said. “Take it.”

Caleb picked up two cases of water, one in each hand. The plastic bit into his fingers. He carried them out into the heat-softened air. He walked toward the tent, set them down near the entrance, then returned for the trash bins.

He made two trips. By the time he finished, his arms ached. The field looked ready. Almost.

He stood at the tent entrance and looked inside. The light under the canvas looked gold now, slanting. Dust motes floated in the air. The space waited like a room before guests arrive.

He heard footsteps behind him and turned.

Naomi stood a few feet away, clipboard gone now. She held a roll of tape and a marker. Her hair had come loose near her temples. She looked tired.

“You got the water,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded. He did not move.

Naomi looked past him into the tent. “It looks good.”

“It does.”

She shifted, tape roll in her fingers. “You always liked revival week.”

Caleb’s chest tightened at the word always. “I did.”

Naomi kept her eyes on the empty chairs. “You used to sit up front with the other kids and sing loud.”

He remembered. He remembered her there too, braids down her back, hands lifted halfway, as if she wanted to lift them higher but felt shy.

“I was loud,” he said.

Naomi’s mouth lifted slightly. “Yes.”

A silence came, thicker than before. Caleb heard the distant sound of a truck door closing. A dog barked somewhere on a nearby street. The wind pressed against the canvas and released.

Caleb took a breath. “Naomi, I-”

She cut him off with a soft shake of her head. “The schedule is on the church bulletin board. I will put a copy in your uncle’s mailbox too.”

Caleb stopped. The words he had tried to speak stayed trapped.

Naomi looked at him then, full on. Her eyes looked steady, but the steadiness looked practiced.

“I am glad you are helping,” she said. “The youth need strong leadership. They listen to music in a way they do not listen to sermons.”

Caleb felt the weight behind her words. It sounded like something she told herself too.

“I want to do it well,” he said.

“I know.” Naomi’s voice softened. “You always did your part when you showed up.”

The last words landed hard when you showed up.

Caleb’s throat tightened. He nodded once. “I will show up.”

Naomi held his gaze another moment, like she tried to decide if she believed him. Then she looked away.

“I need to label bins,” she said.

“Okay.”

She turned to go, then paused. “Caleb.”

He looked at her.

“I hope your summer is good,” she said, careful. “I hope God gives you what you need.”

He stood still. The warmth in her words made his chest ache.

“I hope the same for you,” he said.

Naomi nodded and walked away toward the fellowship hall, tape roll swinging at her side.

Caleb watched her until she disappeared inside.

He stepped into the tent again, alone. The air felt cooler. He walked down the center aisle between stacks of chairs.

He stopped at the front where the stage would stand by tomorrow. He looked up at the lights strung overhead. In daylight they looked small and plain. He knew they would change the whole space at night.

He sat on a stack of folded chairs and rested his elbows on his knees.

He had told himself he came for a simple reason. Worship. Work. A responsible summer.

Now he felt the old pull he had tried to outdrive.

He thought of Naomi's eyes, steady and guarded.

He thought of the way Pastor Whitaker had said, God uses grown men too.

Caleb bowed his head. He did not pray out loud. He let the words form in his chest, quiet.

Lord, give me steady hands. Give me a clean heart. Help me show up.

Footsteps sounded near the entrance. Caleb lifted his head.

Eli stepped inside, looking around with approval. "It will hold."

Caleb stood. "It looks good."

Eli nodded. "You did good work today."

"Thanks."

Eli's gaze moved to Caleb's face. "You look tired."

"I am."

Eli paused, then said, “Revival week wears people down. It also brings people back.”

Caleb swallowed. “I know.”

Eli turned toward the entrance flap. “Go get some rest. Tomorrow will come fast.”

Caleb walked out into the late afternoon light with Eli. The field had emptied some. A few volunteers still moved chairs. Pastor Whitaker stood by the church steps, talking with Hannah Whitaker and Eli Brooks near the side garden. Caleb saw Hannah’s familiar dark hair and calm posture. She looked older too, settled into adulthood with grace.

Hannah glanced toward Caleb. She smiled, small and kind. Caleb lifted a hand in greeting, then dropped it fast, unsure if he should go over.

He did not. He felt too raw. He walked toward his car parked at the far edge of the lot.

The gravel crunched under his boots. Crickets had started their evening song in the grass. The air smelled like warm pine, dust, and the faint smoke of someone grilling nearby.

Caleb reached his car and leaned a hand on the roof for a moment. He looked back at the tent.

It stood tall beside the church, bright in the slanting light. It looked ready for prayer, songs, and people. It looked like a promise.

Caleb opened his car door, then stopped. He stayed standing there, keys in his hand, staring at the field.

He had come to Maple Ridge for one summer. He had told himself it would stay simple.

He did not feel simple at all.

He stood by the car until the sun slipped lower and the shadows lengthened across the gravel. Uncertainty sat heavy in his chest, and he let the question ride with him into the dark.

Chapter 2

Music Across the Field

Caleb did not get in the car.

He stood with his keys, biting his palm, and watched the tent breathe in the evening wind. Canvas lifted, then settled. Ropes hummed low. The poles held steady. The whole thing looked like it belonged there, as if it had waited through every winter for this one week.

Voices drifted from the church steps. Pastor Whitaker laughed at something Eli said. Hannah's voice followed, calm and soft. People carried the last stack of folding chairs across the grass. Someone dragged a trash bag toward the dumpster behind the fellowship hall. A screen door slapped shut down the street.

Caleb finally slid into the driver's seat. Heat had built inside the car. The vinyl burned the back of his legs through his jeans. He started the engine and drove the short stretch to the small rental house Daniel Mercer kept for family when they came through town. It sat on the edge of Maple Ridge behind a line of scrub pines, close enough to hear the church bell if the wind blew right.

He parked and sat with the engine off.

The quiet pressed in. It did not feel like rest. It felt like a pause before a song started.

He went inside. The place smelled of lemon cleaner and old wood. Someone had set out a basket with a loaf of bread wrapped in a towel and a jar of jam. A note lay under a clean mug.

Caleb,

Glad you made it in. Eat. Sleep. We will see you tomorrow.

Daniel

Caleb set the note down and washed his hands at the kitchen sink. Dirt swirled off his fingers and ran brown for a moment. He stared out the small window above the sink. A neighbor's porch light clicked on. Moths threw themselves against it.

He ate two slices of bread and a spoonful of jam. He drank water from the mug. He wanted coffee, but it would steal what little sleep he might get. His body ached in the slow, dull way of honest work.

He did not go straight to bed.

He opened the guitar case he had carried in from the car. The familiar smell rose, wood and felt and metal strings. He ran his thumb along the neck, then checked the tuning with soft plucks. The notes sounded small in the quiet room.

He set the guitar back down.

He sat at the table and pulled his phone out. A few messages from friends at school were waiting. Pictures from a late-night diner. A question about a group project. A joke he would have laughed at yesterday.

He did not answer.

He set the phone face down and folded his hands on the table. He tried to pray.

Words did not come easily. He had prayed plenty in his life. He had led prayers on stage with a mic in his hand. He had sung prayers under bright lights. But now he sat in a plain kitchen in Maple Ridge, and the words got stuck behind his teeth.

He closed his eyes.

Lord, help me mean what I sing.

The thought came, quiet as a breath.

He opened his eyes again and looked at the guitar case. He thought of tomorrow. Rehearsal. Sound check. First night under the tent. People would show up with their Bibles, folding fans, and guarded faces. They would come hungry or out of duty. They would come because their mother asked, or because Pastor Whitaker did, or because they had nowhere else to be on a summer night.

Caleb had told himself his job stayed simple.

Pick songs. Lead. Leave.

He stood and turned off the kitchen light. He went down the short hall. The bedroom held one small lamp and a dresser with a Bible on top. A soft quilt lay folded at the end of the bed, faded blue with tiny white stitches.

Caleb lay down. The pillow smelled like sun-dried cotton.

He stared at the ceiling until sleep took him.

Morning came hot and bright.

Caleb woke to a bird tapping at the window screen and the sound of a lawn mower somewhere down the road. Sweat dampened his shirt. He threw the quilt back and sat up.

His body still felt heavy, but his mind ran.

He dressed in a clean T-shirt and jeans and drank a glass of water. He ate bread again, then packed his guitar and a binder of chord charts into the back seat.

He drove into town with the windows down. Maple Ridge passed by slowly and familiar. Fields stretched out, green and thick. Fence posts leaned in places. A red tractor sat still in a far pasture. The river flashed between trees where the road dipped.

He saw the town sign and a fresh coat of paint on the posts. Maple Ridge. Population 3,421.

Someone had added a small carved cross at the top. It looked new.

He drove through Main Street.

The bakery sat where it always had, but the front windows looked wider now. A new awning shaded the door. The paint looked fresh. A chalkboard sign leaned on the sidewalk with neat handwriting. Cinnamon rolls. Blueberry muffins. Cold brew.

The bookstore still stood next to it. The same bell hung over the door. A new bench sat out front with planters of green ferns. The hardware store had a new sign too, but the same old porch. Men still gathered near the steps with coffee cups in their hands.

Caleb slowed as he passed the café. Two young mothers stood outside with strollers, talking. A teenage boy rode by on a bike, one hand on the handlebars, the other holding a paper sack that smelled like donuts even through the open window.

Caleb kept driving.

He saw the firehouse. The bay doors stood open. A red truck gleamed inside. A man in a navy shirt washed the hood with a sponge. He glanced up as Caleb passed.

Caleb recognized him. Fire Chief Haines.

Chief Haines lifted a hand in a wave, slow and friendly.

Caleb raised his hand back, then looked away fast.

The church steeple rose above the trees ahead, white against the blue sky. Sunlight flashed off the cross at the top. Caleb's throat tightened, as if he had swallowed something too big.

He turned into the church lot.

Cars lined up near the fellowship hall. People moved in and out with boxes. The tent stood beside the field like a wide white shoulder. The canvas glowed in the sun. Lines of string lights hung along the edges, dark now, waiting for dusk.

Caleb parked near the back and sat for a moment with both hands on the wheel.

He had done this before. He had walked onto this property a hundred times as a teenager. He had known every crack in the sidewalk. He had known how the air smelled inside the church when the windows stayed open in July. He had known which pew creaked.

He had not known how it would feel to come back.

He climbed out. Gravel shifted under his boots. The air smelled like warm grass and tar from the road. Somewhere a child laughed.

Caleb carried the guitar case across the lot toward the fellowship hall. The door stood open. Cool air spilled out with the smell of coffee.

Inside, voices bounced off the tile floor. Folding tables lined the room, covered with plastic cloths. Women carried stacks of napkins and paper plates. Someone set out a tray of iced tea pitchers. A box fan hummed in the corner.

Hannah Whitaker stood near the counter with a clipboard, speaking to Mrs. Alder. Mrs. Alder held a pen and a list, her gray hair pinned back neat.

Hannah looked up and saw Caleb.

She smiled again, the same small kindness from yesterday. “Caleb.”

He stopped for half a heartbeat. “Hannah.”

She walked over, clipboard tucked against her chest. She looked older than he remembered, but her eyes held the same steadiness. “You made it back.”

“I did.”

“I heard you came in to help with music.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Hannah’s smile shifted at the formal words. “He is still a boy in his head,” her eyes seemed to say, but her voice stayed gentle. “I am glad you are here. Pastor Whitaker is glad too.”

Caleb nodded. “I saw him last night.”

“He will want to speak with you at some point.” She glanced at his guitar case. “Rehearsal is in the sanctuary.”

“I was heading there.”

Mrs. Alder stepped closer, her eyes bright. “Look at you, Caleb Monroe. All grown.”

Caleb gave a polite smile. “Morning, Mrs. Alder.”

“You look like your father.” She patted his arm like she had when he was fifteen and awkward. “He would be proud of you.”

A hot sting hit the back of Caleb’s eyes. He looked down at the guitar case. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Alder returned to her lists, humming under her breath. Hannah’s gaze stayed on Caleb. Her voice softened. “Eat something later. Do not run on empty.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He shifted his weight. “I mean. Yes.”

Hannah's smile returned, warmer this time. "Go on. I will see you later."

Caleb walked down the hall toward the sanctuary doors.

The church felt cool and dim inside, like stepping into shade under a wide tree. Sunlight streamed through the high windows and lay in pale rectangles on the aisle. The wooden pews shone where hands had worn them smooth.

Voices came from the front. A keyboard played a scale. A drummer tapped a snare with quiet practice strokes. Someone adjusted a microphone stand.

Caleb walked up the aisle.

Eli Brooks stood near the front with a coil of cable in his hands. He looked up and nodded once. "Morning."

"Morning." Caleb stopped beside him. "Need help?"

Eli handed him the end of the cable. "Run this to the mixer."

Caleb took it and walked toward the small soundboard set up on the side. A young man stood there with headphones around his neck and a pencil behind his ear. He looked about Caleb's age, maybe a year younger.

"Hey," the man said. "You are Caleb Monroe, right?"

Caleb nodded. "Yes."

"I am Owen Ferris." Owen held out a hand. His grip felt firm. "Pastor Whitaker asked me to run sound for the week."

"Good to meet you."

Owen pointed at the cable. "Set it right there. Input three."

Caleb plugged it in.

He looked toward the platform. A few singers stood in a loose cluster, flipping pages in binders. One woman adjusted the height of her mic stand. A man strummed an acoustic guitar in short patterns, testing chords. The keyboard player leaned over and tapped buttons, searching for a sound.

Caleb felt his shoulders tighten.

He had led worship at college. He had stood on stages with bigger lights and better speakers. But this felt different. The sanctuary held history. It held Sunday mornings, funerals, weddings, and youth group nights. It held the sound of his own voice cracking at sixteen when he tried to sing through guilt.

He set his guitar case down near a chair and opened it. He pulled out the instrument and ran his fingers across the strings. He tuned quickly by ear, with small turns of the pegs and soft plucks. He listened until the notes sat right.

Eli finished with the cables and stepped back. He watched Caleb a moment. “You doing all right?”

Caleb kept his eyes on the guitar. “Yes.”

Eli did not push. He never did. He only nodded once and walked back toward the door, his boots quiet on the carpeted steps.

Pastor Whitaker entered from the side aisle. He moved with calm purpose, a Bible under one arm and a folder under the other. His hair had more gray than Caleb remembered. His face looked the same, though. Kind eyes. Steady mouth. A presence that settled a room.

He walked up to the platform and greeted people by name.

Then he saw Caleb.

His expression shifted, and warmth lit his eyes. He stepped down from the platform and met Caleb near the front pew. “Caleb.”

Caleb stood. “Pastor Whitaker.”

Pastor Whitaker did not reach for a formal handshake. He pulled Caleb into a brief hug, firm and fatherly. Caleb went stiff for a second, then let himself breathe.

Pastor Whitaker stepped back and looked at him. “I am glad you are here.”

“Thank you.”

“You drove in yesterday?”

“Yes, sir.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. “Long drive.”

“It was.”

Pastor Whitaker held Caleb’s gaze. “How is school?”

“Busy.”

“That sounds right.” Pastor Whitaker glanced toward the platform. “You have a plan for rehearsal?”

Caleb lifted his binder. “Yes, sir. I made a set list. I can go over it with the team.”

“Good.” Pastor Whitaker’s voice lowered. “Do you feel ready?”

Caleb’s mouth went dry. “I think so.”

Pastor Whitaker did not smile, but his eyes stayed gentle. “Bring what you have. God will meet the rest.”

Caleb nodded, and the nod felt like surrender more than agreement.

Pastor Whitaker patted his shoulder. “I will be in my office for a bit. Owen will keep you from breaking anything expensive.”

Owen grinned from the sound table. “I will try.”

A few people laughed.

Pastor Whitaker walked away, leaving Caleb with the weight of his words.

Caleb took a breath and stepped toward the platform.

“All right,” he said, his voice louder than he intended in the quiet sanctuary. He cleared his throat. “Morning, everyone.”

Several heads turned. The singers offered polite smiles. The guitar player gave a nod. The keyboard player lifted a hand in greeting.

Caleb climbed the steps and set his binder on a music stand. “I am Caleb. Thanks for being here early.”

A woman with curly hair and a bright scarf around her neck smiled. “We are glad to have you.”

Caleb recognized her. Maren Bell. She used to babysit kids in the nursery when Caleb was in middle school. Now she stood with a mic in her hand as she belonged.

The drummer, a lanky young man with a baseball cap, twirled a stick between his fingers. “You ready to roll?”

Caleb nodded. “We will start simple. Warm up with ‘Come Thou Fount.’ Then we will move into the revival set.”

He flipped a page. His fingers shook a little. He pressed them against the binder edge until they steadied.

“Key of G,” he said. “We will do two verses, chorus, then the bridge. Keep it light.”

He looked at the group. “Let us run it.”

He strummed the opening chord.

The sound filled the sanctuary, clean and bright. The other guitar joined. The keyboard laid soft notes underneath. The drummer tapped a gentle rhythm on the rim.

The singers entered, and their voices rose together. Not polished like a studio recording. Real. Human. Warm.

Caleb sang too.

His voice came out steady. He watched the faces in front of him. Focus. Prayer. Some nerves. Some joy.

He let the song carry him.

As they moved through the verses, he felt his chest loosen. The melody pulled his thoughts away from his own fear. The words pulled his eyes upward.

Streams of mercy, never ceasing…

He stopped himself. His mind wanted to run ahead and analyze. He forced it back into the moment. He listened to the blend, the tempo, the breath between phrases.

They finished the bridge and let the last chord ring.

Silence followed, full and soft.

Maren smiled. “That feels good.”

The other guitar player, a man in his late twenties named Grant, nodded. “Tempo felt right.”

Caleb glanced toward Owen at the sound table. Owen lifted a thumb.

Caleb turned back to the team. “All right. Next one.”

They worked through the set. A mix of hymns and newer songs, chosen for the week. Songs about surrender. Songs about God’s faithfulness. Songs that left room for someone to cry in the dark under the tent without feeling watched.

Caleb kept the rehearsals moving. He offered corrections with care. He thanked people when they adjusted. He asked the drummer to pull back in one song. He asked the keyboard to push a pad forward in another. He listened more than he talked.

He felt sweat gather at his hairline. The sanctuary stayed cool, but the work made him warm.

Halfway through, the side doors creaked open.

Caleb glanced up, expecting Pastor Whitaker or someone carrying supplies.

Naomi Reyes stepped inside.

She moved quietly, as if she did not want to interrupt. She wore a pale yellow blouse and denim skirt. Her hair fell loose down her back, dark and thick. She held a small cardboard box in both hands.

Caleb’s strumming faltered for a beat.

Then he caught the chord again.

Naomi paused at the back pew and stood still. She did not look toward the platform at first. She looked up at the stained glass, the beams, the cross at the front. She breathed in slowly.

Then she turned her head slightly, and her eyes found Caleb.

Caleb's fingers tightened on the pick. The song continued, but his attention broke apart. Part of him stayed in the rhythm. Part of him watched her.

She stayed near the back, listening.

Her face held a calm expression, but her posture betrayed her. She stood too straight. Her hands gripped the box too firmly. Her gaze stayed fixed on the platform, then slid away, then came back.

Caleb felt the same guarded pull he had felt yesterday in the tent. Like a door she kept shut even when she stood right in front of it.

He kept singing. He did not miss a line.

But he heard his own voice differently with her in the room.

He finished the song and let the final chord fade.

The team murmured in approval. Someone took a sip of water. Grant adjusted his capo.

Caleb leaned toward the mic. "Let us take five."

He set his guitar down on a stand and stepped off the platform. His feet moved before his mind fully decided. He walked down the aisle toward Naomi.

Naomi watched him come. She did not step back. She did not step forward either.

He stopped a few feet away, close enough to speak without raising his voice. "Naomi."

"Caleb." Her voice stayed even.

He glanced at the box in her hands. "What do you have there?"

“I brought new batteries for the wireless mics.” She lifted the box a little. “Hannah asked if I would drop them off.”

Caleb nodded. “Owen will want those.”

Naomi looked past Caleb toward the sound table. Owen waved, then went back to his notes. Naomi shifted her weight. The movement looked small, but Caleb caught it. She wanted to leave.

Caleb steadied himself. “You heard us.”

“I did.” She kept her eyes on his face this time. “It sounded good.”

“Thanks.”

A pause settled.

The old version of Caleb would have filled it with a joke. He would have tried to soften the edge. He had learned how to do that when he wanted something to feel easier than it was.

Now he felt the pause as it was, a question without words.

Naomi spoke first. “You sound different than you used to.”

Caleb went still. “Different how?”

Naomi’s gaze flickered toward the platform, then back. “Steadier.”

Caleb nodded once. He did not trust himself with more.

Naomi adjusted her grip on the box. “I should give those to Owen.”

“I can take them.”

She hesitated. Then she handed the box to Caleb. Their fingers brushed. The contact lasted less than a second, but Caleb felt it like heat.

He walked the box to the sound table and set it down. Owen opened it and nodded with approval. “Perfect.”

Caleb turned back.

Naomi still stood near the back pew, as if she had rooted herself there while she waited.

Caleb walked back toward her. He stopped again, the same careful distance.

“You are helping with revival too?” he asked.

Naomi nodded. “I am helping with the youth volunteers. Registration. Welcome table. Meals.”

“You do a lot.”

Naomi’s mouth pressed into a small line. “Maple Ridge does a lot. People show up.”

Caleb looked around the sanctuary. The sunlight had shifted on the floor. Dust motes drifted in the beams. “Yes. They do.”

Naomi’s voice softened a fraction. “Are you here all week?”

“Yes. Then I go back.”

“To school.”

“Yes.”

Naomi held his gaze. “You always planned on leaving.”

The words landed with care, but they still landed.

Caleb swallowed. “Yes.”

Another pause.

Naomi looked down at her hands, now empty. “I should go. Hannah will wonder where I went.”

Caleb did not want to let her walk away. He did not know why he wanted it so much. He only knew it sat in his chest, urgent and quiet.

He kept his voice low. “Will you be at the tent tonight?”

Naomi lifted her eyes again. “Yes.”

Caleb nodded. “Then I will see you.”

Naomi gave a small nod in return. She turned toward the door.

She took two steps, then paused. She did not turn back fully. “Caleb.”

“Yes?”

Her shoulders rose and fell with a slow breath. “I am glad you came for revival.”

Caleb could not speak for a moment. He watched her. He held the moment like something fragile.

“Thank you,” he said.

Naomi walked out.

The door shut softly behind her.

Caleb stood still a second longer. Then he turned back toward the platform.

The band waited. Maren sipped water and watched him with quiet curiosity. Grant adjusted his strap. The drummer tapped his sticks together in a steady count without sound.

Caleb climbed the steps and picked up his guitar again.

“All right,” he said. His voice came out rougher. He cleared his throat. “Next song.”

They rehearsed until late morning. Caleb kept the focus on the music. He worked through transitions. He adjusted the order of one song, then changed it back. He listened to the room and imagined the tent, open air, crickets, and kids shifting in folding chairs.

When they finished, Caleb closed his binder and thanked everyone.

“Meet at six for sound check under the tent,” he said. “Be ready by six-fifteen.”

People started to pack up. Mic stands clinked. Cables coiled. The sanctuary filled with the small sounds of work and conversation.

Maren stepped closer as Caleb put his guitar in its case. “You did good.”

“Thanks.”

She leaned her head slightly. “You look like you carry a lot.”

Caleb froze for half a beat, then kept moving. “It is fine.”

Maren did not push. She only nodded, as if she understood the answer as a boundary. “See you tonight.”

Caleb watched the team file out. When the sanctuary emptied, he sat in the front pew with his guitar case at his feet.

Silence returned.

He looked up at the cross on the wall.

He let his shoulders fall.

Lord, give me steady hands.

He added more, still silent. Lord, give me a steady heart too.

Footsteps sounded behind him.

Caleb turned.

Pastor Whitaker walked down the aisle, alone. He sat in the pew beside Caleb without asking, leaving a respectful space between them. His Bible rested on his knee.

“You led well,” Pastor Whitaker said.

“Thank you.”

Pastor Whitaker studied Caleb’s face. “You look like you saw someone.”

Caleb’s pulse jumped. He kept his eyes forward. “Naomi came in for a moment.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded once, as if he had expected it. “Naomi has served in more corners of this church than most grown men.”

Caleb let out a quiet breath. “She has always been like that.”

“Yes.” Pastor Whitaker’s voice turned thoughtful. “Faithful. Strong. Sometimes tired.”

Caleb did not respond.

Pastor Whitaker turned a page in his Bible with slow care. “When revival comes, it shines light on many things. Joy. Sin. Fear. Hope. It depends on what a person brings into the tent.”

Caleb stared at the hymnals in the rack ahead of him. The leather looked worn at the edges. “I do not know what I am bringing.”

Pastor Whitaker kept his tone gentle. “You brought yourself back. That is not small.”

Caleb's throat tightened again. He stared hard at the wood grain on the pew in front of him.

Pastor Whitaker flipped to a marked spot and held the Bible open, though he did not push it toward Caleb like a lesson. "I read this this morning. Ecclesiastes 11:4. 'He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.'"

Caleb swallowed. He knew the verse. He had quoted it once in a worship set introduction at school, trying to sound wise. Now it felt like a quiet rebuke.

Pastor Whitaker watched him. "A young man can wait for perfect clarity. He can wait until he feels brave. He can wait until he feels clean enough. Then he realizes he spent his life watching the wind."

Caleb's hands tightened around the edge of the guitar case. "I left, and I told myself it was for the right reasons."

Pastor Whitaker nodded. "It might have been. God does not waste even the roads people choose in fear. But you still need to ask Him what He wants now."

Caleb stared ahead. "I am trying."

Pastor Whitaker's voice stayed low. "Try with honesty. Tell Him where it hurts. Tell Him what you want. Tell Him what scares you."

Caleb's chest ached. He breathed in slowly. "It is hard to pray when I do not know what to say."

Pastor Whitaker looked at him, and for a moment he looked more like a father than a pastor. "Then start with, Lord, I do not know what to say."

Caleb let out a short breath, almost a laugh, but it died before it formed. "Yes, sir."

Pastor Whitaker closed his Bible. “I will not keep you. Lunch in the fellowship hall soon. Hannah and the ladies have enough food to feed an army.”

Caleb nodded.

Pastor Whitaker stood. “One more thing.”

Caleb looked up.

Pastor Whitaker’s eyes held a steady kindness. “Do not measure this week by how you perform. Measure it by whether you obey.”

Caleb swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

Pastor Whitaker walked away, his steps quiet on the carpet.

Caleb stayed seated.

He did not move until the sound of voices rose in the hallway, people gathering for lunch. He stood and carried his guitar case to the fellowship hall.

The room buzzed with laughter and plates clattering. The air smelled like fried chicken and potato salad. A long table held pitchers of lemonade, tea, and a bowl of cut watermelon sweating in the heat.

Caleb filled a plate and found a seat near the end of a table where a few younger volunteers sat. Some he recognized. Some he did not. They greeted him with friendly nods and quick smiles. They talked about the schedule for the week, who would set up chairs, who would man the welcome table, who would watch the toddlers during the service.

Caleb listened more than he spoke.

His mind kept drifting back to the sanctuary door opening and Naomi standing there, listening.

After lunch, Caleb helped stack chairs and wipe tables. Then he drove back to the rental house for a few hours of quiet.

He tried to nap, but his mind would not settle.

He sat on the couch with his guitar and played through the set list again, softer this time. He worked out a transition between two songs, letting one chord hang and then stepping into the next like a gentle turn. He practiced the intro to the hymn, keeping it simple.

Outside, the afternoon heat thickened. Cicadas droned in the trees. A dog barked once and then stopped. The world felt slow, as if it waited for evening.

At five, Caleb showered and changed into a clean shirt. He drank water and ate another slice of bread. He packed his binder and headed back to the church.

The lot filled up fast. Trucks and cars rolled in, dust lifting behind them. People carried coolers, diaper bags, and lawn chairs. Teenagers gathered in clusters, laughing too loud, half-nervous and half-excited.

The tent looked different now with the string lights turned on. Even in daylight, the bulbs gave off a soft glow. The canvas sides stood rolled up, open to the field. Rows of folding chairs stretched across the grass. The stage sat at the front with speakers on stands and a wooden pulpit set to the side.

Caleb parked and walked toward the tent.

The air smelled like cut grass and sunscreen and the smoke of someone's grill nearby. A breeze moved through the open sides of the tent. It carried the sound of people greeting each other, voices mixing with the thud of equipment being set in place.

Caleb found Owen at the sound board. Owen wore headphones now, eyes focused. “We good?” Caleb asked.

“We will be,” Owen said. “Give me ten minutes.”

Caleb nodded and carried his guitar to the stage area.

Grant already stood there tuning. Maren spoke with another singer, pointing at a printed schedule. The drummer adjusted a cymbal.

Caleb set his binder down and began his own sound check.

He strummed a chord.

The sound boomed, then settled as Owen adjusted levels. Caleb played a short progression and listened to how the notes carried across the open field. It felt different from the sanctuary. The air swallowed some frequencies and threw others back. The sound did not bounce off walls. It drifted.

He sang a line into the mic. His voice sounded larger than it felt in his chest.

He stopped and listened.

He heard people outside the tent. Children running. A baby crying. A woman calling a name. Someone laughing.

Then he heard a voice near the edge of the tent, clear and calm.

“Naomi, over here.”

Caleb’s hand froze on the guitar neck.

He looked down the stage steps toward the welcome table set near the entrance. Naomi stood there with a lanyard around her neck and a stack of paper in her hand. She spoke to a teenage girl holding a

clipboard. Naomi pointed toward a row of chairs near the front, then toward a table with Bibles and pens.

The teenager nodded and hurried off.

Naomi turned and lifted a cup to her lips. Water, he guessed. Her posture remained composed, but her eyes moved constantly, scanning the space and checking on people.

Caleb watched her for a moment longer than he meant to.

She looked up.

Her gaze found him on the stage.

For a second, neither of them moved.

Then Naomi gave a small nod. A greeting. A quiet acknowledgment.

Caleb returned it.

Owen's voice came through the monitor. "Caleb. Give me a little more on your vocal."

Caleb turned back to the mic. He sang again, louder. His voice steadied. He kept his eyes on the sound board and the band, but he felt Naomi's presence like a thread pulled taut.

The sky began to soften toward evening. The sun sank behind the trees, and the light under the tent turned golden. The string lights grew more visible. Fireflies flickered at the far edge of the field near the orchard line.

People filled the chairs.

Caleb stood with his guitar strapped on, looking out over the crowd. Families. Older couples. Teenagers. Young adults. People from neighboring towns. Faces he did not know, faces he did.

He saw Hannah near the side aisle speaking with a woman in a floral dress. He saw Eli Brooks near the back, arms crossed, watching the tent like a man watching a building he had helped raise.

He saw Pastor Whitaker step onto the stage and greet the crowd, his voice carried by the speakers and softened by the night air.

Caleb's hands felt sweaty on the guitar. He wiped them on his jeans.

Pastor Whitaker spoke about prayer. About hunger for God. About how a person did not need to clean themselves up before they came to Jesus. He spoke with simple words. He spoke like a man who had watched people fight their own hearts for decades and still believed in God's patience.

He prayed, and the tent grew quiet.

Then Pastor Whitaker stepped back and nodded toward Caleb.

Caleb stepped to the mic.

He looked out over the chairs again. He found Naomi near the welcome table, now standing still with her hands clasped in front of her. She watched the stage. Her face held no smile, but her eyes looked intent, present.

Caleb took a breath.

"Good evening," he said. "We are glad you are here. We are going to sing to the Lord together."

He paused. He felt the wind shift under the tent. He heard the field beyond. Crickets. A distant truck on the road. A screen door somewhere in town.

Caleb spoke again, quieter. "If it helps, the words will be on the screen. If it helps more, close your eyes. Nobody here needs to perform."

He glanced down at his binder, then back up. “Let us pray.”

He bowed his head.

The prayer came. “Lord, we need You. Meet us here. Give us clean hearts. Teach us to worship with truth. Bring our young people near. Bring our families near. Bring those who feel far near. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

The crowd echoed amen, a soft wave.

Caleb lifted his head and strummed the opening chord.

The band joined.

Voices rose across the field, and the sound carried beyond the tent into the warm night.

Naomi stood at the edge and listened. Her eyes stayed on the stage.

Caleb sang, and the words felt like more than lyrics.

He felt the week begin. He felt the pull of something he did not yet understand.

Music moved across the field, and Caleb kept playing, steady hands and an unsteady heart held up by grace.

Chapter 3

Why Summer Feels Different

The next morning came early, bright, and already warm.

Caleb Monroe woke on the narrow bed in his uncle's spare room. He lay still for a moment and listened. A ceiling fan clicked as it turned. Somewhere in the house, a coffee maker gurgled. Outside, a mower started, then settled into a steady hum. Maple Ridge did not sleep in. Maple Ridge worked.

He sat up and rubbed his face. His guitar case leaned against the wall near the dresser. The sight of it brought back the tent, the lights, the sound of voices rising. It brought back Naomi Reyes standing by the welcome table, her hands clasped, her eyes steady on the stage. No smile. No easy warmth. Something sharper. Something guarded.

He swung his feet to the floor. The boards felt cool. He stood and pulled on a T-shirt and jeans. He moved quietly out of habit. Even as an adult, he did not like making noise in someone else's home.

He stepped into the hall and smelled bacon. His stomach tightened with hunger and a strange kind of comfort he did not want to name. He followed the smell to the kitchen.

Uncle Daniel stood at the stove, turning strips in a pan. Daniel Mercer kept his dark hair short and his posture straight. He had the steady look of a man who had learned how to keep showing up in hard seasons. Caleb had not lived with him, but he had spent enough holidays and summers to know the rhythms. Daniel did not talk much in the morning. He did not rush either.

"Aunt Rachel?" Caleb asked.

"Church office early," Daniel said. "Inventory. Something with the pantry shelves."

Caleb nodded and grabbed two plates from a cabinet. He set them on the table without being asked. Daniel glanced at him, then back to the pan.

“You did fine last night,” Daniel said.

Praise hit him in an odd place. He had wanted it, and he had feared it. “Thank you.”

Daniel slid the bacon onto a paper towel. He cracked eggs into the pan. The yolks shone gold. “Pastor Whitaker said the sound carried all the way to the prayer garden.”

Caleb poured himself coffee from a pot already waiting. The mug felt hot against his palms. “People sang.”

“They did.” Daniel watched the eggs, then looked at Caleb. “How do you feel?”

Caleb held the mug close. He stared into the dark surface. “Tired.”

Daniel did not let him hide there. “How do you feel?”

Caleb looked up. Daniel did not push. He waited.

Caleb cleared his throat. “It felt…different.”

Daniel nodded once, as if he had expected only that. “Revival week does that.”

Caleb sat. The chair creaked. “It is not even the week yet. It was one night.”

Daniel slid eggs onto a platter and set it between them. “The Lord does not need a schedule.”

Caleb gave a faint smile. He ate. The bacon snapped under his teeth. The eggs tasted like butter and pepper. He ate more than he meant to.

Daniel ate slowly. He wiped his mouth once, careful. “You saw a lot of people you used to know.”

Caleb’s mind flashed through faces. Mrs. Alder with her tight bun and bright eyes. Eli Brooks standing near the back with arms crossed, watching the poles and the ropes as they mattered, Pastor Whitaker’s steady voice. Hannah Whitaker near the front, singing with her whole body, her hands lifted for a moment before she lowered them and wiped at her cheek, as if she felt foolish for letting the emotion show.

“Some,” Caleb said.

Daniel drank coffee. “Naomi Reyes was there.”

Caleb’s fork paused halfway to his mouth. He forced it to keep moving. “She was working the welcome table.”

“Mm.” Daniel’s gaze stayed calm. “She is a good young woman.”

Caleb kept chewing until he could swallow. “She does a lot.”

“She does.” Daniel leaned back in his chair. “She finished her first year in the education program.”

Caleb’s eyes flicked up. “You know her well.”

Daniel shrugged. “Rachel knows her well. Naomi helps with children’s church when she is home. She sits with some of the older ladies. She drives them to appointments. She fills gaps.”

Caleb set his fork down. “Maple Ridge runs on people who fill gaps.”

Daniel’s mouth curved. It looked like humor, but it carried weight. “Maple Ridge runs on people who let the Lord use them.”

Caleb stared at the table. The wood held faint knife marks. Families had eaten here for years. He had sat in this same chair at twelve, feet swinging, waiting for someone to tell him where he belonged. He still waited for that sometimes. He did not say it.

Daniel stood and carried dishes to the sink. “You are on the schedule for set up at ten.”

Caleb rose and gathered his plate. “I remember.”

“You also promised your mother you would not hide in my guest room all summer.”

Caleb rinsed his plate and set it in the sink. Water ran over his fingers, cool and clear. “I am not hiding.”

Daniel shut off the tap. “Good.”

Caleb dried his hands on a towel. He wanted to ask Daniel something. The question pressed at him. It did not form cleanly.

Daniel looked at him again. “What is it?”

Caleb let out a breath. “Does it always feel like this? When revival starts?”

Daniel’s eyes softened. “Sometimes it feels like a drum in the distance. Sometimes it feels like the air changes. Sometimes it feels like nothing, then someone stands up and starts to weep, and everyone understands they have stood in holy ground without noticing.”

Caleb swallowed. “Last night I felt like I was watching something from outside.”

Daniel nodded. “That is honest.”

Caleb gripped the back of the chair. “I led the songs.”

“You did.”

“And still.”

Daniel did not rush him. “You do not lead worship to prove you belong. You lead worship because God deserves praise. Belonging comes from Him, not from your role.”

Caleb shifted in his seat. He looked away. He did not like how close that landed. He nodded once, sharp. “I need to go.”

Daniel let him go without more words. He did not follow him to the door. He did not call after him. Daniel trusted the Lord with what he could not manage.

Outside, the sun already sat high. Heat pressed down on the yard. The grass looked cut short, sharp lines running across it. Maple trees along the fence line stood still, their leaves full and deep green. A bird darted from branch to branch and sang like it did not worry about anything.

Caleb got into his car and drove toward the church field.

Maple Ridge looked smaller in the daylight. The main road ran past the hardware store and the bakery. The bakery door stood open. A sweet smell drifted out, cinnamon and bread. A few people moved along the sidewalk with paper cups of coffee. They waved at him. Some smiled. Some looked twice, as if trying to place him.

He kept both hands on the wheel. His skin felt tight with the sun. He drove slower than he needed to. The town made him feel like speed would offend it.

He passed the white church with its tall steeple. The windows stood open, and he heard piano notes drift out. Someone practiced. The sound fell into the morning and did not hurry.

Beside the church, the field held the tent. The canvas stood bright under the sun. It did not sway much in the calmer air. Ropes stretched tight. Stakes sat deep in the ground. Folding chairs waited inside, row after row, patient.

A few men already worked near the stage. Eli Brooks lifted a wooden panel onto the platform and fitted it into place. He moved with quiet confidence. He did not rush. He did not waste motion.

Caleb parked and stepped out. The heat hit him full. He shut the car door and walked toward the tent.

Eli looked up. His gaze held no judgment. It held assessment, like he measured a board before he cut. “Morning.”

“Morning,” Caleb said.

Eli wiped his hands on his jeans. He wore a faded work shirt and a ball cap. Sweat darkened the fabric at his shoulders. “You sleep?”

“Some.”

Eli nodded. He did not press. He pointed at a stack of boards. “We need those carried in. Then the sound team wants help running cords.”

Caleb walked over and lifted the first board. It felt warm from the sun. He shifted it on his shoulder and carried it inside the tent.

The inside smelled of canvas and cut grass. Dust floated in the shafts of light that cut through small openings near the edges. Caleb set the board on the stage and went back for more.

With each trip, the work steadied his mind. His muscles found the rhythm. Lift, carry, set down. He did not have to explain himself. He did not have to choose words. He only had to show up.

Voices drifted from outside. A laugh. A greeting. A short exchange about where to place extra chairs. Someone turned on a fan near the front, and it whirred, pushing warm air around.

By midmorning, more people arrived.

Mrs. Alder came with two teenage boys from the youth group. She wore a long skirt and a blouse with small flowers. Her hands looked thin, but her grip stayed strong as she pointed and directed.

“Chairs go three more rows back,” she said. “We will have more folks this year. I feel it.”

One of the boys looked doubtful. “We had a lot last night.”

“We will have more,” Mrs. Alder said. “The Lord has been waking people up all month.”

Caleb heard her and felt a small stir inside him. He did not know if it was hope or fear.

Hannah Whitaker walked in from the church with a box of hymnals. She set it near the front and greeted Eli with a warm smile. “I brought extra copies in case the screen fails.”

Eli nodded. “Smart.”

Hannah turned and saw Caleb. Her expression shifted into recognition and kindness. “Caleb. Good to see you again.”

He had met her many times over the years, but never as an adult. She looked the same and different at once. Her hair fell in a simple braid over one shoulder. She wore a modest summer dress and flat sandals. Her eyes looked steady, like her father’s.

“Good to see you,” Caleb said.

“You led well,” Hannah said. She did not overdo it. She spoke as she meant it. “Thank you for being here.”

Caleb felt his face warm. He did not know where to put the gratitude. “I am glad to help.”

Hannah’s gaze held him for a moment longer. She looked like she saw more than the surface. Then she nodded and moved on to Mrs. Alder.

Caleb turned back to the cords, but his focus broke.

He saw Naomi across the tent. She carried a box of bottled water and set it near the back. She wore denim shorts that reached mid-thigh and a loose blouse tucked in at the waist. Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail. She moved with purpose, not in a hurry. Her posture stayed straight, as if she were carrying more than a box.

She looked up and caught him watching.

Caleb’s hand paused on a cord. His heart gave a strange lurch. He forced himself to nod.

Naomi did not smile. She nodded back and kept walking.

He watched her go, then bent over his work again. He told himself it meant nothing. It only felt like something because the tent made everything feel louder.

A few minutes later, Naomi returned with another box, this one full of paper cups and napkins. She set it down and glanced at the stage. She looked at Caleb again, quickly, then away.

Eli stepped near Caleb and lowered his voice. “She works hard.”

Caleb kept his eyes on the cord. “I have noticed.”

Eli tightened a tie around a cable. “Her family has been here a long time.”

Caleb nodded. He knew some of it. Everyone in Maple Ridge knew everyone’s roots.

Eli leaned back on his heels. “You staying with Daniel and Rachel?”

“Yes.”

“Good people,” Eli said. It sounded like a statement of fact, not opinion.

Caleb looked at him. “You know them well.”

Eli glanced toward the church. “We built a lot of things together.”

Caleb followed that glance. He saw the white building and its simple lines, the steeple cutting into blue sky. He saw the open windows, the curtains moving in the breeze. He thought of all the prayers said inside. He thought of the way Pastor Whitaker’s voice had filled the tent last night, steady and plain.

Eli stood and clapped Caleb on the shoulder once. The touch held no softness, but it held acceptance. “Keep your mind on the work. It helps.”

Caleb nodded. “Yes.”

Eli walked away.

By noon, the stage looked finished. The cords ran clean along the ground and up the posts. The sound team tested microphones. A young man spoke into one, then tapped it, wincing at the feedback.

“Careful,” someone called.

Caleb stood near the front and wiped sweat from his forehead with his shirt. The heat made the canvas smell sharper. He stepped outside for a breath.

The sun blazed in the open field. The grass shimmered. Heat waves rose from the packed dirt by the parking area.

Naomi stood under a small patch of shade near the side of the tent, drinking water from a bottle. Her gaze stayed on the church. Her face looked calm, but her shoulders held tension.

Caleb walked toward her before he thought it through. He stopped a few feet away. “Hey.”

Naomi lowered the bottle. “Hey.”

Silence stretched. The quiet felt heavy because their voices had filled the tent last night. Now they stood in plain daylight with nothing covering the space between them.

Caleb rubbed the back of his neck. “Thanks for setting up last night. And today.”

Naomi’s eyes met his. Dark, steady. “It is what the church does.”

Caleb nodded. “Yes.”

Naomi’s mouth tightened slightly, like she wanted to say something else. She did not.

Caleb tried again. “Are you on the welcome table again tonight?”

“I am,” Naomi said.

“You have a lot going on.”

Naomi lifted one shoulder, then lowered it. “So do you.”

Caleb glanced toward the tent. “Music rehearsal later.”

Naomi looked at him, and something in her gaze softened for half a second. Then it shut again. “You play well.”

“Thank you.”

Naomi looked down at her bottle. She turned it in her hands. “You spoke before the first song.”

Caleb felt his stomach tighten. “Yes.”

“You said nobody needed to perform,” Naomi said.

He nodded, cautious. “It is true.”

Naomi’s fingers tightened around the plastic. “It is hard to believe sometimes.”

Caleb held still. The words landed deeper than he expected. He watched her face for a clue.

Naomi looked up. She caught him studying her, and her eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Nothing,” Caleb said, too fast.

Naomi’s lips pressed into a line. “You do not know me.”

Caleb felt heat in his cheeks, and it did not come from the sun. “I did not say I did.”

Naomi took a breath. She looked away toward the church again. “I have to go. Mrs. Alder asked me to check the sign-up sheet for the nursery volunteers.”

Caleb stepped back. “Okay.”

Naomi walked off, her sandals scuffing the dry grass. She did not look back.

Caleb stood there a moment longer, watching her move toward the fellowship hall. A door opened. A gust of cooler air spilled out, along with the smell of old wood and lemon cleaner. Naomi disappeared inside.

Caleb let out a slow breath. He told himself he had only tried to be polite. He told himself he did not care what she thought. The lie did not hold.

He turned back toward the tent.

The day moved in pieces. More errands. More small tasks. More people arriving to do what needed to be done.

In the afternoon, Pastor Whitaker walked through the tent with Daniel Mercer. Pastor Whitaker wore a short-sleeved button-down shirt and khaki pants. He looked clean and unhurried, like he had never run late in his life. He stopped to speak with the sound team, asked a question, listened, nodded.

Then his gaze found Caleb.

Caleb straightened without meaning to.

Pastor Whitaker walked over. His smile came gentle. “Caleb Monroe.”

“Pastor Whitaker,” Caleb said.

Pastor Whitaker held out his hand. His grip stayed firm, warm. “Thank you for coming.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pastor Whitaker studied him for a moment. His eyes held years of counseling and funerals and weddings and altar calls. “How long has it been?”

Caleb did the math and felt the distance like a bruise. “Too long.”

Pastor Whitaker’s smile did not fade. “You grew up.”

Caleb gave a small, awkward laugh. “I tried.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. “Daniel told me you are leading worship for the week.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Last night blessed people,” Pastor Whitaker said. “Some came in tired. Some came in angry. Some came in unsure. The Lord met them anyway.”

Caleb swallowed. “I hope so.”

Pastor Whitaker tilted his head slightly. “You do not sound sure.”

Caleb looked down at his hands. He saw dirt under his nails from the cords and boards. He saw his own unease written in the way his fingers kept moving. “I am not sure what I am doing.”

Pastor Whitaker did not flinch. He did not offer quick comfort. He nodded like Caleb had given him something solid. “Then you are in the right place.”

Caleb looked up, confused.

Pastor Whitaker’s voice stayed low. “Men who think they have it all figured out do not lean on the Lord. They lean on their own plans. The Lord does good work with a willing heart.”

Caleb’s throat tightened again. He nodded once.

Pastor Whitaker glanced toward the open side of the tent. Teens ran across the field toward the church, laughing, chasing one another. A

younger child chased them and tripped, then popped back up and ran harder.

Pastor Whitaker's gaze softened. "This town has prayed for those young people for a long time. People have stayed faithful in quiet ways. People have stayed when it felt like nothing changed."

Caleb followed his gaze. He saw Mrs. Alder in the distance, her hands on her hips as she spoke to a group of girls. He saw Hannah Whitaker carrying a stack of papers. He saw Eli Brooks on a ladder, tightening something above the stage.

Pastor Whitaker looked back at Caleb. "Revival week does not start when the tent goes up. It starts when someone prays in the dark and keeps praying."

Caleb nodded. "Yes, sir."

Pastor Whitaker's hand settled on Caleb's shoulder for a brief moment. The touch held weight. "If the Lord stirs something in you this week, do not run from it."

Caleb's pulse jumped. He forced his voice steady. "I will not."

Pastor Whitaker gave a small smile, then walked on with Daniel.

Caleb stood still after they left. He felt exposed, like Pastor Whitaker had named what Caleb had tried to ignore. He did not know what the Lord might stir. He only knew something already stirred, and it scared him.

That evening, Maple Ridge shifted into its other rhythm.

The air stayed warm, but the sun eased lower. Shadows lengthened. The light turned soft and gold. People finished chores, washed up, and drove toward the church field. Trucks rolled in with coolers in

the back, minivans parked along the edge. Teenagers walked in groups, loud and restless.

String lights came on again under the tent. The glow warmed the canvas. Fireflies blinked in the grass beyond the ropes.

Caleb stood near the stage and tuned his guitar. He listened to the murmur of voices. He heard laughter. He heard greetings. He heard an older man call out a name and clap someone on the back.

It felt like a family gathering. It also felt like a line in the sand.

He looked out and saw Naomi at the welcome table. She wore a simple blue dress tonight, the fabric soft and plain. Her hair fell loose, dark waves over her shoulders. She handed out programs, pointed people toward their seats, and answered questions in a calm voice.

A group of teens from a neighboring town walked in, looking around with curiosity and caution. Naomi greeted them with the same steady warmth she gave everyone else. She did not try to charm them. She did not perform. She served.

Caleb watched her longer than he should have.

The band gathered. A drummer tapped sticks on his knee. The keyboard player adjusted a stand. Caleb checked his binder. He had chosen songs he knew Maple Ridge would sing, songs with words that held steady truth. He also had one newer song he thought might connect with the younger crowd.

He heard Pastor Whitaker step onto the stage. The sound quieted as people settled. Folding chairs creaked. A baby fussed, then soothed.

Pastor Whitaker welcomed everyone again. He spoke of Jesus with simple clarity. He spoke of repentance and mercy as they belonged

together. He spoke of young people and old people seeking the Lord side by side. He quoted from Joel, his voice steady.

“I will pour out My Spirit on all people,” he said. “Your sons and daughters will prophesy.”

Caleb heard the words and felt the tent grow still. Even the teens quieted. Even the restless ones listened for a moment.

Pastor Whitaker prayed. The prayer did not stretch long. It did not try to impress. It asked God to move. It asked God to soften hard hearts. It asked God to save.

Then Pastor Whitaker nodded to Caleb again.

Caleb stepped forward and adjusted the microphone. He looked out over the chairs. He saw faces he had met as a kid. He saw new faces. He saw the older saints who had prayed for years with tired eyes and faithful hands. He saw young people with guarded expressions and arms crossed.

His gaze found Naomi. She had stepped away from the welcome table and stood along the side aisle. Her hands clasped at her waist again. Her eyes stayed on the stage. Her face looked intent, like she had come to receive something, not manage something.

Caleb took a breath.

“Good evening,” he said.

Voices answered back.

He kept his tone calm. “We are going to sing to the Lord. If some people feel out of place, it is all right. The Lord meets people where they are.”

He paused. He felt his own words turn toward him. He swallowed and kept going. “Let us pray.”

He bowed his head. “Lord, You see every heart in this tent. You see those who want You and those who do not know how to want You. You see those who feel tired. You see those who feel ashamed. You see those who feel proud. Break what needs breaking. Heal what needs healing. Give us clean hearts. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

The tent answered Amen.

Caleb lifted his head and began to play.

Voices rose again, and the sound carried across the field. The night held it. The town held it.

As the singing moved through the first song, Caleb felt something change. He did not know how to name it. It did not feel like a rush. It felt like a door opening a crack.

He watched the crowd as he sang. He saw an older woman wipe at her eyes. He saw a teenage boy stop looking at his phone and glance up at the screen. He saw a young couple clasp hands.

He also saw Naomi sing.

Her lips moved with the words. Her voice did not sound loud. Her face did not seek attention. Yet something in her expression shifted as she sang, like she let herself step out from behind duty for a moment. Her eyes shone in the string lights.

Caleb kept playing, and his chest tightened. He did not want to feel it. He did not want to carry another longing. He had left places before because longing hurt.

Between songs, the drummer kept a soft rhythm. Caleb spoke briefly, then began the next song. The music rolled steady. The crowd leaned in.

When the set ended, Caleb stepped back. Another leader came up to give a short testimony. A young man from a neighboring church spoke of the Lord pulling him out of anger. His words came rough, but honest. People listened.

Caleb stood off to the side with his guitar. He watched Naomi move through the rows, handing water to an older man, helping a mother with a fussy toddler. Naomi did not sit. She did not stop.

At one point, she looked up and met Caleb's eyes again.

This time, she held his gaze. Her expression held no smile, but it held something else. A question. A challenge. Maybe a warning.

Caleb looked away first.

The service ended with prayer at the front. People stood and moved down the aisle in small groups. Some knelt. Some stood with bowed heads. Pastor Whitaker and other leaders prayed with them. Hannah Whitaker knelt beside a teenage girl and spoke low, her hand resting lightly on the girl's shoulder.

Caleb set his guitar in its stand and stepped down from the stage. He did not go forward. He did not feel like he had the right. He did not feel like he belonged in the place where people asked God to change them.

He walked toward the side of the tent instead. He told himself he needed to help clean up. He told himself he needed to make sure the cords stayed taped down.

He saw Naomi near the back, gathering leftover programs and stacking them. He moved toward her.

"Naomi," he said.

She looked up. "What?"

He flinched at the sharpness. “I wanted to ask if you needed help.”

Naomi stared at him for a beat. Then her shoulders eased. “Yes. Put those chairs back in line. People scooted them.”

Caleb nodded. “Okay.”

He walked into the rows and began straightening chairs. Metal scraped softly on grass. He worked down each row, aligning legs with the lines in the ground, making the space tidy again.

Naomi kept stacking papers. Her movements stayed efficient. Still, the earlier edge in her voice had faded. Caleb did not know why. It gave him a strange relief.

When he finished, he walked back toward her. “Done.”

Naomi lifted the stack and tucked it into a box. “Thank you.”

Caleb hesitated. “You seem…busy.”

Naomi’s eyes narrowed again, though less harshly. “You keep saying that.”

Caleb rubbed his thumb along the edge of his guitar strap. “It is true.”

Naomi shut the box. “People need things.”

Caleb watched her hands. He noticed how steady they were. He noticed the faint ink stain on her finger, like she had graded papers or filled out forms. “Do you ever get tired?”

Naomi picked up another box and held it against her hip. “Yes.”

Caleb followed her as she carried it toward the supply table. “Do you ever stop?”

Naomi set the box down. She turned to face him fully. The string lights caught the curve of her cheek and the seriousness in her eyes. “Do you ever stop running?”

The question hit him like a hand to the chest.

Caleb stared at her. His mouth went dry. “I am not running.”

Naomi’s gaze did not move. “You came back for the week. You act like it is a job you will clock out of.”

Caleb swallowed. He forced his voice to be calm. “I am here for the summer.”

Naomi stepped closer, then stopped herself, like she did not want to invade his space. “Summer ends.”

Caleb felt something shift inside him, a quiet panic. He heard his own words from earlier, his plans, his neat timeline. He heard his mother’s voice on the phone, asking him to be wise, to consider what the Lord wanted. He had answered with vague promises.

Naomi’s voice stayed low. “Everyone keeps saying this revival feels different.”

Caleb glanced toward the front where a few people still prayed. Pastor Whitaker’s voice murmured. A soft hymn rose from a small group near the stage, sung without microphones.

“What do you think?” Caleb asked.

Naomi’s eyes flicked to the praying people. Her face softened with something like longing, then hardened again. “I think people want God. I think people want change. I think people fear what it will cost.”

Caleb held his breath. He did not know whether she was speaking about the town or herself.

Naomi looked back at him. “You fear it too.”

Caleb’s throat tightened. He forced a small shrug. “Everyone fears something.”

Naomi’s mouth pressed tight. “Some people hide behind plans.”

Caleb felt heat rise in his face. “What do you know about my plans?”

Naomi’s eyes flashed. “You talk about university like it is the only place that matters.”

Caleb stared at her. He did not remember saying it to her. Maybe he had said it in passing. Maybe she had heard him speak to someone else. Maple Ridge heard everything.

Naomi kept going, quieter now. “I see how you look at this place like it is temporary. Like it is something you outgrow.”

Caleb’s voice came sharp. “I did outgrow it.”

The words left his mouth before he could catch them.

Naomi froze. Hurt flickered across her face. It lasted only a second, then she masked it with calm. “Then you should lead the songs and leave. It will be simple.”

Caleb’s stomach dropped. He opened his mouth, then shut it. He did not know what to say. He had not meant to wound her. He also did not know if he believed his own words.

Naomi picked up another stack of programs and held it close. Her voice stayed even. “I need to finish this.”

Caleb nodded, stiff. “Okay.”

He stepped back and let her go.

Naomi walked toward the fellowship hall without looking at him. Her shoulders stayed straight. Her pace stayed steady. Still, Caleb saw the tightness in her grip on the papers, as she held herself together by force.

Caleb stood alone in the tent for a moment. The lights hummed softly. The canvas breathed with a faint night breeze. The sound of prayer drifted like smoke.

He looked toward the front again. Pastor Whitaker had moved to stand with an older man. Hannah Whitaker prayed with a young couple. Eli Brooks stood near the edge, his head bowed, his hat in his hands.

Caleb's throat tightened.

He turned and walked out into the warm night.

Crickets sang in the grass. Fireflies blinked near the fence line. The air smelled like dust and mowed hay from a nearby field. The sky held deep blue, with a few stars starting to show.

Caleb walked toward the parking area and stopped beside his car. He did not get in. He leaned a hand on the roof and stared back at the tent.

From outside, it looked calm. It looked like a simple structure: canvas, poles, and rope. From inside, it held too much. It held prayer. It held hunger. It held the words Naomi had thrown at him like stones.

You keep saying you are busy.

Do you ever stop running?

Summer ends.

Caleb closed his eyes. He did not pray out loud. He did not know how to pray clean. Still, a quiet plea formed in him, raw and plain.

Lord, show me what You want. Do not let me waste this.

He opened his eyes again and looked at the tent. The string lights glowed soft. The sound of voices drifted out, still praying, still singing low.

Caleb stayed where he was, hand on his car, heart unsettled by the sense that summer in Maple Ridge had already begun to press on him in ways he had not planned to carry.

Chapter 4

What Comes After August

Caleb Monroe stood beside his car until the last of the voices inside the tent thinned. The night stayed warm. The gravel under his shoes held heat from the day. He watched the canvas rise and fall with the breeze. He listened for a cue to move, like a drum count before a song.

None came.

He slid into the driver's seat and shut the door. The inside smelled faintly of old coffee and guitar case foam. He set his hands on the wheel and stared through the windshield at the dark outline of the church field. The white steeple rose beyond the tent, pale even in low light.

He had grown up with that steeple in the corner of his mind. Not close enough to call it his. Close enough to feel watched by it.

He started the engine. The headlights cut across the lot. He drove slowly down the lane past the church, past the fellowship hall, past the prayer garden where low shrubs sat in shadow. He turned onto the road toward his uncle's house.

Windows stood open on a few homes. Fans turned. A dog barked once and quit. Maple Ridge rested in the way small towns did. The quiet did not feel empty. It felt held.

Caleb pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. His uncle's porch light burned. Moths circled it in small frantic loops. He sat for another moment with his hand on the key, like he waited for someone to tell him what to do.

He went inside.

The house smelled like wood polish and dish soap. A framed photo of a younger Caleb sat on the hallway table. He stood in a choir robe, mouth open mid-song, eyes squeezed shut like he believed every word.

He looked away.

In the spare room, he shut the door and sat on the edge of the narrow bed. The ceiling fan clicked as it turned, steady and patient. He took his phone from his pocket and stared at the screen.

A message from a friend at school sat unread.

You back home. You good.

Caleb typed, erased, typed again. He set the phone facedown on the bed without sending anything. He rubbed his hands over his face, then pressed his palms to his knees.

Naomi's words stayed in his ears. Not loud. Sharp.

Do you ever stop running?

He lay back and stared at the ceiling. The fan blades blurred. He tried to pray again. No speech came. He shut his eyes and let silence be his offering.

Sleep came late. When it did, it came thin.

Morning light pushed through the blinds too early. Heat already sat in the air, as if the day had not cooled at all. Caleb woke with his shirt stuck to his back. He sat up and listened.

A coffee maker gurgled in the kitchen. Cabinets opened and shut. His uncle moved with calm purpose, as the day belonged to him.

Caleb dressed and stepped into the hall. The kitchen table held an open Bible, with a pair of reading glasses beside it. His uncle stood

at the counter, cutting an apple. Gray lined his hair at the temples. His shoulders stayed strong.

“Morning,” his uncle said.

“Morning.” Caleb’s voice came rough.

His uncle set the apple slices on a plate. “You sleep?”

“A little.”

His uncle glanced once at Caleb’s face, then back to the plate. He did not press. He never pressed. It had been one of the reasons Caleb agreed to stay here.

A kettle hissed. His uncle poured hot water into a mug.

“Coffee?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

His uncle filled a second mug and slid it across the table. Caleb sat. The chair creaked under him.

Outside, a mower started somewhere down the road. It ran steady. The sound felt like Maple Ridge breathing.

His uncle sat across from him with his own mug. He nodded toward the open Bible. “I read through Joel this morning.”

Caleb looked at the page. He knew what verse his uncle meant. He had heard it last night in the tent, spoken by a woman with a trembling voice.

I will pour out My Spirit on all people.

Caleb stirred sugar into his coffee, slow. “People quote Joel every revival.”

His uncle watched him. “People quote what they need.”

Caleb’s spoon clinked against the mug. “Do they ever get it?”

His uncle did not answer fast. He sipped his coffee. He set the mug down. “Sometimes. Sometimes later.”

Caleb stared into the dark surface of his coffee. “I told Naomi I was leaving after the week.”

His uncle’s eyes stayed steady. “You plan to.”

“I told her like it was simple.”

His uncle nodded once, small. “And it was not.”

Caleb let out a breath through his nose. “She looked at me like I was a stranger.”

His uncle leaned back. The chair shifted. “Naomi Reyes does not waste words. She never did.”

Caleb looked up. “You know her well.”

“Her family served in this church since before your mother met your father.” His uncle paused. “She also grew up watching people leave.”

Caleb held his mug with both hands. The ceramic felt too warm. “So did I.”

His uncle’s gaze stayed on him. “You left Maple Ridge before Maple Ridge left you.”

Caleb’s voice flattened. “I did not grow up here.”

“You grew up near enough.” His uncle’s voice stayed kind. “Near enough to get tied to people.”

Caleb looked out the window. Sunlight lay on the yard. The grass looked pale at the tips from heat. A bird hopped along the fence line and pecked at the ground.

He said, “I do not want to talk about it.”

His uncle nodded. “Then do not.”

Relief came sharp, then shame followed it. Caleb dropped his eyes. “Sorry.”

His uncle shook his head once. “No need.” He tapped the table near the Bible. “You are here for revival week. You lead music. You serve. God does not waste a willing hand.”

Caleb gave a small laugh without humor. “Willing.”

His uncle smiled a little. “You got out of bed. You sat at this table. That counts.”

Caleb swallowed. “Is Naomi working today?”

“She is at the church early. Bulletin boards. Classroom set up. Pastor Whitaker asked for help.”

Caleb’s stomach tightened. He set his mug down. “I should go.”

His uncle stood and carried his mug to the sink. “Go with a clean heart.”

Caleb paused. “I do not have one.”

His uncle turned on the water. “Then ask for one.”

Caleb left before his uncle could say more.

The road back into town ran between fields. Corn stood high and still, leaves sharp against the light. A few hay bales sat in a pasture, round and golden. Heat shimmered above the blacktop.

He parked near the church and walked across the lot. The tent stood fully set now. In daylight it looked larger. The canvas stretched tight. Ropes ran clean from poles to stakes. Folding chairs sat stacked under the open side, waiting. A few fans hung from support beams, ready for evening.

The church building sat beside it, white paint bright in the sun. Windows stood cracked open. Hymn music drifted out, faint and tinny from someone testing the sound system.

Caleb stepped into the fellowship hall. The air inside held a cool bite from old air conditioning, mixed with the smell of coffee and lemon cleaner. Someone had set out a row of plastic cups by a large metal urn.

Voices came from down the hallway.

He walked toward them, slow.

Naomi stood in the main classroom, on a step stool, pinning a paper banner along the top of a bulletin board. Her dark hair sat twisted up at the back of her head. A few loose strands clung to her neck. She wore a pale cotton shirt and jeans. A thin chain necklace rested at her collarbone.

A stack of posters sat on a table beside her, along with a roll of tape and a pair of scissors.

She reached up higher. Her fingers stretched. The tape peeled free and stuck to itself. She frowned and tried again.

Caleb watched for a second too long. He felt the pull to step in, to hold the banner, to offer help without asking for words.

His shoe scuffed the floor.

Naomi froze. She did not turn right away. Her shoulders lifted a fraction, then settled. She pressed the tape against the paper with slow care. Then she stepped down from the stool and faced him.

Her expression stayed calm. Her eyes did not.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Morning.” He cleared his throat. “Need help.”

Naomi glanced at the banner, then at the stool. “Yes.”

She did not soften the word. She did not sharpen it either. She held it like a tool.

Caleb stepped into the room. The floor wax smelled sharp. A box fan hummed near the doorway. A few chairs lined the walls, pushed back for space. On the far table, someone had left a basket of crayons and a stack of blank paper.

Naomi handed him the tape roll. Her fingers brushed his for a second. She pulled back at once.

“Hold the left side,” she said, pointing.

Caleb took the corner of the paper banner and lifted it. The paper felt thin. It fluttered when the fan shifted. Naomi climbed the stool again and worked on the right side, pinning the top edge smooth.

The banner read in thick marker: REVIVAL WEEK. COME EXPECTING.

Beneath it, a second line in smaller letters read: JOEL 2:28.

Caleb held the paper steady. “You made this.”

Naomi pressed tape down. “I did.”

“It looks good.”

Naomi did not look at him. “It needs to stay up.”

Caleb watched the way she focused. Her movements stayed precise. She did not waste effort. He remembered her like that when they were younger. She had been the girl who stayed after youth group to fold chairs while others ran outside. She had been kind without drawing attention to it.

He said, “You always did this stuff.”

Naomi’s mouth tightened. “Someone needs to.”

Caleb felt the sting. He held the paper higher to keep it straight.

Naomi finished the tape and smoothed the edge one more time. Then she climbed down and stepped back to look. Her eyes lifted to the banner, then moved across the room as if she checked for other needs.

She reached for another poster on the table. “We have signs for the tent entrances. Pastor Whitaker wants them up before lunch.”

Caleb nodded. “Okay.”

Naomi handed him two posters and a roll of twine. “Take these to the tent. Tie them to the stakes near the side openings. Someone will trip if they do not see the ropes.”

Caleb took the posters. “I can do it.”

Naomi picked up the tape gun and clicked it once to test. “Thank you.”

The words sounded polite. They did not sound close.

Caleb stood there with paper in his hands. He wanted to say he had been wrong last night. He wanted to say he did not know what came

after August. He wanted to say he felt split in half, pulled between a life he built away from here and a life he did not let himself want.

He said none of it.

He turned and walked out.

Outside, heat hit him like a wall. The tent canvas shone bright. He crossed the grass. It had been cut short for the week, and it scratched his ankles through his socks.

He tied the first sign near the main entrance. The paper read: WELCOME. PLEASE WATCH THE ROPES.

He stepped back and checked. The twine held. The sign lifted in the breeze and settled again.

He moved to the side entrance and tied the second sign. As he worked, he saw Eli Brooks across the field near a small trailer of equipment. Eli wore a work shirt and jeans. His hat shaded his face. He carried a toolbox in one hand. He moved with the calm of someone who knew what needed to be done.

Eli looked up and caught Caleb's eye. He raised a hand in greeting.

Caleb lifted his hand back. He walked toward him.

Eli set the toolbox down. "Morning."

"Morning." Caleb glanced at the trailer. Cables, mic stands, and a few wooden risers sat stacked inside.

Eli nodded toward the tent. "Looks good."

"It does."

Eli wiped his hands on a rag. His eyes stayed steady, quiet. "You find what you need in there."

Caleb hesitated. “I do not know what I need.”

Eli did not flinch at the honesty. “You feel the pull.”

Caleb swallowed. “I feel pressure.”

Eli nodded once. “Pressure does not always mean wrong.”

Caleb looked down at the grass. “Naomi does not like me being here.”

Eli’s mouth shifted as he held back a smile. “Naomi cares about people.”

“That does not answer it.”

Eli bent and opened the toolbox. He took out a small metal connector and a screwdriver. “People feel safer when they know where someone stands.”

Caleb watched him tighten a screw. “So I need to pick a side.”

Eli glanced up. “You need to tell the truth.”

Caleb’s throat tightened. “I do not know it.”

Eli went back to his work. “Then start with what you do know.”

Caleb let out a slow breath. “I know I leave for school in August.”

Eli’s hands kept moving. “And.”

Caleb stared at the tent. Chairs now sat in rows, set by volunteers earlier. In daylight they looked plain. At night, with string lights, they had felt like a place where something holy could happen.

He said, “And I do not want to feel like this when I go.”

Eli tightened the last screw and set the tool down. He looked at Caleb. “Like what?”

Caleb struggled for words. “Like I missed something. Like I was close and still left empty.”

Eli nodded. “Then do not leave empty.”

Caleb gave a short laugh. “How?”

Eli lifted the toolbox again. “You show up.”

He started walking toward the tent.

Caleb followed. He watched Eli’s steady pace. He watched the way people waved at him as they passed, as Maple Ridge trusted him. Caleb felt like a visitor, even while he carried a guitar and led songs that people knew by heart.

At the tent, Eli set the toolbox down near the stage. The platform stood built from wooden panels, clean and sturdy. Mic stands waited in place. A keyboard sat covered with a sheet. Speakers stood like silent guards at the edges.

Eli crouched near the front and checked a cable run. “Sound team asked me to secure these along the edge so nobody catches a heel.”

Caleb nodded. “I will be careful.”

Eli glanced toward him. “You lead tonight?”

Caleb’s stomach dipped. “Rehearsal this afternoon. Tonight I think so.”

Eli’s voice stayed low. “Then keep your heart steady.”

Caleb looked away. “It is not steady.”

Eli pressed tape down along a cable with firm strokes. “Steady enough to sing.”

Caleb stood there and felt small. He did not like it. He also felt relieved that Eli did not ask for a story. Eli did not demand an explanation. He gave direction, the way a good carpenter did.

Caleb turned and walked out of the tent again.

He headed back toward the fellowship hall, thinking he should find Naomi and offer to help with the rest of the signs. He moved past the prayer garden. The small stone bench sat in shade from a young maple tree. The air smelled like warm dirt and mint from a small patch someone planted at the edge.

He saw Naomi there.

She sat on the bench with a notebook on her lap. Her shoulders slumped in a way Caleb had not seen inside. She stared down at the page but did not write.

He slowed. He did not want to intrude. He also did not want to keep avoiding her.

Naomi looked up and saw him. Her eyes widened a fraction, then settled back into calm.

Caleb stopped a few feet away. “I put the signs up.”

“Thank you.” Naomi closed the notebook partway, as if she were hiding something.

Caleb glanced at it. He saw a list. Names. Times. Tasks. The kind of list that held a whole week together.

He pointed toward the bench with his chin. “Is it okay if I sit?”

Naomi hesitated. Then she shifted to make space. “Yes.”

Caleb sat at the other end. The bench felt rough under his palms. The shade cooled his neck.

For a moment, neither spoke. The sounds around them filled the space. A lawn mower in the distance. A hammer tapping from the tent field. A few voices from the open church windows.

Naomi looked down at her notebook again. She traced a line with her pen but did not write.

Caleb forced himself to speak. “I should not have said what I said last night.”

Naomi’s eyes stayed on the notebook. “You said you were leaving.”

“I said it like it meant nothing.”

Naomi lifted her gaze to him. Her eyes held tiredness. Not sleep tired. Heart tired. “It is what you do.”

Caleb felt the words land. He nodded once. “Yes.”

Naomi’s fingers tightened on the pen. “People leave Maple Ridge. People should. Some people need to.”

Caleb studied her face. “You do not sound like you believe that.”

Naomi’s mouth pressed into a line. “I believe people should follow God. I do not believe people should use calling as a cover for fear.”

Caleb stared at the ground. Dust sat in the cracks of the walkway stones. “You think I am afraid.”

Naomi looked away. “I think you stay in motion so you do not have to sit with what you feel.”

Caleb swallowed. The heat under the shade still pressed in. Sweat dampened his hair near his temples.

He said, “What about you?”

Naomi’s eyes narrowed a little. “What about me?”

Caleb turned his head to look at her fully. “You stay busy too.”

Naomi’s shoulders lifted. “This week needs work.”

“I do not mean this week.” Caleb paused, choosing each word. “I mean your life. You do everything. You help everyone. You stay. You hold it all.”

Naomi’s throat moved. She looked down again and ran her thumb along the notebook edge. “It is easier than deciding.”

Caleb leaned forward slightly. “Deciding what.”

Naomi let out a breath. “What comes after August.”

The words hung between them, simple and heavy.

Caleb felt his chest tighten. “That is what you meant last night.”

Naomi nodded once, small. “Yes.”

Caleb stared ahead at the tent field. Volunteers moved in the sun, carrying a stack of folding chairs. Someone laughed. Someone called out the row count.

Caleb said, “I do not know what comes after August either.”

Naomi’s eyes flicked to him. “You have school.”

“I have school.” He nodded. “I also have questions. More than I admit.”

Naomi’s gaze held him now, steady. “About what?”

Caleb’s hands rested on his knees. He curled his fingers, then released them. “About what I am doing there. About what I am supposed to do with music. About whether I chase stages or serve a church. About whether God wants me in one place.”

Naomi's expression shifted. The sharpness eased a degree. "You lead worship well."

Caleb looked at her, surprised by the softness. "You do not even want me here."

Naomi's cheeks warmed. "Those are different things."

Caleb let the truth of it sit. He nodded once. "I grew up hearing people talk about calling like it was a map. Like God drew a line and all you had to do was follow it."

Naomi's voice stayed quiet. "It does not feel like a map."

"It feels like fog," Caleb said.

Naomi's fingers stopped moving on the notebook. "Yes."

Caleb looked at her. "So what comes after August for you?"

Naomi's eyes dropped. "Student teaching starts. I finish my education degree." She said it like a recitation.

"And then?" Caleb asked.

Naomi's grip on her pen tightened. "I applied to districts in three counties."

Caleb blinked. "You did."

Naomi nodded, still looking down. "I did not tell many people. Pastor Whitaker knows. Hannah knows."

Caleb's throat tightened. "Why did you apply away?"

Naomi's voice stayed steady, but it thinned. "Because I need to know if I stayed because God asked me to stay, or because I was afraid to go."

Caleb let out a slow breath. “So you might leave.”

Naomi finally looked at him. “Yes.”

The word struck him harder than he expected. He had walked into this week thinking he held the leaving card, the easy exit. Naomi had been the one rooted here, dependable, known.

Now she sat beside him and admitted she stood at the edge too.

Caleb’s chest felt tight. He tried to hide it. He failed.

Naomi saw it. Her eyes softened again, then guarded themselves. “Do not look like that.”

Caleb stared at her. “Like what.”

“Like you want to tell me not to.” Naomi’s voice stayed low. “You do not get to be the one who leaves and also the one who asks people to stay.”

Caleb flinched. “I was not going to ask.”

Naomi raised an eyebrow. “You were thinking it.”

Caleb looked away. He watched a firefly drift through the shade near the mint. It blinked once, then disappeared into the brighter air.

He said, “I do not want you to feel trapped here.”

Naomi’s laugh came short and dry. “I do not feel trapped by Maple Ridge. I feel trapped by expectations. People talk like staying is holiness and leaving is selfish. People talk like God only loves small towns.”

Caleb glanced at her. “Do they say that to you?”

Naomi’s mouth tightened. “They say it without words. They ask me when I will teach at Maple Ridge Elementary. They tell me the

children need teachers who love the Lord. They say my parents will miss me if I move."

Caleb's throat tightened. "And you."

Naomi's eyes shone for a second, then steadied. "I will miss them too."

Caleb sat with the ache of it. He knew it. He had lived it, even if his connection to Maple Ridge had been partial. He had felt the guilt of leaving people who loved him, even when he believed leaving served a good purpose.

He said, "At school, people talk like leaving home is maturity. Like staying means you never grew up."

Naomi's gaze stayed on him. "And what do you believe?"

Caleb's mouth went dry. He did not want to admit it. He did anyway. "I do not know. I think I believed leaving meant I mattered."

Naomi's eyes held his. No pity. No scorn. Only understanding.

Caleb's voice dropped. "It sounds ugly when I say it."

Naomi shook her head once. "It sounds honest."

Caleb swallowed. "What about you? What do you believe?"

Naomi stared out at the tent. "I believe God can call people to stay. I believe He can call people to go." She paused. "I also believe fear can dress up like faith."

Caleb nodded slowly. "Yes."

Naomi's fingers loosened on the pen. She set it on the notebook. "I do not want to choose wrong."

Caleb looked at her hands. Her nails held faint ink stains. Teacher hands. Bulletin board hands. Work hands.

He said, “I do not either.”

Silence settled again, but it changed. It felt less like a wall. It felt like room.

Naomi glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “So what will you do after revival week?”

Caleb breathed in. The air smelled like grass and warm leaves. “Go back to school. Finish summer term. Start fall semester.”

Naomi waited.

Caleb’s throat tightened. “And keep asking God to show me what He wants.”

Naomi nodded. “Do you ask Him?”

Caleb looked down. “I try.”

Naomi’s voice stayed quiet. “Do you listen?”

Caleb closed his eyes for a second. “I do not stay still enough.”

Naomi did not push. She did not soften it either. “Then stay still.”

Caleb opened his eyes and met her gaze. “Is that what you are doing right now?”

Naomi’s cheeks colored. “I came out here to breathe. I wrote lists all morning. I started to feel like I could not hear myself think.”

Caleb nodded. “Do you hear God when you sit out here?”

Naomi looked toward the prayer garden path. A few stones formed a simple curve. Someone had planted lavender at the edge. The purple heads drooped in the heat. Bees moved slowly around them.

Naomi said, “Sometimes. Sometimes I only hear my own worry.”

Caleb leaned back and stared at the tree leaves above them. Sunlight broke through in bright coins. “I hear my worry most of the time.”

Naomi’s voice softened. “Then why do you lead worship?”

Caleb turned to her. “Because when I sing truth, I remember it for a minute.”

Naomi’s eyes held him. “That matters.”

Caleb’s throat tightened. He nodded once.

Footsteps approached on the walkway. Caleb sat up. Naomi straightened too, notebook still on her lap.

Pastor Whitaker walked toward them from the church side door. He wore a short-sleeved button-down and dark slacks. His Bible sat under his arm. His face looked calm, but his eyes stayed alert, like he held the whole week in prayer.

He stopped near the bench. “Good morning.”

Naomi stood at once. “Good morning, Pastor Whitaker.”

Caleb stood too. “Morning, sir.”

Pastor Whitaker’s gaze moved between them, gentle and knowing without being intrusive. “I saw the signs go up. Thank you, Caleb.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. “Naomi, Hannah is looking for you in the supply closet. The youth group rooms need extra fans.”

Naomi picked up her notebook. “I will go.”

Pastor Whitaker smiled. “Thank you.”

Naomi stepped off the walkway, then paused. She looked at Caleb. Her voice stayed even. “Rehearsal at four. Do not be late.”

Caleb nodded. “I will be there.”

Naomi walked toward the church building, moving with purpose again. Her shoulders squared, like she had put her heart away for later.

Caleb watched her go until she disappeared inside.

Pastor Whitaker stayed beside him. The older man looked out at the tent, then up at the steeple. A breeze lifted the edge of his shirt.

“Youth revival weeks always stir things,” Pastor Whitaker said.

Caleb kept his eyes on the field. “Yes, sir.”

Pastor Whitaker’s voice stayed quiet. “They stir hearts. They stir plans.”

Caleb swallowed. He did not trust himself to answer.

Pastor Whitaker turned slightly, giving Caleb space while still staying near. “You lead worship tonight. The music matters, but your heart matters more.”

Caleb nodded. “I know.”

Pastor Whitaker waited. His silence asked for honesty without demanding it.

Caleb finally said, “I do not know where I belong.”

Pastor Whitaker’s gaze rested on him. “Do you belong to the Lord?”

Caleb's throat tightened. "Yes."

"Then start there," Pastor Whitaker said. "Belonging grows from roots deeper than geography."

Caleb stared at the grass. "It feels like everyone else knows what they are doing."

Pastor Whitaker let out a low breath. "People often look steady when they feel unsure."

Caleb glanced at him. "Even Naomi."

Pastor Whitaker did not smile. He did not frown. He nodded once. "Naomi carries much. She also asks hard questions. I respect her."

Caleb felt a strange mix of relief and fear. "She might leave."

Pastor Whitaker's eyes stayed kind. "She might."

Caleb swallowed. "Should I tell her to stay?"

Pastor Whitaker's gaze sharpened, gentle but firm. "No."

The single word landed clean.

Pastor Whitaker continued. "You should tell her the truth. The rest belongs to the Lord."

Caleb nodded, slow. "I do not know what my truth is."

Pastor Whitaker adjusted the Bible under his arm. "Then do what you did this morning. Keep showing up. Keep asking." He paused. "God speaks in His Word. He speaks in prayer. He speaks through wise counsel. He also speaks through obedience in small steps."

Caleb's chest eased a fraction. "Small steps I can do."

Pastor Whitaker smiled a little. "Good."

A voice called from the tent field. Someone needed Pastor Whitaker regarding seating for older members. Pastor Whitaker excused himself and walked away, his pace unhurried.

Caleb stood alone again by the prayer garden.

He looked at the bench where Naomi had sat. He pictured her hands on the notebook. He pictured the way her eyes softened when she admitted she did not want to choose the wrong one.

He understood her more than he wanted to.

He walked back to the parking lot and sat in his car with the windows down. He did not start the engine. He let the warm air move through the cabin. He listened to the sounds of work around the church.

He took his phone and finally answered his friend.

Back for revival week. I am fine.

He stared at the words. Fine was a lie and also not. He hit send anyway.

His phone buzzed almost at once.

Cool. Have fun. Do not get stuck there.

Caleb read it twice. His jaw tightened. He set the phone down.

Do not get stuck there.

He looked back at the tent. In daylight, it did not look like a trap. It looked like a place where people gathered to seek God. It looked like a place where a young man who had spent years proving himself could admit he felt unsure.

He rested his forehead against the steering wheel for a moment. He whispered, low enough no one could hear.

“Lord, I do not want to run.”

The words came out plain. They felt like a start.

He lifted his head and sat back. He watched volunteers move chairs. He watched Eli Brooks secure cables along the edge of the stage. He saw Hannah Whitaker step out of the church with a box in her arms, her hair pinned up, her face focused.

Maple Ridge did not look like the world Caleb had built away from it. It did not look like his campus or his crowded music department halls. It looked slower. It looked rooted. It looked like a place where choices lingered.

The day pushed forward. Heat deepened. The sky stayed clear, bright blue without clouds.

Caleb went inside and helped where he could. He carried boxes of hymnals to the tent. He hauled coolers from the kitchen to the fellowship hall. He moved stacks of folding chairs when someone asked. He kept his eyes open for Naomi without hunting for her.

Near midday he found her again in the hallway outside the youth rooms. She stood on tiptoe, plugging in a fan on a high shelf. The cord slipped from her fingers and swung down.

Caleb caught it before it hit her face. He held it up. “Here.”

Naomi looked at him, startled. “Thank you.”

He held the fan steady while she secured the plug. Her forearm brushed his once as she reached. She froze for a beat, then kept working.

When the fan started, it blew her loose strands of hair back from her face. She blinked against the breeze.

Caleb stepped back. “You should let someone else carry some of this.”

Naomi turned to him. “Like who?”

“Like me,” he said.

Naomi studied him. “You already do a lot.”

Caleb shook his head. “I do tasks. You carry responsibility.”

Naomi’s eyes narrowed, thoughtful. “You think you can carry it better.”

“I think I can carry some.” He paused. “If you let me.”

Naomi’s face softened, then tightened again. “Why?”

The question hit him. It did not sound accusatory. It sounded guarded. Naomi had learned to demand motive, because she had seen people offer help and then vanish.

Caleb answered with the only truth he knew. “Because I do not want to be the type of person who leaves messes for others.”

Naomi held his gaze. Her breath moved slowly. “Okay.”

The single word felt like a door opening a crack.

She handed him a folded list torn from her notebook. “Then take this to the tent. Check each item. Mark it done. If something is missing, tell me.”

Caleb took the list. “I will.”

As he turned to go, Naomi spoke again. “Caleb.”

He stopped and looked back.

Naomi's voice stayed quiet. "Thank you for sitting out there earlier."

Caleb blinked. "For sitting."

"For being honest," Naomi said.

His throat tightened. "I did not say much."

"You said enough," she replied.

Caleb nodded once, then walked away before he said something clumsy.

In the tent, he moved through the list. Extra Bibles on the side table. Tissues in the back rows. Water station stocked. First aid kit under the welcome table. He marked each item with the pen Naomi had clipped to the paper.

When he reached the last item, he paused.

Prayer cards placed on every other chair.

He stared at the chairs. The idea of prayer cards felt small and also heavy. People would write names. They would write needs. They would hand them forward, and the church would carry them.

Caleb grabbed a stack of cards and started setting them out row by row. The paper felt cool in his fingers. The tent smelled like canvas, grass, and dust. Fans pushed air in slow circles. Sunlight filtered through the open sides and lit the metal chair legs.

He worked without rushing.

As he placed the cards, he thought about the question Naomi had named and the question he carried too.

What comes after August?

For the first time, he did not treat it like a problem to solve fast. He treated it like a prayer to live with.

When he finished, he stood at the front near the stage and looked out at the rows. Empty chairs waited for bodies, for voices, for tears, for raised hands.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and opened his Bible app. He searched for Ecclesiastes and found the verse his uncle had quoted once when Caleb faced a choice.

Whoever watches the wind will not plant. Whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.

Caleb read it twice. He let it sit.

He put the phone away and stepped down from the stage.

Outside, the afternoon stretched long. Heat shimmered over the field. The string lights hung slack in the sun, waiting for dusk.

Caleb walked back toward the church for rehearsal later, list completed, pen tucked behind his ear. His chest still held uncertainty, but it also held something else.

A willingness to stay present for one more day. A willingness to stop watching the wind long enough to plant something small and faithful.

He did not know what came after August.

He only knew he did not want to run from the question anymore.

Chapter 5

Testimony Night

By late afternoon, the air inside the tent turned thick and close. The fans moved it around without cooling it. The canvas held heat like a skillet.

Caleb Monroe stood at the edge of the small stage and watched people arrive in slow pockets. Folding chairs scraped the ground. The sound traveled through the tent like both a warning and a welcome. Someone laughed near the back. Someone else hushed a child.

He adjusted a mic stand and checked the cable with his foot. He did not hurry. He had learned in three nights of revival that the tent did not respond to hurry. The tent responded to steadiness.

He glanced toward the side opening.

Naomi Reyes stood near the welcome table with a stack of bulletins in her arms. She wore a simple cotton dress the color of sand. Her dark hair lay in a braid over one shoulder. She spoke to an older couple, her face turned up, her smile easy.

Caleb looked away before he stared too long. He moved to the guitar stand and tightened the strap on his acoustic. His palms held a thin film of sweat. He wiped them on his jeans and tried to focus on the set list taped to the floor.

Tonight would be testimonies.

Pastor Whitaker had announced it on Sunday and again last night. He had spoken with quiet care. He did not push. He invited. He told them God still moved in ordinary lives. He told them stories did not need polish to carry truth.

Caleb believed him.

He also felt the weight of the word testimony like a stone in his pocket.

He had led worship in the chapel at school. He had led in conferences. He had stood in front of strangers and sung words he meant. Yet testimony night in Maple Ridge felt different. These people would talk about their real lives. They would talk about sins, grief, and fear. They would talk about what changed.

And Maple Ridge held memory like a ledger.

Caleb checked his tuning and listened as the strings settled. He heard the low murmur of voices build. The sun dipped enough to send a soft gold slant through the open sides of the tent. Dust floated in the light.

Eli Brooks stepped in from the side and nodded once at Caleb. Eli carried a crate of bottled water and set it under the edge of the stage.

“You good?” Eli said.

Caleb nodded. “Yes.”

Eli looked at him for a beat, like he heard the word and checked the space behind it. Then he reached up and tightened one of the string light hooks overhead. He did it without fuss. He did most things that way.

Caleb watched him work. Eli had a calm to him Caleb did not understand yet. It did not feel like personality. It felt like surrender practiced over time.

Naomi finished at the welcome table and crossed the tent with a clipboard in hand. She stopped at the front row and placed a fresh box of tissues under a chair. Then she came toward the stage.

Caleb kept his eyes on his guitar.

“Your capo,” Naomi said.

He looked up.

She held it out in her palm. A black clamp. Small. Essential.

He felt heat rise in his neck. “I thought I had it.”

“It fell off the music stand,” she said. “It landed by the monitor.”

He took it and closed his fingers around it. Their hands did not touch. The closeness still charged the air between them.

“Thank you,” he said.

Naomi nodded and looked past him at the chairs. “It will fill up.”

“It has,” he said.

She glanced back, and her eyes held his for a second. Her gaze stayed steady. She did not flinch from him, even when he did not know what to say.

“I am glad you stayed,” she said.

The words landed clean, no hint of teasing. No pressure. No trap.

Caleb swallowed. “Me too.”

Naomi shifted her weight. “Pastor Whitaker asked me to remind you. After the second song, he will come up. He wants you to keep playing soft. No full stop.”

“Under him,” Caleb said. “I can do that.”

Naomi looked at his guitar. “You always did.”

He felt the old past tense press on him. A room in the church years ago. A youth night. His hands on strings. A crowd of kids singing too loud. Naomi in the second row, eyes closed, face lifted, not trying to be seen, a different life.

He kept his voice careful. “Yes.”

Naomi stepped back. “I will be near the side if you need anything.”

He nodded.

She turned and walked away, braid swinging once against her shoulder. Caleb watched her for a heartbeat, then faced forward and forced his mind back to the order of the night.

The worship team gathered behind him. Two girls from the youth group held the microphones with both hands as if they were precious. A boy set his cajon in place and tapped the face of it lightly. Another young man ran a cable to the keyboard and plugged it in.

Caleb took a breath. He prayed without sound.

Lord, keep it simple. Keep it honest. Let them hear You.

Outside the tent, the field rolled into shadow. The grass held the day’s heat. Fireflies began to blink near the edge of the parking area. Their small lights rose and fell like a slow song.

People kept coming.

A group of teenagers from a town twenty minutes away pushed through the entrance in a tight cluster. Their laughter came too loud for the space. They slowed when they saw the crowd. They found seats near the middle.

Mrs. Alder walked in with a paper fan in her hand and a Bible tucked under her arm. She wore a pale blue blouse and her hair sat in a neat

bun. She nodded at Naomi, then at Caleb. Her eyes held a kind of watchfulness. She did not judge. She noticed.

Hannah Whitaker moved down the aisle with a toddler on her hip and a diaper bag slung over her shoulder. She whispered something to Eli near the back, and he nodded. Hannah's eyes swept the tent like she counted needs before they happened.

Caleb felt the pull of old familiarity. These people belonged to one another. They fought and forgave and ate casseroles in each other's kitchens. They buried their dead in the cemetery behind the church and sang through tears.

Caleb had left all of it.

He had told himself he left for good reasons. College. Opportunity. A future. He had told himself Maple Ridge had no room for him anymore.

He had not known if that was true until he returned and felt the way his chest tightened when someone said his name.

Tonight, testimonies would come. Stories would rise from chairs and stand in open air. Caleb did not know what it would do to him.

Pastor Whitaker stepped up to the small platform near the stage and adjusted his microphone. His hair had more gray than Caleb remembered. His shoulders stayed broad. His eyes stayed kind.

He leaned close to Naomi near the side and said something quiet. Naomi nodded. She walked to the front and took a seat on the aisle near the first row. She set her clipboard on her lap and folded her hands over it.

Caleb took his place at center stage and looked out.

The tent held more bodies than the night before. Folding chairs filled in. Extra chairs lined the back. Kids sat on the grass near the open sides, their legs crossed, their faces shiny with sweat. The sound of cicadas rose in the trees beyond the field. A warm breeze moved through and lifted the canvas edge like a slow breath.

Caleb leaned to the mic.

“Good evening,” he said. His voice came out steady. He surprised himself. “We are going to sing for a bit. Then Pastor Whitaker will lead us into testimony time. If anyone has never been here before, Maple Ridge is glad you came.”

A few heads nodded. A few people smiled.

Caleb looked down at his guitar and found the first chord. He strummed once. The sound rang out clean. He began the opening song, one Maple Ridge had sung for years. The words came simple. The melody carried easily.

Voices joined. At first they came scattered. Then they gathered, the tent filled with sound.

Caleb watched faces as he played. A teenage boy sang with his eyes open, staring hard at the stage as if he dared the words to be true. An older man sang without moving his lips much, his jaw set, his eyes wet. A young mom bounced a baby on her knee and mouthed the chorus while the baby grabbed her necklace.

Naomi sang too. She sat with her shoulders relaxed, her voice soft but sure. She kept her eyes forward. She did not look at Caleb. She did not need to.

They moved to a second song. One of the girls stepped forward and sang a verse in a clear voice. Her hands shook. Caleb kept his strum steady under her.

As the song ended, Caleb did not stop. He shifted to a gentle progression, chords spread wide, sound low. The tent quieted. The last voices faded like breath.

Pastor Whitaker walked up and stood near the mic, hands resting on the wooden edge of the stand.

“Amen,” he said. He looked around the tent, letting his gaze travel slowly. “Thank you, worship team.”

Caleb kept playing softly.

Pastor Whitaker nodded once at Caleb, a silent cue to keep going.

“Tonight is testimony night,” Pastor Whitaker said. “No pressure. No performance. When the Lord does a work in someone, it does not stay hidden forever. It comes out. Sometimes it comes out in song. Sometimes it comes out in the way someone forgives. Sometimes it comes out in words spoken with fear and faith in the same breath.”

A few people shifted in their seats. Caleb heard the scrape of a shoe on gravel.

Pastor Whitaker continued. “If someone has a story to share, a word of thanks, a prayer God answered, a burden God lifted, this is time for it. If someone needs prayer, those cards on the chairs are there for a reason. Write a name. Write a need. If words feel hard, hand the card forward anyway.”

Caleb kept the chord progression steady. It gave people something to rest on.

Pastor Whitaker glanced toward the back. “Before anyone else comes up, I asked someone to start us. Not because his story is bigger than anyone else. Because he knows what it is to leave and what it is to come home.”

Caleb's right hand faltered for half a beat. He recovered fast, but his stomach clenched.

Pastor Whitaker looked toward the front row. "Eli Brooks."

Eli stood from his seat near the back. He did not look surprised. He walked up the aisle with his hands at his sides.

The tent went quiet. Even the teenagers stilled.

Eli stepped up to the platform and stood at the mic. He did not touch it. He did not clear his throat. He looked out at the people like they were family because they were.

"I do not like microphones," Eli said.

A few soft chuckles moved through the tent. The sound eased the tightness.

Eli looked down for a second. Then he lifted his eyes again. "I spent years thinking God would never want to use me. I spent years thinking my worst day would follow me forever. I kept my head down. I fixed things with my hands because it felt safer than speaking."

He paused. He took a breath.

"Then the Lord kept bringing me back to His Word," Eli said. "It did not happen in a flash. It happened in mornings when I did not feel holy. It happened in nights when shame wanted to lie down in bed with me and tell me I belonged to it."

A hush settled. Caleb felt the hairs on his arms rise.

Eli continued. "I learned the Lord does not wait for a man to clean himself up. He meets him in the dirt. He takes what is broken, and He does not throw it away. He rebuilds it."

Eli's eyes moved across the crowd. They landed on Pastor Whitaker for a brief second. Then they moved on.

"I want to say thank you to this church," Eli said. "Some of you prayed when I did not know you prayed. Some of you spoke truth when I did not want to hear it. Some of you gave me work when you could have turned your back."

Eli swallowed. His voice stayed firm.

"And I want to say this," he said. "If someone in here thinks leaving town means leaving guilt behind, it does not. Guilt follows. It rides in the passenger seat. It talks loud in the quiet. It only quiets when the Lord speaks louder."

Caleb's fingers tightened on the guitar neck. His heart beat hard. Eli did not look at him. Eli spoke to the whole room. Still, Caleb felt the words land right on his chest.

Eli's voice softened. "If someone thinks coming home means everyone will clap and forget, it does not always work like that. People are human. Some will remember. Some will whisper. The Lord still calls a man home. He still offers forgiveness. He still offers a place at the table."

Eli nodded once, like he finished what he came to say.

"I thank God for mercy," he said. "And I thank Him for patience. I am still learning. I am still asking Him to make my life match what I say I believe."

Eli stepped back from the mic. He looked at Pastor Whitaker and nodded.

Pastor Whitaker's eyes shone. He clasped Eli's shoulder for a brief second. Eli walked off the platform and back down the aisle without looking around for approval.

Caleb kept playing. His hands moved on muscle memory, but his mind spun.

Leaving town. Passenger seat. Coming home. Whispering. The Lord speaking louder.

Caleb stared at the guitar strings. He felt exposed without anyone saying his name.

Pastor Whitaker leaned to the mic again.

“Thank you, Eli,” he said. “Thank you for telling the truth.”

Pastor Whitaker looked across the crowd. “Who else?”

Silence held for a moment. The tent breathed. The fans hummed. A child coughed.

Then a teenage girl stood from the middle section. She wore a sweatshirt even in the heat, sleeves pulled over her hands. She kept her head down as she walked up. Her sneakers scuffed the ground.

Caleb watched her. He did not know her face. She belonged to the visiting group.

She stepped to the mic and stared at it as if it might bite.

Pastor Whitaker moved a half step closer, still giving her space.

“My name is Brooke,” she said. Her voice shook. “I came because my friend told me there was music and free cookies.”

A few people smiled. The tension eased.

Brooke’s eyes stayed down. “I have been mad at God,” she said. “My parents split up last year. My dad left. He does not call much. My mom works all the time. I have been mad at God because I prayed and it did not change anything.”

Her voice cracked. She swallowed and tried again.

“I do not know much about the Bible,” Brooke said. “But last night someone read something. It was in Joel. It said God would pour out His Spirit. It said sons and daughters would prophesy. I do not even know what that means.”

She lifted her eyes for the first time. Tears sat on her lashes.

“But I think it means He still sees us,” she said. “I think it means He still shows up even if people leave. Even if dads leave.”

A sound moved through the tent. Quiet. Tender.

Brooke wiped her cheek with her sleeve. “I asked God last night to help me stop hating Him. I asked Him to help me trust Him again. I do not feel fixed. I do not feel brave. I feel scared.”

Her hands clenched into fists near her sides.

“But when we sang, I felt something,” Brooke said. “I felt like God was near. I have not felt that in a long time.”

She drew in a shaky breath. “I just wanted to say it out loud.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. “Thank you, Brooke.”

Brooke stepped away fast, like she feared the tears might fall harder if she stayed. She walked back to her seat and slid in next to her friend.

Caleb’s throat tightened. He kept playing, but his eyes blurred for a second. He blinked hard and stared at the tent pole in front of him until his vision cleared.

Testimonies came one after another. Some small. Some heavy.

A young man stood and admitted he had lied to his parents about where he went at night. He said he felt sick of hiding. He said he wanted to turn around.

An older woman stood and spoke of her husband's long illness. She said she had prayed for healing and watched him weaken anyway. She said she had learned God stayed faithful even when the answer hurt.

A boy from Maple Ridge, one Caleb remembered from childhood, stood and talked about graduating in a week. He said he feared leaving home. He said he feared staying. He said he did not know what God wanted.

Caleb felt each story like a thumb pressed into bruises he pretended not to have. He played through it all. His right hand kept the rhythm. His left hand formed chords without thought.

Naomi did not move much. She listened with her whole face. When someone cried, she leaned forward a little. When someone laughed through nerves, she smiled without mocking. When someone stopped mid-sentence, she did not fill the silence. She let it stand.

Caleb watched her in pieces, careful not to stare. He saw the way her hands stayed folded. He saw her thumb rub the edge of the clipboard. He saw her blink slowly when someone talked about fear of the future.

He wondered what she carried beneath her calm.

Pastor Whitaker stepped back up after a lull and spoke gently. "If someone has never shared before, it does not need to be long. The Lord honors honest words."

A man stood near the side. Caleb recognized him as Fire Chief Haines. His shoulders stayed square, his posture firm. He walked to the mic with the weight of a man used to crisis.

“I am not a talker,” Haines said.

A ripple of quiet laughter moved through the tent. People knew him.

Haines looked out, eyes narrowed in the lights. “I have seen fires take houses in minutes,” he said. “I have seen wrecks on the highway. I have seen families waiting for news in the dark.”

He paused. His jaw tightened.

“I have also seen young people pray over a friend in the back of an ambulance,” he said. “I have seen God hold a mother steady when her world shook. I have seen peace come down on a scene I did not think peace could touch.”

He looked toward the youth section. “Some of you think you are too young to matter,” he said. “You matter. God uses young hearts. Do not waste your years.”

Caleb heard the Scripture thread under it. Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young.

Haines nodded once. “I needed to say it.”

He stepped away from the mic and walked back to his seat without looking left or right.

The night moved deeper. The string lights glowed warm under the canvas. Outside, the sky turned dark purple and then deep blue. More fireflies blinked at the edge of the field.

Caleb’s fingers started to ache. He kept playing anyway. The music became a thread holding the room together while people bared what they often hid.

After a pause, Pastor Whitaker looked toward the front row. “Naomi.”

Caleb’s breath caught.

Naomi’s head lifted. Her eyes widened a fraction. She did not look like she expected her name. She glanced at Pastor Whitaker, then down at her lap. Her hands tightened on the clipboard.

Caleb watched her stand. She moved with care, as if sudden motion might break something inside her. She walked up the aisle. People watched her with warmth. Maple Ridge knew Naomi. They knew her family. They knew her as the girl who stacked chairs after potlucks and sang in the choir even when she had a cold.

She stepped onto the platform and stood at the mic. Her shoulders rose with a breath. She set the clipboard down on the edge of the stand and let her hands fall at her sides.

For a moment she did not speak.

Caleb kept the music soft. He shifted to a simpler pattern. He gave her more space.

Naomi looked out at the tent. Her eyes found faces. Mrs. Alder. Hannah. Eli. Teenagers. Visiting kids. Parents.

Then Naomi’s gaze flicked toward Caleb, fast. It felt like a check. It felt like she wanted to know he stayed with her.

Caleb met her eyes and held them for a second. He nodded once.

Naomi swallowed.

“I did not plan to come up here,” she said.

Her voice did not shake much. It held a quiet steadiness, as if she were speaking to a classroom. Still, something in her tone carried tenderness. Something close to fear.

“I grew up here,” Naomi said. “Maple Ridge is home. I know most of you. You have seen me in the fellowship hall, in the choir, in the kitchen. You have seen me when I was little and when I thought being grown would feel clearer.”

A small smile touched her mouth. It faded.

“This summer I finished another semester,” she said. “I am studying education. I want to teach. I want to do it well. I keep thinking about what comes next, where I will work, where I will live. What kind of life I will build.”

Her fingers curled lightly, then released.

“And I keep feeling pulled,” Naomi said. “Pulled between staying and going. Between what I know and what I think I want. Between duty and desire.”

She paused. Her eyes went to the open side of the tent, to the dark field beyond. The sound of crickets rose and fell.

Naomi looked back at the crowd. “I have prayed for God to tell me His plan,” she said. “I have asked for a sign. I have asked for a feeling. I have asked Him to make it easy.”

A few people nodded. Some smiled with recognition.

“But this week,” Naomi said, “I have felt something different. I have felt God asking me to trust Him without a map.”

Her eyes shone. She blinked once, slowly.

“I do not know where I will be in a year,” she said. “I do not know what comes after August. I do know the Lord does not waste seasons. I do know He does not call people to faith only when they feel ready.”

Her voice softened. “I have seen young hearts in this tent hungry for God. I have seen friends who were tired of pretending. I have seen people pray with honesty. It has reminded me that God is alive in Maple Ridge. He is alive in the ordinary.”

She took a breath. It trembled at the end.

“And I want to say I am sorry,” Naomi said.

The words fell into silence. Caleb’s hand slowed, then steadied again.

Naomi held the mic with both hands now, as if she needed to anchor herself. “I am sorry for the times I judged someone who left,” she said. “I told myself I was being faithful. Sometimes I was only being afraid.”

Caleb’s chest tightened. He kept his eyes on Naomi.

Naomi’s voice stayed gentle. “I am sorry for the times I looked at someone’s choices and thought I knew their heart. I did not. I only knew my own fear. I wanted to be safe. I wanted to be sure.”

Her gaze moved across the crowd. It did not land on anyone too long. It did not accuse.

“I am asking God to give me love instead,” Naomi said. “Love that listens. Love that stays open. Love that trusts Him with other people’s stories.”

She swallowed. Her eyes brimmed, and she did not wipe them.

“I do not know what my future is,” she said. “But I know who holds it. I know Jesus has never failed me. I know His Word keeps me clean when the world pulls me in ten directions. I want my life to honor Him.”

Her voice turned smaller. “I want to be brave enough to follow Him even when it means change.”

She took one last breath. “Thank you for praying for me.”

Naomi stepped back from the mic. She wiped one tear with her fingertips and gave a small nod. She picked up her clipboard and walked down the steps.

People did not clap. They did not treat it like a show. Instead, the tent held a deep quiet. Someone whispered amen. Someone else whispered it too.

Naomi returned to her seat, her shoulders slightly hunched, as if she felt exposed. She stared at her hands.

Caleb kept playing. He did not trust himself to look away. Her words had pressed against a place in him he kept guarded.

I judged someone who left.

Caleb wondered if she meant him. He wondered if she meant more than him. He wondered if her apology came from a conversation with God or from something sharper.

He felt tenderness rise in him, with nowhere to go.

Pastor Whitaker stepped up.

“Thank you, Naomi,” he said.

He looked out at the crowd. “Anyone else?”

A boy stood near the back. Caleb recognized him as Micah Carter from stories he had heard in town. Micah looked younger than Caleb, still in his teens, with a narrow frame and a serious face. He walked to the front with his hands shoved in his pockets.

Micah stood at the mic and stared at the floor.

“My dad told me to come,” Micah said.

A soft laugh moved through the room. Micah did not smile.

“I did not want to,” Micah said. “I wanted to stay home and play games.”

More quiet laughter, warmer.

Micah lifted his eyes. “I do not know how to say church words,” he said. “I do not know how to pray in front of people.”

He looked toward Pastor Whitaker as if to ask if it was still allowed.

Pastor Whitaker nodded.

Micah swallowed. “This week,” he said, “I started thinking about what kind of man I want to be. I started thinking about how easy it is to waste time.”

Caleb felt the words hit him. Waste time. Watch the wind. Look at the clouds.

Micah continued. “I kept thinking I had a long time. Then I listened to that verse Pastor Whitaker read. It was in Ecclesiastes. It said whoever watches the wind will not plant.”

Micah’s voice steadied as he spoke Scripture out loud.

“I do not want to be a guy who watches the wind,” Micah said. “I want to do what God wants. I do not know what it is yet. But I want to start. I want to stop making excuses.”

He shrugged one shoulder, awkward. “That is all.”

Micah walked back to his seat and sat fast.

Caleb's hands kept moving, but his mind ran. God had used Naomi to speak his own private question, then used a teenager to speak the verse Caleb had read alone hours earlier.

It felt like God's hand on his shoulder.

Not hard. Firm.

The testimonies slowed after that. People sat in quiet, heads bowed, hands clasped. Some wrote on prayer cards and passed them down the row. The white cards moved forward like small offerings.

Caleb played softer. His fingers hovered on strings more than they pressed. He let silence come between chords.

Pastor Whitaker stepped to the mic again.

"Let us pray," he said.

Caleb faded the music down to a faint hum and then let it stop. The sudden quiet filled his ears. He set his hand on the body of the guitar to still the last vibration.

Pastor Whitaker prayed in a voice built for this, steady and warm.

He thanked God for saving mercy. He thanked God for young hearts. He asked God to guard what began in the tent. He asked God to carry truth home with each person. He asked God to heal families. He asked God to call people by name.

Caleb bowed his head. He prayed too, without sound.

Lord, do not let me hide. Do not let me leave unchanged.

When Pastor Whitaker finished, the tent stayed quiet for a moment longer. No one rushed to stand. No one grabbed their bags and pushed out. It felt like the air held something sacred and fragile.

Then Pastor Whitaker spoke again. “If anyone wrote a prayer card and wants someone to pray with them tonight, come forward. Elders and leaders will be here.”

People began to move. Chairs creaked. Footsteps sounded on gravel. A few teens walked forward together, close enough to touch shoulders. Mrs. Alder came, knelt in the front row, and spoke with a young woman, her hand on the girl’s arm.

Naomi stood and walked toward the side aisle. She moved to a group of younger girls and crouched beside them. She listened more than she spoke. Then she prayed with them, head bowed, hands resting gently on their clasped fingers.

Caleb watched from the stage, still holding his guitar. He felt unsure where to go. He was a leader tonight, yet he felt like the one who needed prayer.

Eli stepped near the stage and nodded toward the floor. “You can set the guitar down,” he said.

Caleb swallowed. “Yes.”

He placed the guitar on the stand with care. His fingers tingled from playing.

Eli stood beside him for a moment, both of them looking out.

“You heard a lot,” Eli said.

Caleb nodded once. “Yes.”

Eli’s eyes stayed on the crowd. “Testimony night does not leave a man the same.”

Caleb’s throat tightened. “No.”

Eli glanced at him, then looked away again. “You do not need to talk to me,” he said. “You do need to talk to the Lord.”

Caleb let out a breath. “I have.”

Eli’s voice stayed gentle. “Keep going.”

Caleb nodded.

On the far side, Naomi finished praying and stood. She wiped her cheeks with the edge of her fingers and tried to smooth her face back into calm. She turned as if to return to her seat, then stopped when she saw Caleb watching.

Her eyes held his. Her shoulders drew back a little, like she chose not to retreat.

Caleb stepped down from the stage and walked toward her through the aisle. People moved around them, some crying, some hugging, some quiet, the tent filled with low prayers and soft conversation.

When he reached Naomi, he stopped a few feet away. He did not want to crowd her.

Naomi held her clipboard against her chest. “Are you all right?” she asked.

Caleb nodded. Then he shook his head.

Naomi’s brow furrowed. She waited.

Caleb looked down at the ground, at the crushed grass under their shoes. He heard the hum of the fans. He heard someone whisper a prayer behind him.

He lifted his eyes again. “When you said you were sorry,” he said, “I did not know if you meant me.”

Naomi’s face tightened for a second. Her gaze dropped.

“I did not plan to say it,” she said.

“I know,” Caleb said. “But you did.”

Naomi nodded. Her fingers tightened on the clipboard.

“I did mean you,” she said. “And I did not mean only you.”

Caleb absorbed it. The admission stung. It also felt honest.

Naomi’s voice stayed low. “I did not understand why you left,” she said. “I told myself it was pride. I told myself you did not care. I told myself you did not love this place.”

Caleb felt shame rise fast. He swallowed it down. “Some of that was true.”

Naomi looked up, eyes bright. “I do not know,” she said. “I never asked. I assumed. I prayed for you in a way that made me feel right, not in a way that loved you.”

Caleb’s chest ached. He wanted to tell her he deserved it. He wanted to tell her he did not. Both felt too small for what sat between them.

Naomi’s voice softened. “I am sorry,” she said again.

Caleb stared at her for a long moment. The tent noise wrapped around them, but it felt like a small private room.

“I am sorry too,” he said.

Naomi blinked. “For what?”

“For leaving the way I did,” Caleb said. “For making it easy for people to assume the worst. For acting like God could not reach me in Maple Ridge.”

Naomi’s lips parted, then closed. She nodded once, slow.

Caleb felt the edge of something dangerous. Vulnerability. He kept his voice steady.

“Thank you for saying what you said,” he told her.

Naomi’s eyes flicked toward the floor. “It was embarrassing.”

“It was brave,” Caleb said.

Naomi’s breath caught, small. She looked back up and held his gaze.

“Your playing helped,” she said. “It gave people room.”

Caleb nodded. “I learned it at church,” he said. “I learned it here.”

Naomi gave a small smile. It came and went fast.

A group of teens walked past them toward the exit, still talking in hushed voices. One of the girls looked at Caleb and Naomi, then quickly looked away, cheeks pink.

Naomi shifted her stance. “Do you need to talk to Pastor Whitaker?” she asked.

Caleb’s stomach tightened. He had not planned it. He had not prepared words. He had tried to keep tonight about others.

He glanced toward the front where Pastor Whitaker stood with an elder, praying with a young couple. Pastor Whitaker’s hand rested on the man’s shoulder. The man’s face crumpled as he cried.

Caleb swallowed. “I do not know,” he said.

Naomi nodded. “It is all right.”

Caleb looked at her. “Did you mean what you said?” he asked, “about trusting God without a map.”

Naomi's grip on the clipboard eased. "Yes," she said. "I want to mean it every day. I do not always."

Caleb nodded. "I read Ecclesiastes earlier," he said. "The verse about watching the wind."

Naomi's eyes softened. "God keeps repeating things," she said.

"Yes," Caleb said. "It is hard to ignore."

Naomi looked toward the open side of the tent. The night pressed in warm and close. Fireflies blinked over the dark grass. "Do you ever feel like summer is too loud?" she asked, "like it tells the truth too fast."

Caleb felt a quiet smile pull at his mouth. It faded into something tender. "Yes," he said.

Naomi looked back at him. "I am glad you are here for it."

Caleb's heart moved in his chest. He held her gaze, then nodded once. "Me too."

They stood in silence for a moment. It did not feel awkward. It felt full.

Eli walked past with a trash bag, gathering empty water bottles. He glanced at Caleb and gave a small nod, then continued.

Hannah Whitaker passed by with the toddler asleep on her shoulder. She smiled at Naomi, then at Caleb, and kept walking. Her smile carried quiet knowing without pushing.

Caleb watched the flow of people. The night slowly shifted from open prayer to closing chores. Someone folded chairs near the back. Someone wiped the welcome table. The worship team gathered cables.

Naomi lifted her clipboard. “I need to collect the prayer cards,” she said. “Pastor Whitaker wants them sorted by need. Some go to the elders. Some go to the women’s prayer group.”

Caleb nodded. “I can help.”

Naomi hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Caleb said. “I want to.”

Naomi nodded. “All right.”

They walked down the row together and picked up cards from the chairs. Some were blank. Some held scribbled names. Some had shaky handwriting. Some had smudges where tears fell.

Caleb held each one as it mattered. He read a few without meaning to. Please help my mom stop drinking. Please help my brother come home. Please forgive me. Please show me what to do after graduation. Please help me want You.

His throat tightened again.

Naomi carried a stack against her chest. Her face stayed calm, but her eyes looked heavier.

They brought the stacks to the welcome table and set them down. Naomi began sorting them into piles with careful hands. Caleb followed her lead, quiet.

When they finished, Naomi exhaled and rested her palms on the edge of the table.

“I am tired,” she said.

Caleb nodded. “Me too.”

Naomi looked at him, then down. “Thank you for helping,” she said.

Caleb shifted his weight. “Thank you for letting me.”

Naomi’s eyes lifted. They held his again. Something gentle sat there. Something new.

Pastor Whitaker approached, his Bible tucked under his arm. He looked between them, then at the prayer cards.

“Thank you,” he said to Naomi.

Naomi nodded. “Yes, Pastor.”

Pastor Whitaker turned to Caleb. “Thank you for leading tonight,” he said.

Caleb’s mouth went dry. “Yes, sir.”

Pastor Whitaker studied him with quiet care. “If you want to talk, my office is open,” he said. “Not tonight. You have carried a long evening. Another time.”

Caleb nodded, grateful for the space. “Yes,” he said. “Thank you.”

Pastor Whitaker rested his hand on Caleb’s shoulder for a brief second. The touch grounded him.

Then Pastor Whitaker looked at Naomi. “Walk safely to your car,” he said.

Naomi smiled. “I will.”

Pastor Whitaker left them and carried the prayer cards toward the church.

Caleb and Naomi stood in the thinning crowd. The tent felt bigger as people left. The fans still hummed. The string lights glowed steady.

Naomi picked up her clipboard. “I parked by the fellowship hall,” she said.

Caleb nodded. “I parked near the road.”

They started walking toward the open side together, moving with the slow pace of people who did not want to break what the night had built.

Outside, the air felt cooler than inside the tent, though the ground still held heat. The grass smelled sweet and crushed under their steps.

They reached the edge of the field where the church building rose white in the night, windows dark now except for a few soft lights inside. The steeple stood against the deep sky.

Naomi paused near the path leading to the parking area. “Good night,” she said.

Caleb stopped too. “Good night.”

Naomi’s fingers tightened on the clipboard again. “I am glad you did not run,” she said, voice low.

Caleb felt the words land like an offering.

He nodded once. “I am glad too.”

Naomi held his gaze for a moment longer, then turned and walked toward her car, her sandals scuffing the gravel lightly.

Caleb watched her go until she reached the light near the fellowship hall door. She did not look back. She did not need to.

He turned toward his own car, the night wrapped around him, warm and alive with insects and distant voices. Behind him the tent stood

steady, canvas breathing in the dark, lights glowing like small stars held low to the ground.

Caleb walked slower than he meant to. His chest felt full. He did not know what to do with it yet.

He reached his car and rested a hand on the roof before he opened the door. He looked back once at the tent, then at the church steeple beyond it.

Testimony night had pulled things out into the open. It had made room for truth. It had made room for apology. It had made room for God to speak close.

Caleb slid into the driver's seat and sat without starting the engine. The steering wheel felt warm under his hands.

He did not know what God would ask of him before this summer ended.

He only knew he did not want to watch the wind anymore. He wanted to plant something faithful while he had the chance.

Chapter 6

The Prayer Behind the Tent

Caleb sat with both hands on the steering wheel. The engine stayed off. The heat from the day still lived in the vinyl and the glass. Crickets stitched the dark together. A few late voices drifted from the church doors as people stacked chairs inside the tent.

He watched the tent for a moment. The string lights made the canvas glow. The ropes held tight. The poles stood like quiet guards.

His phone sat face down in the console. No buzzing. No pull from campus. No group chat. No reminder of who he became when he left Maple Ridge.

He breathed in through his nose. Cut grass. Dust. A hint of someone's perfume from earlier in the aisle.

Naomi's words stayed with him. I am glad you did not run.

He pressed his thumb into the seam of the steering wheel. He did not trust his own habits. He had run before. He had learned how to make it look like wisdom.

He got out of the car and closed the door with care. Gravel shifted under his shoes. He did not head toward his uncle's house. He did not head toward the road.

He walked back toward the field.

The tent stood beside the church like a second sanctuary. The main church building looked asleep. The steeple cut the sky clean. A porch light near the fellowship hall left a small pool on the walkway. Beyond it, darkness spread over the cemetery and the tree line.

Caleb walked along the side of the tent instead of through the opening. He passed the edge where people had stood laughing

earlier. Now only a few lingered by the sound table. A teenage boy coiled a cable with slow hands. Someone snapped a case closed.

Caleb kept going. He followed the line where canvas met the night. The back of the tent grew quiet. The string lights did not reach as far. A single work light hung near the rear pole and threw a hard circle on the grass.

He stepped past it into shadow.

Behind the tent, the air felt different. The breeze moved more easily. The sound of voices turned thin. He heard the steady click of the fans inside, muted by canvas. He heard a frog from the ditch near the far fence.

He stopped where the tent ropes anchored into the ground. Stakes sat deep. Each rope ran tight, a straight line from earth to canvas. Someone had tied the knots with care. No slack. No hurry.

Caleb stood with his hands at his sides and looked at the dark field. Fireflies blinked low near the grass. They appeared, then vanished. He felt the small ache of wanting to be steady like the ropes.

He lifted his face toward the sky. Stars hid behind summer haze, but a few showed through.

He tried to pray. Words did not come.

He swallowed. His throat felt rough, like he had been singing too hard, though he had not led much that night. He had stood at the edge of the stage and played when asked. He had watched the room. He had watched Naomi more than he meant to.

He took a step closer to the back pole and rested a hand against it. The metal felt warm, then cooled under his palm.

He closed his eyes.

“Lord,” he said, voice low. The word came out like a question.

He waited for the rest. Nothing came.

He did not force it.

He stood there and listened.

The canvas shifted with the breeze. It made a soft, slow flap. The sound reminded him of a sail. It also reminded him of a band room curtain moving when the air kicked on, two different lives, folded into one sound.

He heard footsteps on the other side of the tent. Someone walked behind the stage and toward the back opening. The steps slowed. Then stopped.

Caleb opened his eyes but did not turn yet.

A voice spoke from the edge of the shadow. “I thought I saw you leave.”

Naomi.

He turned.

She stood a few feet away, still holding her clipboard. She had added a pen behind her ear. Her dark hair fell loose now, no longer pinned back the way it had been during the rush of testimony night. The work light from the rear pole did not fully reach her face, but he saw the line of her jaw and the calm set of her mouth.

He felt a quick lift in his chest. Then he felt the caution right behind it.

“I did leave,” he said.

“And then you came back,” she said.

He nodded. He did not step closer. He did not step away. “I did not want to go home yet.”

Naomi shifted her weight. Gravel pressed under her sandal. “I came to check the back ropes,” she said. “Pastor Whitaker asked me to make sure nothing came loose. The wind picked up.”

Caleb looked at the rope nearest him. It held firm. “They are tight.”

Naomi walked closer and reached for the rope on her side. She tugged once, testing it. Her hand looked small against the thick line. “Eli Brooks tied these,” she said. “He always ties them the same way. He said the rope should feel like truth. Straight. No slack.”

Caleb let out a quiet breath. “Eli says things like that.”

Naomi’s mouth softened. “He does.”

Silence settled again. It did not feel awkward. It felt like a porch after everyone had gone inside, with one light still on.

Naomi glanced toward the field. “Testimony night always does this,” she said. “It makes people quiet.”

Caleb watched a firefly blink near the grass. “It made me loud inside.”

Naomi turned back to him. The work light caught her eyes. They looked tired, but steady. “What did it make you loud about?”

He held her gaze. His throat tightened again. He wanted to say everything. He wanted to say nothing.

He looked away first. Toward the dark tree line. Toward the fence posts. “Things I thought I buried,” he said.

Naomi did not push. She took a slow breath. “I heard you sing during the last song.”

He nodded once. “I was only filling in.”

“You were leading,” she said.

He almost argued, then stopped. She spoke plain truth. He had led without meaning to.

Naomi lifted her clipboard a little and pressed it against her chest. “When you sang, I saw your shoulders drop,” she said. “Like you stopped holding something up for a minute.”

Caleb swallowed. His fingers tightened on the back pole, then loosened. “I do not know how to stop holding it up,” he said.

Naomi took a small step closer. The distance between them shrank. The air felt warmer again, though the breeze had not changed.

“What are you holding?” she asked.

He looked at her again. He saw her attention, full and quiet. He also saw caution in her, like she had learned to be careful with people’s stories.

He respected it. It made him want to tell the truth.

“I left Maple Ridge,” he said, “and I told myself it was for school. For opportunity.”

Naomi did not blink. She listened.

Caleb kept his voice low. “I also left because it was easier to be someone else where nobody knew my family. Nobody knew what I promised when I was younger.”

Naomi’s brow creased. “What you promised to God?”

He nodded.

Naomi’s gaze dropped to the grass for a moment, then lifted again. “Was it a promise made during revival?”

Caleb gave a small, sharp breath. “Yes.”

Naomi did not move. She did not smile. She did not look impressed. She looked like she understood the weight of a young vow.

“I was sixteen,” he said. “I stood at the front. I cried so hard I thought I would choke. I told Pastor Whitaker I would serve the Lord with my life. I told everyone I would stay involved here. I said I would never chase something bigger for myself.”

Naomi’s voice came soft. “And then life kept moving.”

“Yes,” he said. “And the words stayed. They stayed like a rope tied around my chest.”

Naomi’s hand slid down the edge of her clipboard. “You were young.”

“I was old enough to mean it,” he said. “I meant it. Then I got a scholarship. Then my professors talked about internships in cities I had only seen on screens. Then the world got wider.”

Naomi looked down again. He saw her throat move when she swallowed.

He said, “It felt like Maple Ridge belonged to my childhood. Like I had to outgrow it.”

Naomi tilted her head. “And now you are here.”

“Yes,” he said. “For one summer.”

Naomi held his gaze a long moment. “You say it like it is a fence.”

He felt the truth of her words. He did not answer right away.

Naomi added, “As you have already decided where your life belongs.”

He looked away, then back. “I thought I did.”

Naomi’s face stayed calm, but something in her eyes shifted. A small hurt. A small anger. He saw it and felt it in his chest.

He did not want to wound her. He did not want to give false hope either.

Naomi spoke again, quiet but firm. “Maple Ridge is not only for children.”

“I know,” he said.

“Then why does it sound like you think it is?” she asked.

Caleb stared at the rope line between them and the tent. He watched it rise into darkness. “Because I have been afraid,” he said.

Naomi’s voice stayed gentle. “Of what?”

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then opened them. “Of staying and failing,” he said. “Of leaving and failing. Of choosing wrong.”

Naomi let out a slow breath. “I understand that.”

He looked at her. “Do you?”

Naomi nodded. “Yes.”

She shifted again, then stepped closer to the back pole so the work light caught more of her face. Her skin looked warm under the light. A faint sheen of sweat still sat on her forehead from the heat inside the tent. She did not wipe it away.

“I have not left,” she said. “Everyone thinks I stayed because I did not want anything else. Some people say it as if it were praise. Some people say it like it is pity.”

Caleb felt a pull to defend her, but she continued.

“I stayed because my mother needed help at first,” Naomi said. “Then I stayed because the church needed volunteers. Then I stayed because the school needed substitutes. Then I stayed because it was easier to say yes than to pack my life into a car.”

Caleb listened, chest tight.

Naomi’s fingers tightened around the clipboard. “Now I am in the last year of my program,” she said. “Student teaching starts in the fall. I have offers in three districts. One is here.”

Caleb nodded once. He did not speak. He did not want to break the moment.

Naomi looked toward the church building. “Pastor Whitaker keeps saying God does not waste any season,” she said. “He says obedience is not a trap. He says it is a path.”

Caleb huffed a small laugh. “He always says things like that too.”

Naomi’s mouth pressed into a small line. “He does. I believe him. Most days.”

Caleb looked at her. “And the other days?”

Naomi met his eyes. “The other days I worry I stayed because I was afraid,” she said.

The words hit him clean. He nodded slowly. “So we both fear choice.”

Naomi gave a small nod in return. “Yes.”

Silence again.

Inside the tent, a chair scraped. Someone laughed once, then the sound cut off like a door closing.

Naomi glanced at the rope beside Caleb's hand. "We should pray," she said.

The suggestion landed like a weight and a comfort at once.

Caleb did not move. "You want to pray here?"

Naomi nodded. "Behind the tent is quiet. People do not come back here unless they are working."

Caleb looked at the stake in the ground. The rope ran from it, straight and sure. He thought of Eli's words. Rope should feel like truth.

He breathed out. "I do not pray well when someone listens."

Naomi's voice stayed soft. "Prayer is not a performance."

"I know," he said. "But my mouth still treats it like one."

Naomi's eyes held steady. "Then you do not have to pray out loud."

Caleb hesitated. He had led songs in front of crowds. He had stood on stages in auditoriums and sung into microphones. Yet the thought of praying with Naomi behind a tent made his hands sweat.

He nodded once. "All right."

Naomi set her clipboard on the grass near the pole. She kept the pen behind her ear. Then she looked at Caleb as if she were asking permission without saying it.

Caleb understood. He stepped away from the pole and moved to the side, leaving space. "Here," he said.

Naomi knelt first. She did not lower herself with drama. She moved like someone used to praying in kitchens and hospital rooms. Caleb followed, slower. His knees met the grass. It felt damp under the top layer of heat.

They faced the dark field, side by side, close enough for their shoulders to almost touch.

Naomi folded her hands in her lap. Caleb rested his hands on his thighs. He stared at the ground for a moment, then closed his eyes.

Naomi began, voice low. “Lord, thank You for tonight.”

Her words moved steadily. No shine. No forced emotion.

“Thank You for the testimonies,” she said. “Thank You for the courage You gave people to speak. Thank You for bringing people home.”

Caleb’s chest tightened on the last words.

Naomi continued. “Thank You for Caleb. Thank You for the gift You put in him. Thank You for bringing him here for this week.”

Caleb held still. The mention of his name in prayer made him feel seen in a way he could not control.

Naomi’s voice softened further. “Lord, he is carrying things. You know them. You know why he feels heavy.”

Caleb’s throat burned. He kept his eyes shut.

“Please meet him here,” Naomi said. “Please give him peace. Please give him courage.”

The night air moved across Caleb’s face. He felt the warm breeze, then a cooler touch as it shifted.

Naomi paused, then added, “Please help him hear Your voice over his own fear.”

Caleb’s hands curled into fists, then relaxed.

Naomi took a breath. “And Lord, please help me too,” she said. “I want to obey You. I do not want to obey my fear. I do not want to make a small life because I feel small.”

Caleb turned his face slightly toward her, eyes still closed. The honesty in her voice pulled at him.

Naomi said, “If You want me here, make my heart willing. If You want me elsewhere, make my heart willing.”

She went quiet for a few seconds. Caleb heard the tent canvas shift. He heard a distant car door close in the lot. He heard his own breath.

Naomi spoke again, softer. “And please guard what is growing between us, Lord. If it is from You, keep it. If it is not, be kind and stop it.”

Caleb’s eyes opened, but he kept his head bowed. Her words startled him. She had named something he had not said out loud. She had named it without claiming it, without grabbing.

He respected her more in that moment than he knew how to show.

Naomi finished. “We trust You. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Caleb stayed kneeling. He did not say amen out loud. The word sat in his chest like a stone he did not want to drop.

Naomi did not rush to stand. She stayed still, hands in her lap, eyes open now, looking out into the dark.

Caleb stared at the grass. “Thank you,” he said.

Naomi nodded. “You are welcome.”

Caleb drew a slow breath. “You prayed for me like you know me.”

Naomi’s gaze stayed on the field. “I know pieces,” she said. “And I know God. He knows the rest.”

Caleb swallowed. “You prayed for what is growing.”

Naomi’s face turned slightly toward him. The light caught the edge of her cheek. “Yes.”

He waited. His heart beat hard.

Naomi kept her voice steady. “I did not say it to pressure you.”

“I know,” he said.

Naomi picked at a blade of grass near her knee, then let it go. “You came back after you left,” she said. “You stood through testimony night when it would have been easy to slip out. You watched people cry, and you did not look away. You sang as you meant it.”

Caleb felt his throat tighten again. “I did not know you noticed.”

Naomi looked at him now. Full eye contact. “I notice,” she said.

The simple words hit him harder than any praise.

Caleb pushed his hands into the grass and shifted his weight. He did not stand yet. “I do not want to hurt you,” he said.

Naomi’s eyes stayed calm. “Then do not.”

He gave a small, pained laugh with no humor. “It sounds simple.”

“It is simple,” she said. “It is not easy.”

“I have a habit of leaving before someone asks me to stay.”

Naomi’s expression softened. “Who asked you to stay before?”

Caleb looked away. He saw a memory like a flash, sharp and unwelcome. A kitchen table. His mother’s tired face. His father’s silence. A suitcase by the door when he left for school.

He blinked hard. “No one,” he said. “Not in the way you mean.”

Naomi’s voice dropped. “Then who taught you to leave?”

He held his breath. The question pressed against a spot in him he kept covered.

He looked at Naomi again. “I do not know,” he said, and it was only partly true.

Naomi did not argue. She accepted the answer as a boundary.

She shifted and rose to her feet. Caleb stood too, slower. His knees ached from the grass.

Naomi reached down and picked up her clipboard. She brushed a bit of dirt from the bottom edge.

Caleb watched her hands. He thought of how she had prayed, how she had asked God to be kind either way.

He did not want either way. He wanted one way, the way that kept her near.

Fear rose at the thought.

Naomi tucked the clipboard under her arm. “We should head out,” she said. “Pastor Whitaker locks up after the last volunteer leaves. He worries about raccoons getting into the snack boxes.”

Caleb nodded. “I will walk you.”

Naomi glanced toward the path. “My car is by the fellowship hall.”

“I know,” he said.

They started along the back line of the tent. The grass brushed Caleb’s shoes. The air cooled a little more as the night deepened.

Naomi walked with the quiet confidence of someone who belonged to the land. She waved at a volunteer near the side opening. The woman waved back and called, “Good night, Naomi.”

Naomi returned it. “Good night, Mrs. Alder.”

Caleb heard the name and filed it away. Mrs. Alder moved with the slow ease of age and service. She carried a stack of folded paper fans and set them in a plastic bin.

Naomi kept walking. “Mrs. Alder has been at every revival since I was little,” she said.

Caleb nodded. “She remembers everything.”

“She remembers the good,” Naomi said. “She leaves the rest with God.”

They reached the edge of the field where gravel replaced grass. The fellowship hall light still glowed. Naomi’s car sat under it. A few other cars remained scattered near the road.

Caleb slowed. He did not want to end the night with a polite goodbye again. The prayer had changed something. It had made room.

Naomi stopped near her driver door and turned to face him. The light above the door washed her face in pale gold. Her eyes looked darker under it.

“Thank you for coming back,” she said.

Caleb’s chest pulled tight. “I do not know what I am doing,” he said.

Naomi's hand rested on the car door handle. "You showed up," she said. "People make faith complicated. God does not."

Caleb did not look away. He wanted to tell her he liked the sound of her praying his name. He wanted to tell her he had thought of her all week, even before he saw her at the tent. He wanted to tell her he felt safer behind the tent with her than he did on any campus stage.

He did not say any of it.

Naomi waited. She did not fill the space. She let it breathe.

Caleb spoke, careful. "Will you pray with me again tomorrow night?" he said, "after the service."

Naomi's eyes softened. "Yes," she said.

He nodded once. Relief and fear moved through him together.

Naomi opened her door, then paused. She looked back at him. "Caleb."

"Yes," he said.

"Do not make promises in fear," she said. "Do not make them to me. Do not make them to God."

He felt the truth of it like a hand on his shoulder. "All right," he said.

Naomi nodded, then slid into her car. She closed the door. The dome light blinked on, then off.

Caleb stepped back and watched her start the engine. The headlights swept over the gravel. She backed out slowly, then turned toward the road.

She rolled her window down as she passed him. "Good night," she said.

“Good night,” he said.

She drove away, taillights shrinking toward the town center.

Caleb stood alone under the fellowship hall light for a moment. The tent lights glowed behind him. The church building stayed quiet, its white boards faint in the dark. The steeple rose above it all.

He walked back toward his car by the road. The gravel crunched under his shoes. He felt the night air cool on the sweat at his neck.

When he reached the car, he did not get in right away. He rested a hand on the roof as he had before. The metal had cooled now. It felt steady.

He looked back at the tent. He pictured the space behind it. The grass under his knees. Naomi’s voice. The simple plea for God to guard what was growing.

He bowed his head beside the car, standing this time. He kept his voice low, for God alone.

“Lord,” he said, “give me a clean heart. Give me a steady mind. Teach me how to stay when You tell me to stay.”

He stopped. He swallowed.

“And if You are building something here,” he said, “do not let me tear it down with fear.”

He lifted his head. The tent lights still glowed. The ropes still held. The field smelled like grass and dust and summer.

Caleb opened his car door and got in. He did not start the engine yet.

He sat in the quiet and let the prayer settle like a knot tied right, firm and true. He did not know what would come next, but he knew he would not face it alone.

Chapter 7

What Calling Feels Like Early

Morning came before Caleb Monroe felt ready for it.

Light slid through the thin curtain in his uncle's spare room and landed on the edge of his suitcase. The house held the quiet of early hours. A ceiling fan clicked with each turn. The air smelled like coffee and dish soap, like someone had already started moving through the day.

Caleb lay flat on his back and stared at the ceiling. He listened for his own thoughts to settle. They did not.

He thought of Naomi Reyes driving away. He thought of the way she had said his name, as she meant it. He thought of her warning in the parking lot. Do not make promises in fear.

His phone lay on the nightstand. It stayed dark. No missed calls. No new messages from his campus worship director. No email from the summer program he had told himself he would apply for once revival week ended.

He sat up and swung his feet to the floor. The wood felt cool under his soles. He stood and stretched once, slow. His muscles still held the memory of tent poles and rope. His shoulders ached in a good way.

He dressed in a clean T-shirt and jeans. He ran a hand through his hair and took a breath. The mirror above the dresser showed him a face he knew, and still did not fully trust. His eyes looked older than last summer. His mouth held a line he did not remember having in high school.

He left the room and walked down the hallway. Floorboards creaked under his steps. Framed pictures lined the wall. His uncle's wedding

day. A fishing trip at the river. A church picnic where faces blurred into one bright crowd. Caleb paused at the last frame. It showed Maple Ridge Community Church, white boards and a sharp steeple against a sky so blue it looked painted. Someone had taken it years ago, before the new ramp, before the updated sign by the road.

He walked on.

The kitchen sat warm with morning sun. His uncle, Daniel Mercer, stood at the counter with a mug in his hand. He wore a faded work shirt. His hair stuck up at the back. He looked over and smiled like he had been waiting.

“Morning,” Daniel said.

“Morning,” Caleb said.

Daniel nodded toward the coffee pot. “It is strong. It has to be. Revival week does not respect sleep.”

Caleb poured a mug and took a sip. Heat filled his mouth and throat. It steadied him.

Daniel leaned back against the counter. “How late did it run?”

“Not too late,” Caleb said. “People lingered.”

“They always linger,” Daniel said. “They do not want the night to end once the Lord gets close.”

Caleb stared into his coffee. “I prayed after,” he said.

Daniel’s face shifted, soft and attentive. He did not interrupt.

“By the car,” Caleb added. “I asked God to keep me steady.”

Daniel nodded once. “Good.”

Caleb waited for more, for advice, for a plan. Daniel did not offer one. He only took another drink of coffee.

A clock ticked above the sink. Outside, a mower started two houses down, then settled into a steady hum. Maple Ridge woke up like it always did, with simple work.

Caleb gathered himself. “Uncle Daniel.”

Daniel set his mug down. “Yes.”

“I do not know what I am doing,” Caleb said.

Daniel held still. He watched Caleb with calm eyes. He did not smile. He did not rush in to fix the words.

Caleb gripped his mug tighter. “I told myself this summer was simple,” he said. “I told myself I would come back, lead music for revival, help where I should, then go back to school and keep moving.”

Daniel nodded again, slow.

“But it does not feel simple,” Caleb said.

Daniel’s gaze stayed steady. “No,” he said. “It rarely does.”

Caleb let out a short breath through his nose. “You always talk like that.”

Daniel’s mouth curved, small. “I learned it the hard way.”

Caleb looked down. “I have plans,” he said. “I have a track I have been running on for years. Music program. Ministry minor. Internship in the city. A church there. A chance to do something bigger.”

Daniel waited.

“And then I come here,” Caleb said. “And I stand under a tent in a field. And something in me goes quiet. Like I do not need to impress anyone.”

Daniel’s eyes softened. “Maple Ridge does not feed pride,” he said. “It feeds roots.”

Caleb swallowed. “Is that bad?”

Daniel shook his head. “Roots hold trees in place when the wind comes.”

Caleb stared at the table. He pictured the tent ropes in his hands. He pictured the canvas pulling against the stakes when the evening breeze moved through. He felt again the pressure of the rope and the way the knots had to sit right.

Daniel spoke again. “Eat something,” he said. “You will need strength.”

Caleb gave a short nod and opened a cabinet. He found a box of cereal and poured some into a bowl. He added milk and ate standing at the counter, quiet.

Daniel rinsed his mug and set it in the sink. “What is on the schedule today?”

Caleb thought. “Rehearsal at the church after lunch,” he said. “Sound check. A meeting with the youth team. Naomi said she would help with seating and welcome.”

Daniel’s eyebrows lifted. He said nothing. He turned and opened the fridge.

Caleb watched him. “What?”

Daniel pulled out eggs. “Nothing,” he said.

Caleb set his spoon down. “Do not start.”

Daniel cracked an egg into a bowl. “I did not start anything.”

Caleb felt heat rise in his face. He hated how his body gave him away before he even spoke. “Naomi is…,” he began.

Daniel stirred the eggs with a fork. “Naomi is Naomi,” he said. “She has been serving in this church since she was a girl. Her father fixes the church van. Her mother runs meals for half the county. Naomi has a quiet spine. People trust her.”

Caleb stared at the eggs. “I know,” he said.

Daniel poured the eggs into a pan. The sizzle filled the kitchen. “Then be careful,” he said, still calm. “Be honest. Do not use her steadiness as a place to hide.”

Caleb’s throat tightened. He did not like how true it sounded. “I am not trying to hide.”

Daniel turned the eggs with a spatula. “Then what are you trying to do?”

Caleb opened his mouth. No clean answer came.

Daniel slid the eggs onto a plate and set it on the table. “Eat,” he said again. “Then go for a walk if you need to. The day will come either way.”

Caleb sat and ate. The eggs tasted salty and plain. The food grounded him. Daniel sat across from him with his own plate. He bowed his head before he ate.

“Lord,” Daniel said, voice quiet. “Thank You for this day. Thank You for work to do. Thank You for Your voice, even when we struggle to hear it. Keep our hearts tender. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

“Amen,” Caleb said.

They ate in silence after that. The quiet did not feel empty. It felt like a room where God might step into it if Caleb stopped filling it with plans.

When they finished, Daniel stood and carried his plate to the sink. “I will be at the hardware store this morning,” he said. “Eli Brooks asked me to meet him about the hinges for the fellowship hall doors.”

Caleb’s head lifted. “Eli is helping with that too?”

Daniel nodded. “Eli helps with everything. The man has been a gift to this church.”

Caleb remembered Eli from years back. Quiet. Strong hands. Eyes that looked like he had seen pain and refused to hand it to anyone else. “Tell him I said hello,” Caleb said.

“I will,” Daniel said. He wiped his hands on a towel. “And Caleb.”

Caleb looked up.

Daniel’s voice stayed gentle. “If the Lord asks you to stay, do not make Him drag you.”

Caleb held his uncle’s gaze. The words landed like a weight and a warning. “I do not know if He is asking.”

Daniel nodded once. “Then listen.”

Daniel left for work a few minutes later. The screen door snapped shut behind him. The house settled again.

Caleb stood in the kitchen alone and stared out the window over the sink. The backyard grass looked dry at the edges. A bird hopped

along the fence and pecked at something in the dirt. The sun already carried heat.

He rinsed his plate and set it in the drying rack. Then he grabbed his keys and stepped outside.

The air hit him full. Warm. Sweet with cut grass and the faint scent of someone's laundry on a line. A dog barked far off, then went quiet.

He walked down the street toward the town center. Maple Ridge held the same bones it always had. Modest houses. Front porches with swings. Flags on poles. Flowers in pots. People who waved even when they did not know his story.

A woman watering a hanging fern glanced up. "Morning," she called.

"Morning," he answered.

He kept walking. His shoes scuffed the edge of the road where gravel met pavement. He let his mind settle into the rhythm of his steps.

He had spent the last two years telling himself a clean story about the future. Graduation. A job with a worship ministry. A church in a city where no one knew his name. A place where he could do big work for God and feel sure of himself.

But God had not asked him for a big story. God had asked him for obedience. Caleb knew that in his head. He also knew his head did not rule him when the time came to choose.

He turned onto Main Street. The bakery sat open with a small chalkboard sign out front. The smell of yeast and sugar drifted into the air. A few cars sat angled along the curb.

Across the street, the bookstore windows held stacks of devotionals and summer reading. A bell over the door chimed as someone entered.

Maple Ridge did not try to impress anyone. It did not sell itself. It stayed steady. It kept faith like a porch light, always on, even when the road turned dark.

Caleb's phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out.

A text from Pastor Mark Whitaker.

Morning, Caleb. Thank you for last night. Meet me at the church office at ten if you have time.

Caleb stared at the screen. Pastor Whitaker did not send texts unless he meant something by it. He did not waste words. He did not push either. He asked, and he waited.

Caleb typed back.

Yes, sir. I will be there.

He slipped the phone back into his pocket and checked the time. He had space before ten. He walked toward the church.

The white building sat a few blocks away, tucked behind a line of trees. The steeple rose clean against the blue sky. Sunlight flashed off the small cross at the top. The sight hit Caleb in the chest, the same way it always did.

He slowed.

He remembered being a boy in these pews, his legs swinging because they did not reach the floor. He remembered watching the older men pray at the altar, shoulders bent, hands folded. He remembered thinking they looked like they carried the whole town to God.

He also remembered being eighteen, sitting in the back row during his last summer before college, angry for reasons he had not known how to name. He had wanted out. He had wanted noise and movement and a life that did not feel small.

He had told himself Maple Ridge wanted to keep him. He had not known the difference between control and care.

He crossed the street and stepped onto the church grounds. The field beside it held the revival tent, bright in daylight, canvas stretched taut. Ropes ran down to stakes. The string lights hung in neat lines, waiting for dusk.

A few volunteers moved around the tent. Folding chairs stacked near the entrance. A table sat under the edge of the canvas, covered with bottled water and paper cups. Someone had set a fan on the ground, pointed toward the stage.

Caleb walked toward the prayer garden behind the church instead. He needed quiet.

He followed the path of flat stones. The garden held a simple bench, a small fountain, and a few shrubs trimmed into shape. Flowers sat in pots near the fence. The air smelled like damp earth near the fountain and hot grass beyond it.

He sat on the bench and rested his elbows on his knees. He looked down at his hands.

They looked like a musician's hands. Long fingers. Calluses on the tips. A small scar across his right knuckle from loading equipment last year. They did not look like a pastor's hands. They did not look like a teacher's hands. They looked like hands built to play chords and lead songs.

He thought of his professors, their sharp minds and sharper opinions. He thought of the worship conferences he had attended, where leaders talked about vision, growth, and reach.

He thought of last night, kneeling behind the tent with Naomi, whispering a prayer as it mattered more than a microphone ever would.

Calling. The word sat heavy in him.

He had always assumed calling would feel clear. Like a door swinging open with bright light behind it. Like a map drawn in bold lines.

Instead it felt like this. Like waiting. Like holding a rope and trusting the stake.

Footsteps crunched on the path behind him. Caleb turned his head.

Naomi walked into the garden with a tote bag over her shoulder. She wore a simple cotton dress and sandals. Her dark hair fell loose down her back. The sun caught warm tones in it. She held a folder against her side.

She stopped when she saw him. Surprise flashed in her eyes, then eased into calm. “Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning,” he said. His voice came out quiet.

Naomi stepped closer, careful on the stones. “I did not expect to see you here this early,” she said.

“I walked,” Caleb said.

Naomi looked at him for a moment like she weighed what to ask. She chose something small. “Did you sleep?”

“A little,” Caleb said. He shifted on the bench. “Did you?”

She gave a short nod. “After I got home, I sat on my porch for a while,” she said. “I listened to the crickets. I needed to come down from it.”

“From the service,” he said.

“From everything,” Naomi said.

Caleb glanced at her tote. “What is that?”

Naomi lifted the bag slightly. “Sign-in sheets,” she said. “Pens. Extra name tags. Pastor Whitaker asked me to keep track of who comes from out of town.”

Caleb nodded. “You always end up with the important jobs.”

Naomi’s mouth curved, small and restrained. “Someone has to do them.”

Silence settled between them. The fountain bubbled, a bird called from the tree line.

Caleb watched Naomi’s hands. She held the folder firm. She looked steady again. But her eyes held something softer than steady. Something careful.

Naomi glanced at the bench. “Is it all right if I sit?” she asked.

“Yes,” Caleb said. He moved over to make room.

Naomi sat with her knees together and her hands on the folder. She looked straight ahead at the garden fence. “Last night felt…,” she started, then stopped.

Caleb waited.

Naomi took a breath. “It felt like God touched something,” she said. “Not in a loud way. In a quiet way.”

Caleb nodded. “I felt it too.”

Naomi turned her head slightly toward him. “And you prayed after,” she said.

He felt his neck warm. “How did you know?”

“I saw you,” Naomi said. “From my car.” She lifted her chin toward the parking lot. “You stood by your door with your head bowed.”

Caleb swallowed. He did not know what to do with the fact that she had watched. It did not feel like pressure. It felt like care.

He looked down at the stones. “I did not want to go to sleep with my mind running,” he said.

Naomi’s voice stayed quiet. “Did it help?”

“A little,” Caleb said. He looked at her. “Your warning helped too.”

Naomi blinked once. “Good,” she said. “I did not want to sound harsh.”

“You did not,” Caleb said. “You sounded honest.”

Naomi’s gaze held his for a beat. Then she looked away again. “Honesty feels risky,” she said.

“It does,” Caleb said.

She nodded slowly, as she agreed with something more than the sentence.

They sat in the early warmth, two young adults on a church bench, both trying to hear God over their own fear. Caleb felt the odd comfort of it. He had spent so much time trying to be certain alone. He had not realized how tired it made him.

Naomi shifted the folder in her lap. “Pastor Whitaker asked me to meet with the youth volunteers later,” she said. “There are a lot of teenagers coming. Some from Maple Ridge. Some from other towns. He wants adults near the doors. He wants someone watching the younger kids.”

Caleb nodded. “You will organize it.”

Naomi glanced at him. “It is not control,” she said, like she heard Daniel’s warning without being present.

Caleb gave a short laugh. “I did not say it was.”

Naomi’s cheeks colored. “I know,” she said. “I only… I hear myself sometimes. I hear how I sound.”

Caleb’s smile faded into something gentler. “You sound like someone who cares,” he said.

Naomi looked down at the folder. Her fingers tightened around the edge. “Caring feels like weight,” she said. “I do not always know what is mine to carry.”

Caleb heard his own ache in her words. “I know,” he said.

Naomi lifted her eyes. “Do you?” she asked, simple and direct.

Caleb went quiet. He thought of his plans. He thought of his prayer. He thought of the way his chest tightened when he pictured leaving in August. “I think I do,” he said.

Naomi looked back toward the fence. “I used to think calling would feel like fire,” she said. “Like you would wake up and know what you are supposed to do.”

Caleb’s throat tightened again. “I thought that too.”

Naomi let out a slow breath. “Instead it feels like asking the same question over and over,” she said. “And then living the day in front of you anyway.”

Caleb leaned back on the bench. The wood pressed into his shoulders. “What question?” he asked.

Naomi turned her head, eyes steady. “What does God want?” she said. “And what does Naomi want? And how do I know when those two things match?”

Caleb stared at her. The honesty sat bare between them. It did not feel dramatic. It felt brave.

He nodded once. “I ask a version of that too,” he said.

Naomi’s eyes softened. “What version?” she asked.

Caleb looked at his hands again. “What does God want?” he said. “And what does Caleb want? And how do I know I am not calling my own desire obedience?”

Naomi sat still. She did not flinch. She did not rush to reassure him. She respected the question.

She spoke after a moment. “Have you told anyone that?” she asked.

Caleb thought of campus friends. Worship team nights. Group chats, laughter, and late food runs. He thought of how easy it felt to keep things light.

“No,” he said.

Naomi nodded. “Why not?” she asked.

Caleb took a breath. “Because people want leaders who sound sure,” he said. “They want someone who stands on stage and speaks as God told him the set list Himself.”

Naomi looked at him, her expression calm but firm. “God does not need performance,” she said. “People do.”

Caleb let the words settle. He had known something like them, but he had not wanted to admit it. He turned his head toward her. “You say things like Pastor Whitaker,” he said.

Naomi’s mouth curved again, briefly. “I grew up under his preaching,” she said. “And my mother quotes Scripture while she cooks.”

Caleb felt the warmth of it. “My mother used to do that,” he said.

Naomi’s eyes searched his face. “Does she still?” she asked.

Caleb’s throat tightened. He looked away. “She does,” he said. “I do not always answer her calls.”

Naomi did not press. She only nodded once, as if she understood there was a story there that Caleb did not want to open today.

A breeze moved through the garden. It did not cool the air much. It carried the smell of sun on grass.

Naomi shifted on the bench. “My college friends think I am strange,” she said.

Caleb glanced at her, surprised by the turn.

Naomi held his gaze now. “They think Maple Ridge is small,” she said. “They think church is something people grow out of. They think a girl who stays near her family lacks ambition.”

Caleb heard the hurt under her steady tone. “Do you believe them?” he asked.

Naomi’s fingers pressed into the folder. “Some days,” she said. “I hate admitting it, but some days I hear their voices in my head. I

hear them when I choose to spend my Friday nights here instead of going out."

Caleb nodded slowly. "And other days?" he asked.

Naomi's eyes lifted toward the steeple beyond the trees. "Other days I feel peace," she said. "I feel like this is where God planted me. Like my life does not have to look impressive to be obedient."

Caleb swallowed. Her words touched his own restless spot. "Do you ever want to leave?" he asked.

Naomi held still. "Yes," she said.

The simple answer surprised him. He respected it.

Naomi kept going. "I want to see other places," she said. "I want to teach in a school with a real arts program. I want to travel. I want to stand in a classroom and know I earned my place."

Caleb's chest tightened. He heard her fear too. "And staying feels like giving that up," he said.

Naomi looked at him, eyes bright. "Staying feels like settling," she said. "Leaving feels like betrayal. Some days I do not know which fear is worse."

Caleb let out a slow breath. "I have the opposite problem," he said.

Naomi's brows lifted.

Caleb stared at the fountain. "Leaving always felt like obedience to me," he said. "Like God wanted me to go do something bigger. Like staying would mean I failed."

Naomi watched him. "And now?" she asked.

Caleb turned toward her. “Now I wonder if I built that idea myself,” he said. “I wonder if I wanted to leave because it felt safer than staying close to people who know me.”

Naomi’s gaze softened again. “People who know you,” she echoed.

Caleb nodded. He thought of Maple Ridge faces. He thought of the way older men watched him with quiet expectation when he led worship. He thought about the way teenagers looked at him as if he had answers.

He did not have answers. He had hunger. He had questions. He had a song in his chest that did not always come out clean.

Naomi spoke low. “Calling does not always feel safe,” she said.

Caleb looked at her. “What does it feel like?” he asked.

Naomi took a breath. “It feels like saying yes before I feel ready,” she said. “It feels like choosing the next right thing, even when I want a full plan.”

Caleb nodded. “Like obedience early,” he said.

Naomi’s eyes held his. “Yes,” she said.

A sound drifted across the church grounds, faint but clear. Someone testing a microphone inside the tent. A short burst of static, then a man’s voice saying, “One, two.”

Caleb glanced toward the field. Time moved.

He looked back at Naomi. “Do you ever worry you will choose wrong?” he asked.

Naomi’s grip tightened again. “Yes,” she said. “All the time.”

Caleb’s voice went quiet. “Me too,” he said.

They sat with the confession. It did not pull them apart. It drew them closer, like a shared secret.

Naomi shifted the folder onto her lap and reached into her tote bag. She pulled out a small notebook with a pen tucked in the spiral. She held it for a moment, then offered it to him. “I write down things Pastor Whitaker says,” she said. “Or things I read. It helps me remember when my mind gets loud.”

Caleb hesitated. Then he took it. The cover felt worn, soft at the corners.

He flipped it open. The pages held neat handwriting. Scripture references. Simple lines. Names of people to pray for. A list titled Revival Week Requests.

He scanned a page near the middle and saw a verse written out in full.

Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. 1 Timothy 4:12.

Caleb’s throat tightened. He looked up.

Naomi watched him, her face open. “I wrote that when I started college,” she said. “I felt small there.”

Caleb nodded, still holding the notebook. “I know that verse,” he said. “People quoted it at me when I was a teenager.”

Naomi’s eyes stayed steady. “It is different when it becomes yours,” she said.

Caleb ran his thumb along the edge of the page. “Does it feel like yours now?” he asked.

Naomi took a slow breath. “Some days,” she said. “Other days I feel young in every way. Like people expect me to know what to do, and I do not.”

Caleb closed the notebook carefully and handed it back. Their fingers brushed. The touch sent a quick, quiet awareness through him. It did not feel like heat. It felt like tenderness. Like a door opening a crack.

Naomi took the notebook and slid it into her tote.

Caleb tapped the table once. “Pastor Whitaker wants to meet with me at ten,” he said.

Naomi’s brows lifted. “About music?” she asked.

“Maybe,” Caleb said. “He asked me to come to his office.”

Naomi nodded once. “He will ask you questions,” she said.

Caleb gave a small smile. “He always does.”

Naomi stood. “I should go,” she said. “I need to get these sheets to the welcome table.”

Caleb stood too. “I will walk with you,” he said.

They left the prayer garden together and followed the stone path around the church. The sun sat higher now. Heat rose off the grass. The church windows stood open, and a faint smell of old wood and lemon cleaner drifted out.

As they neared the field, volunteers moved in steady patterns. Two men carried a stack of folding chairs. A teenage boy dragged a trash bag toward the dumpster. A woman in a wide-brim hat set bottled water into a cooler.

Naomi waved at a few people. They waved back. Some called her name.

Caleb watched how she moved through them. She did not perform. She did not shrink either. She belonged here in a quiet, earned way.

At the edge of the tent, a man stood near the stage with a guitar case open. Eli Brooks.

Caleb recognized him at once. Taller than Caleb remembered. Same calm posture. Same steady eyes.

Eli looked up and saw Caleb. His face shifted into a brief smile. “Caleb Monroe,” he said.

Caleb stepped closer and held out a hand. “Eli Brooks,” he said.

Eli shook his hand firmly. “Good to see you back,” Eli said.

“Good to be back,” Caleb said, and felt the strange truth of it.

Eli glanced at Naomi. “Morning, Naomi,” he said.

“Morning,” Naomi said. “I am taking sign-in sheets to the table.”

Eli nodded. “Pastor Whitaker asked me to check the stage supports,” he said. “Then I will help Daniel with those hinges.”

Naomi looked at Caleb. “I will see you later,” she said.

Caleb nodded. “Yes,” he said.

Naomi walked toward the welcome table at the edge of the tent. Caleb tracked her for a moment, then forced himself to look back at Eli.

Eli lifted his chin toward the stage. “You have rehearsal today,” he said.

“Yes,” Caleb said.

Eli studied him with the same calm he seemed to bring to every task. “You look tired,” Eli said.

Caleb let out a breath. “I am thinking too much,” he admitted.

Eli nodded as he understood. He bent and checked a bolt at the stage corner. His hands moved with ease. “Thinking has its place,” Eli said. “So does listening.”

Caleb leaned against a tent pole and watched him work. “People keep saying that,” Caleb said.

Eli glanced up. “Then God might be repeating Himself,” he said.

Caleb gave a short laugh, then sobered. “Eli,” he said.

Eli returned to the bolt. “Yes.”

“How did you know you were supposed to stay here?” Caleb asked. “In Maple Ridge. In this church. Working with your hands. Serving as you do.”

Eli tightened the bolt and stood. He wiped his hands on his jeans. His eyes stayed on the stage for a moment, like he gathered words the way he gathered tools.

“I did not know,” Eli said.

Caleb blinked. “You did not?” he asked.

Eli shook his head. “I knew I needed Jesus,” he said. “I knew I needed a clean life. I knew I had wreckage behind me. Pastor Whitaker helped me start again. This place gave me work. It gave me people who did not treat me like my worst day.”

Caleb swallowed. He had heard some of Eli's story in pieces. He knew there had been trouble. He knew there had been repentance. He did not know details.

Eli's voice stayed low. "Calling came later," Eli said. "It came through daily faithfulness. Through small yes answers. Through building something solid when I wanted to run."

Caleb looked toward the field. The tent held steady under the sun. "So calling did not show up like lightning," Caleb said.

Eli's mouth curved, small. "No," he said. "It showed up like a nail you drive in straight. You look back later and see you built a frame."

Caleb absorbed the words. They held weight without drama. They felt like truth because they sounded like work.

Eli nodded toward the church. "Pastor Whitaker will tell you something similar," he said. "He will ask you what you love. He will ask you what you fear. Then he will point you back to Scripture."

Caleb's throat tightened. "Do you ever regret staying?" he asked.

Eli's gaze went distant for a moment. Then it returned. "I regret sin," he said. "I regret pride. I regret times I did not listen. I do not regret obedience."

Caleb nodded. He felt something settle in him, not an answer, but a steadier posture.

Eli reached for his guitar case and latched it shut. "You will do fine," he said.

Caleb exhaled. "I do not know," he said.

Eli looked at him again, calm and direct. "Then do what you do know," Eli said. "Lead worship tonight. Serve the people in front of you. Pray with a clean heart. Leave the rest in God's hands."

Caleb nodded. “All right,” he said.

Eli started toward the church building. Caleb watched him go, then turned toward the welcome table. Naomi stood with two older women, pointing at the sign-in sheet. She spoke in a low voice and smiled once. The women listened, then nodded.

Caleb felt his chest tighten. Not with panic. With something that felt like hope trying to rise.

He checked the time and headed toward the church office.

Inside, the building held cool shade. The entry hallway smelled like old hymnals and floor wax. Voices echoed faintly from the sanctuary as someone practiced piano, a simple melody, slow and steady.

Caleb walked to Pastor Whitaker’s office door and knocked.

“Come in,” Pastor Whitaker called.

Caleb stepped inside.

Pastor Mark Whitaker sat behind his desk with a Bible open in front of him. Papers lay stacked to one side. A pen rested across a notepad. Sunlight from the window fell across the corner of the desk and lit the grain of the wood.

Pastor Whitaker looked up. His eyes warmed. “Caleb,” he said. “Thank you for coming.”

“Yes, sir,” Caleb said. He stood near the chair in front of the desk.

Pastor Whitaker gestured to it. “Sit,” he said.

Caleb sat. The chair creaked under him.

Pastor Whitaker leaned back, hands folded. He studied Caleb the way Caleb remembered from childhood. Not with suspicion. With attention. Like he cared enough to see the truth.

“How are you?” Pastor Whitaker asked.

Caleb swallowed. The honest answer sat on his tongue. “Restless,” he said.

Pastor Whitaker nodded once. “I saw it last night,” he said. “In your eyes.”

Caleb held still. “I tried to hide it,” he admitted.

Pastor Whitaker’s mouth curved, small. “You did not hide it from the Lord,” he said.

Caleb stared down at his hands. “No,” he said.

Pastor Whitaker leaned forward slightly. “Tell me,” he said. “What has your summer looked like in your mind? Before you arrived.”

Caleb took a breath. “Simple,” he said. “Lead music. Help where needed. Leave after.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. “And now?” he asked.

Caleb’s throat tightened. “Now it feels like the Lord is asking for more than I planned,” he said.

Pastor Whitaker did not react strongly. He only watched Caleb with steady calm. “What do you think He is asking?” he said.

Caleb hesitated. “I do not know,” he said. “That is the problem.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded again. “It is not a problem,” he said. “It is a moment. Many people fear moments like this and rush into noise.”

Caleb forced himself to meet Pastor Whitaker's eyes. "I do not want to rush," he said.

Pastor Whitaker's voice stayed gentle. "Then do not," he said.

Silence sat between them for a moment. Caleb heard the faint piano in the sanctuary, a hymn tune he could not name.

Pastor Whitaker opened his Bible wider and turned it slightly so that Caleb could see the page. "I have been reading Joel," he said.

Caleb nodded, unsure where it would go.

Pastor Whitaker tapped the page once with his finger. "Joel 2:28," he said. "Do you know it?"

Caleb thought. "Some of it," he said.

Pastor Whitaker read it out, slow. "And afterward, I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions."

Caleb listened. The words sounded familiar. They sounded like revival.

Pastor Whitaker looked up. "The Lord does not reserve His voice for one age group," he said. "He speaks to the young. He gives vision to the young. He gives responsibility too."

Caleb felt his chest tighten. "I am not sure I am ready," he said.

Pastor Whitaker nodded. "You are not," he said. "And you will never be, if you wait for readiness first."

Caleb blinked. Pastor Whitaker rarely spoke with sharp edges. The truth carried one now, mild but firm.

Pastor Whitaker softened again. "Tell me what you love," he said.

Caleb stared at the Bible, then at the desk, then back at Pastor Whitaker. The question felt simple. It also felt like it could expose him.

He answered anyway. “I love leading worship,” he said. “I love the moment when people stop watching the stage and start singing to God. I love seeing someone’s face change when they realize the Lord sees them.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. “Good,” he said. “What else?”

Caleb swallowed. “I love building a set that serves the room,” he said. “Not showing off. Serving. I love when the team listens to each other.”

Pastor Whitaker watched him. “Do you love people?” he asked.

Caleb’s throat tightened again. “Yes,” he said. “I think I do. I do not always know how to show it.”

Pastor Whitaker’s eyes softened. “Then learn,” he said.

Caleb held still.

Pastor Whitaker’s voice stayed low. “What do you fear?” he asked.

Caleb’s hands tightened on his knees. The honest answer rose fast. “I fear being small,” he said.

Pastor Whitaker nodded once, as he expected it.

Caleb kept going, the words spilling now that he had started. “I fear staying in a place where everyone knows me,” he said. “I fear failing in front of people who prayed for me. I fear giving my life to something and finding out I misunderstood God.”

Pastor Whitaker listened without flinching.

Caleb took a breath. “And I fear leaving,” he admitted, quieter. “I fear chasing a life that looks good and missing what God wanted.”

Pastor Whitaker sat back and let the silence breathe. The piano in the sanctuary stopped. The building felt still.

Pastor Whitaker spoke again. “You are describing what calling feels like early,” he said. “It feels like tension. It feels like two roads in front of you. It feels like you want God to write the whole thing in the sky.”

Caleb’s throat tightened. He gave a short nod. “Yes,” he said.

Pastor Whitaker leaned forward. “The Lord often gives a lamp for the next step,” he said. “Not a spotlight for ten years.”

Caleb stared at him. The words hit him clean.

Pastor Whitaker opened his Bible again and turned pages. He stopped and tapped a verse with his finger. “Ecclesiastes 11:4,” he said. He read it out. “Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.”

Caleb swallowed. He had not heard that verse in a long time. It felt sharp in the best way.

Pastor Whitaker looked up. “If you wait for full clarity, you will stay stuck,” he said. “Obedience means you plant. You water. You show up. You lead worship tonight with a clean heart. You help the youth team. You speak with Naomi if the Lord opens the door. You keep listening.”

Caleb’s face warmed at Naomi’s name. He tried to keep it calm. “Yes, sir,” he said.

Pastor Whitaker’s mouth curved, gentle. “Naomi has been praying for revival week since she was young,” he said. “She carries a heart

for this place. She also carries questions about her future. Do not add weight to her life through indecision."

Caleb's stomach tightened. "I do not want to," he said.

Pastor Whitaker nodded. "Good," he said. "Then be honest with her as you are honest with God. Not to gain comfort. To walk in light."

Caleb held still. The counsel felt direct. It also felt kind.

Pastor Whitaker's gaze stayed on him. "You came back for one summer," he said. "Your mind sits on autumn already. Slow down."

Caleb swallowed. "I do not know how," he admitted.

Pastor Whitaker nodded. "Then practice," he said. "Practice staying present. Practice saying yes to the day in front of you. The Lord will lead you. You do not have to force it."

Caleb nodded slowly. "All right," he said.

Pastor Whitaker leaned back. "One more question," he said.

Caleb waited.

Pastor Whitaker's eyes held his. "Have you asked the Lord what obedience looks like, if it costs you something?" he asked.

Caleb's throat tightened. "I asked Him to teach me how to stay when He tells me to stay," he said, remembering his prayer by the car.

Pastor Whitaker nodded, pleased. "Good," he said. "Now live as you meant it."

Caleb looked down. His chest felt tight and clear at the same time.

Pastor Whitaker stood. Caleb stood too, quick.

Pastor Whitaker walked around the desk and rested a hand on Caleb's shoulder. The touch felt steady, fatherly. "Let us pray," he said.

Caleb bowed his head.

Pastor Whitaker prayed without performance. He asked God for wisdom for Caleb. He asked God for humility. He asked for protection over revival week. He asked God to pour out His Spirit on the young. He thanked God for Naomi and the way she served. He asked God to guard her heart. He asked God to guard Caleb's heart too.

When he finished, Caleb said, "Amen," voice low.

Pastor Whitaker released his shoulder. "Go eat lunch," he said. "Then go rehearse. And Caleb."

"Yes, sir," Caleb said.

Pastor Whitaker's eyes held a quiet firmness. "Do not confuse movement with obedience," he said.

Caleb nodded. "I will remember," he said.

He left the office and stepped into the hallway again. The air felt warmer now. Outside, the day had brightened into full summer heat. Light poured through the church windows.

Caleb walked out onto the front steps and paused. The steeple towered above him. The revival tent sat visible beyond the side lawn.

He took a breath. He did not feel settled. He did not feel finished.

He felt called to the next step.

He walked toward the tent. Volunteers moved around it as they did earlier, steady and focused. The week had work. The week had prayer. The week had songs to lead.

Naomi stood at the welcome table, writing something on a clipboard. She looked up as he approached. Her eyes searched his face, quiet and attentive.

Caleb stopped in front of her. “Pastor Whitaker met with me,” he said.

Naomi’s expression stayed calm. “How did it go?” she asked.

Caleb swallowed. “He told me to slow down,” he said. “He told me to plant instead of watching the wind.”

Naomi’s eyes softened. “That sounds like him,” she said.

Caleb nodded. “He also told me to walk in light,” he said. “To be honest.”

Naomi held still, pen in her hand. “With God,” she said.

“And with you,” Caleb said.

Naomi’s breath caught, small. Then she steadied. She set the pen down. “All right,” she said. Her voice stayed quiet, but it did not shake.

Caleb glanced around. People moved nearby. Teens laughed near the chairs. An older man called directions near the stage. The tent held a low hum of preparation.

Caleb looked back at Naomi. “Not here,” he said. “Not in front of everyone.”

Naomi nodded once. “After rehearsal,” she said.

Caleb nodded. “Yes,” he said.

Naomi picked up her pen again, but her eyes stayed on him. “Thank you,” she said.

Caleb frowned slightly. “For what?” he asked.

“For choosing light,” Naomi said.

Caleb felt the words press into his chest. He did not feel brave. He felt exposed. But he also felt relief.

He stepped back. “I will see you later,” he said.

Naomi nodded. “I will be here,” she said.

Caleb turned toward the stage area where his guitar and cables waited in the church storage room. He walked with a steady pace. He felt the heat on his shoulders. He heard the tent canvas shift in the breeze. He heard the sound of life around him, and for the first time in days, he let himself stay inside it.

Calling did not feel like lightning.

It felt like a slow yes, spoken early, before the full plan came.

Chapter 8

Summer Storm, Revival Still Open

Caleb stepped into the church storage room and shut the door behind him. The air felt cooler in the dim light. Dust sat on the tops of folding tables. A stack of hymnals leaned against a wall. Someone had left a box of paper fans by the door, the kind with the church name printed in blue.

He found his guitar case where he left it. He set it on a table and opened it. The smell of wood and old strings rose. Familiar. Steady. He ran his fingers across the neck and checked the tuning pegs.

Voices drifted through the wall. Laughter. A door opening and closing. The thud of chairs.

He tried to picture what he would say to Naomi after rehearsal. Pastor Whitaker had asked him to walk in light. Caleb had agreed. The agreement had felt clean in the pastor's office, like a line drawn straight on paper.

Now the line bent. He did not want to hurt her. He did not want to stir old things that should have stayed buried. He also did not want to keep living with half words.

He pulled his strap out and looped it over his shoulder. He gathered his cables and a small tuner. He checked the pocket for extra picks. His hands moved on their own. His mind kept turning.

He stepped back into the sun. Heat sat on the lawn and the gravel. The tent stood firm, the canvas bright under the sky. String lights ran along the edges, unlit in the day. The poles cast long thin shadows across the grass.

A few teens carried a box of bottled water toward the side entrance. A woman waved Caleb over and asked where the extra extension

cords went. He pointed her toward the storage shed. He kept walking.

Near the stage, Eli Brooks knelt by a power strip. He worked without hurry. He wore a faded shirt and jeans. His hands looked like they knew every screw in Maple Ridge.

Caleb stopped at the edge of the stage. “Need help?” he asked.

Eli glanced up. “I am all right,” he said. “Check your line. One outlet back there has a loose ground.”

Caleb nodded. “Thanks.”

Eli went back to his work. He did not press for talk. Caleb respected him for that. Eli carried a calm that did not come from an easy life. It came from settled life.

Caleb climbed onto the stage and set his case down. He plugged in and tested his cable. A small pop sounded in the speaker. He turned down his volume and checked again.

Micah Carter wandered up and leaned on the stage edge. He held a basketball at his hip. Sweat shone on his forehead.

“You playing tonight?” Micah asked.

Caleb smiled. “If the power holds.”

Micah bounced the ball once. “If the tent holds,” he said.

Caleb looked up. “What do you mean?”

Micah lifted a shoulder. “My dad says the weather might turn,” he said. “He said to keep the side flaps ready.”

Caleb glanced toward the open sky. The afternoon looked bright. A few clouds sat far off, thin like smears. “It looks fine,” he said.

Micah nodded. “It always looks fine until it does not.”

He dribbled away toward the parking lot. The ball thumped in a steady rhythm.

Caleb ran through chord shapes. He checked the monitors and signaled to the sound guy. A teenage boy named Logan sat behind the small board, his face careful. He moved faders in tiny steps. He listened like he wanted to do it right.

Naomi stood near the welcome table again. She had moved the clipboard aside and placed a stack of small booklets in neat rows. Prayer guides. He recognized the cover. Maple Ridge Community Church had printed them for revival week, a simple blue design with a verse on the front.

Naomi wore a light blouse and a long skirt. Her dark hair sat in a low braid. A few strands escaped near her temple. She tucked them back while she spoke to Mrs. Alder, who held a box of pens. Mrs. Alder’s gray hair looked pinned tight, but her eyes held warmth.

Caleb looked away before Naomi looked up. His chest tightened anyway, the plan to speak after rehearsal sat between them like a held breath.

The band filtered in. A drummer named Cole brought his sticks and set them on the snare. A girl from the youth group, Tessa, carried a mic stand and adjusted the height. They moved around each other with quiet practice, learned in church basements and school auditoriums.

They started rehearsal. Caleb led a warm-up and then a run-through. He kept his voice steady. He watched the others. He watched the sound levels. He tried to keep his attention on the work.

Outside the tent, the light shifted.

At first it felt like a cloud passing over. Shade slid across the canvas and then moved away. Then it returned and stayed.

Caleb glanced up again. The sky had changed. Clouds gathered in a rough line. Darker now, stacked in layers.

A warm wind pushed through the tent. The canvas flexed. The ropes hummed.

Logan looked up from the board. “Uh,” he said.

Cole tapped his sticks together. “We are good,” he said, though he did not sound sure.

Caleb held up a hand. “Keep going,” he said.

They played again. The music rose and filled the tent. It felt right inside the space. The canvas softened the sharp edges of the sound. The notes did not bounce back hard. They settled. They stayed.

A low roll of thunder sounded far away. It did not startle anyone at first. It sounded like a truck on a distant road.

Mrs. Alder appeared at the side opening and glanced out. Her mouth pressed into a line. She turned and hurried toward the church.

Caleb kept playing. He did not want to give fear a place.

The next thunderclap hit closer. The teens stopped laughing near the chairs. A few people looked up. Someone stepped to the edge of the tent and peered out.

Naomi moved from the welcome table toward Pastor Whitaker, who stood near the center aisle with a man from the deacons. Caleb saw Pastor Whitaker’s face. Calm. Focused.

Pastor Whitaker lifted a hand and called out. “All right,” he said. “We will adjust.”

His voice carried. It always did. He did not raise it. It still reached everyone.

Eli Brooks climbed up onto the stage. He leaned close to Caleb. “Keep your gear covered,” he said. “Rain is coming hard.”

Caleb nodded and glanced at his guitar. He had an old towel in his case. He pulled it out and laid it near the pedals.

Pastor Whitaker walked toward the stage. He did not climb up. He stood on the grass and looked at Caleb.

“We will keep revival open,” Pastor Whitaker said. “We will shift the plan. We will pull people inside if lightning gets close.”

Caleb swallowed. “What do you want me to do?”

“Keep rehearsal short,” Pastor Whitaker said. “Then help with the side flaps. Naomi will direct the welcome team.”

Caleb nodded.

Pastor Whitaker’s eyes held him for a moment. They held a question without words. Caleb felt it. He answered with a small nod. Yes. He would speak in light. He would not run.

Pastor Whitaker turned and went back to the center aisle.

Rain came in a sudden sheet.

It hit the tent with a sharp roar. The canvas snapped as the wind shifted. Water drummed on the roof in a fast, heavy rhythm. The sound swallowed everything else.

Caleb stopped playing. The band froze. Logan leaned over the board, wide-eyed.

The air changed inside the tent. It cooled. The smell of wet grass rushed in. Earth and summer rain. A clean scent, heavy with life.

People started moving. Some hurried toward the openings to check ropes. Others pulled the side flaps down partway. The open edges of the tent flapped and then settled when someone tugged the lines tight.

Caleb took his guitar off and laid it in the case. He draped the towel over it. He closed the lid and latched it. He grabbed his cables and stuffed them into his bag.

Eli stepped across the stage and pointed toward a stack of sandbags. “Bring those to the west corner,” he said.

Caleb did not argue. He jumped down and ran. The grass slicked under his shoes. He nearly slid, caught himself, and kept moving.

The sandbags felt heavier than they looked. He carried two at a time. Water ran down his arms. His shirt clung to his back.

At the west corner, the canvas pulled hard with the wind. Two men held the rope and tried to keep it taut. One of them shouted numbers again, like earlier in the week. Slow and steady. It anchored the work.

Caleb set the sandbags down at the base of the pole. He pushed them into place with his foot.

A flash of lightning lit the world white for a split second. Thunder cracked close behind it.

Someone yelled, “Inside.”

Pastor Whitaker’s voice cut through. “Everyone in the church. Move now.”

People obeyed. No panic. Fast steps. Focus.

Caleb grabbed another sandbag and shoved it tight. Eli appeared beside him, rain running off his hair. “Go,” Eli said. “The corner will hold.”

Caleb nodded and ran with the others. Water streamed off the tent edges in thick lines. It poured in the doorway for a moment, then someone pulled the flap down and tied it off. The sound of the rain muffled.

Caleb sprinted across the wet lawn toward the church side entrance. The white clapboard walls looked brighter under the dark sky. The steeple rose above the storm, sharp against the clouds.

Inside, the air smelled like wood polish and old carpet. The sudden quiet felt strange. People filled the foyer and the hallway. Wet hair. Wet shoes. Laughter that sounded like relief.

Naomi stood near the fellowship hall doors. She had a stack of towels in her arms. Her braid had loosened. A strand of hair stuck to her cheek.

She handed a towel to a shivering teenage girl. “Take this,” Naomi said. “Go sit in the fellowship hall. Mrs. Alder has hot cocoa started.”

The girl nodded and hurried away.

Naomi turned and saw Caleb. Her eyes met his. Her face softened for a moment, then she steadied again. She handed him a towel.

“Thanks,” he said.

She glanced at his shirt. “You got soaked,” she said.

He wiped water from his hair. “The corner needed sandbags.”

Naomi nodded. “I saw.”

People moved around them. Someone asked where to put a box of Bibles. Naomi pointed them toward a table. She moved with purpose. She did not let the storm throw her.

Pastor Whitaker walked into the foyer. “Listen up,” he said. “We will set up in the fellowship hall tonight. We will keep the service time. We will keep the hearts. We will keep the doors open.”

A murmur rose. Agreement. A few amens.

Caleb felt the weight in his chest ease. Revival week did not depend on canvas. It depended on obedience. He knew that. Still, part of him had loved the tent. It felt like a visible sign, a place where people stepped out of routine.

Naomi turned to Caleb. “The band needs to move gear,” she said. “The hall has outlets by the stage area. We can set you up near the piano.”

Caleb nodded. “I will help.”

They moved together down the hallway. The church lights hummed overhead. Old framed photos lined the walls. Past pastors. Choir groups. A picture of the church when it still had dirt roads on both sides.

The fellowship hall doors stood open. Inside, women from the church moved tables to the sides. Men stacked chairs. The kitchen window showed steam and motion. Someone had already pulled out a large metal urn for coffee.

Rain beat against the windows. Water ran in thick trails down the glass.

Caleb carried his guitar case and his bag of cables. Cole carried the snare. Logan carried the sound board with careful hands. Tessa held mic stands.

They set up along the front of the hall where a small platform rose two steps above the floor. A piano sat at one side, polished and worn at the same time. A cross hung on the wall behind it.

Caleb plugged in and checked the sound. It felt different in the hall. The sound bounced off the walls, sharper than in the tent, but still steady. He adjusted the levels, his fingers moving with practiced ease. The others followed his lead, arranging their equipment with quiet focus. The storm outside raged on, but inside the fellowship hall, there was an odd peace, a feeling that no amount of thunder or rain could disrupt what had been set in motion this week.

Naomi stepped onto the platform, her movements sure despite the weight of the moment pressing on everyone. She placed a stack of hymnals on a nearby table and glanced toward Caleb. “Sound check good?” she asked.

He nodded. “It is good.”

Her eyes lingered on him for a heartbeat longer than necessary, then she turned to help Mrs. Alder, who was setting out cups for the cocoa. Caleb watched her braid sway as she walked, strands coming loose again. There was something about her, something steady, like the church steeple rising above the storm. She was not shaken, not really. She carried peace in a way he envied.

The band settled into place, and Logan signaled that the sound board was ready. Pastor Whitaker stepped to the center of the hall, his presence filling the space the way it always did. He did not need a microphone. His voice carried with quiet authority.

“Let us begin,” he said, his hands raised slightly, palms open. “The rain may pour, but God’s grace pours more. We are here to worship, to pray, to seek Him. And no storm can stop that.”

A murmur of agreement swept through the room, followed by a few scattered “amens.” Caleb adjusted his guitar strap and looked out at the gathered crowd. Wet hair, damp clothes, tired faces, but something about the way they stood spoke of hope. They were ready, even here, even now.

The band played the opening chords of a hymn, and the sound filled the hall. Voices rose, joining the music, uniting in worship. Caleb let the melody guide him, the notes flowing from his fingers like they were born to be there. The storm outside felt distant now, almost muted. Inside these walls, there was something stronger.

Naomi joined the singing, her voice clear and unwavering. Caleb could not help glancing toward her, drawn by the way she sang with her whole heart. It was not just music. It was faith made audible, a declaration that even storms could not silence.

As the hymn ended, Pastor Whitaker stepped forward again. “Tonight, we remember that God meets us wherever we are, in tents, in halls, in the middle of storms. Let this revival remind us of the One who calms every wave.”

The room was quiet for a moment, save for the rain beating against the windows. Then someone clapped, and another joined, until the hall was filled with applause, not for the band, not for the service itself, but for the truth that had been spoken.

Caleb felt something shift in his chest. It was not just relief. It was hope. The kind of hope that made him believe Maple Ridge might hold more for him than he’d dared to imagine.

Naomi caught his eye again as the applause faded. Her look was brief, but it held something, a question, maybe, or an answer he did not yet understand. He nodded, almost imperceptibly, and she smiled. It was small, but it reached her eyes.

The storm outside continued, but Revival stayed open inside.

Chapter 9

The Song He Almost Didn't Lead

The sound bounced off the low ceiling and came back at Caleb with a slight delay. It muddied the edges of the chords. He turned his amp down and listened again.

Logan crouched by the sound board. He slid a knob and leaned close to the small lights. "Talk," Logan said.

Caleb spoke into the mic. "One, two. Testing."

His voice came back warmer than he expected. The fellowship hall held decades of potlucks, funerals, and Christmas plays. It held prayer meetings where someone had cried in the back row, and no one had turned to stare. It held laughter after baptisms. The room had absorbed it all.

Naomi crossed the hall with a coil of extension cords in her arms. Her hair still held damp at the ends. She moved past Caleb and set the cords by the wall. She kept her eyes on the work.

Caleb watched her for a beat too long. He looked away first.

Tessa lifted a mic stand and tightened the collar. "If the rain keeps up, we might need more towels," she said.

"Kitchen has a stack," Naomi said. "I will bring them."

Cole stepped onto the platform and tapped the snare with a stick. "This room will make me sound better than I am," he said.

Logan did not look up. "It will also make you sound worse than you are," he said.

Cole grinned. He kept tapping, soft and careful, feeling the room.

Caleb ran a hand down the neck of his guitar. The strings felt dry again. He strummed an open chord and let it ring. The note did not fly the way it did in the tent. It stayed close. It wrapped the room.

Pastor Whitaker walked in with a roll of blue painter tape. His sleeves sat pushed up his forearms. He looked like a man who had moved chairs his whole life and never complained.

He pointed at the floor. “Logan, mark your cables so no one breaks their neck.”

Logan nodded. “Already doing it.”

Pastor Whitaker looked at Caleb. “We will do this, son. The Lord has given us a room and a roof.”

“Yes, sir,” Caleb said.

Pastor Whitaker nodded once, then turned to the far end of the hall where Mrs. Alder stood near a table of paper cups. She spoke to two girls from the youth group and handed them a tray of cookies.

Naomi headed for the kitchen. She paused at the door and looked back. Her gaze landed on Caleb again. It stayed there a second. Her face softened, then she turned away.

Caleb lifted his guitar strap over his shoulder and checked his tuning. The rain on the windows sounded steady. It filled the spaces between voices.

He took a slow breath. He had done this plenty of times. He had stood on stages with lights, monitors, and a team that ran schedules down to the minute. He had led worship in a chapel on campus where the seats sat bolted to the floor, and the sound system cost more than his uncle’s truck.

This felt harder.

The revival had started in the field under canvas and strings of lights. It had felt like something old made new. People had come night after night. Some came out of habit, others out of hunger they did not know how to name.

Then the storm hit. The wind had slapped the tent and driven rain sideways. Sandbags and rope had held as long as they could. Folks had run with boxes of Bibles held over their heads. Naomi had stood in the downpour and directed people like she had been born for it. Caleb had watched her and felt small.

He heard voices in the foyer. People arrived early, shaking off wet umbrellas and laughing about getting caught in the rain. A few kids ran down the hallway until a mother snapped their names.

Naomi came out of the kitchen with a stack of towels on her forearms. She handed them to Mrs. Alder. “If anyone needs one, please tell them to take it,” Naomi said.

Mrs. Alder patted Naomi’s arm. “You always think of everything.”

Naomi gave a tight smile. “I try.”

Pastor Whitaker stepped onto the platform and took the mic. He did not test it. He trusted it. “Friends,” he said, voice low and steady. “We will start in a few minutes. Find a seat. If you need cocoa, the kitchen has it. If you need prayer, you will have it.”

He looked out at the room like he knew every worry that walked through the doors. “God is not kept outside by rain,” he said. “He meets us where we gather.”

A few people said amen.

Caleb looked down at his hands. His fingers rested on the strings. He told himself to focus. Tonight still mattered.

Logan leaned toward him. “We are good,” he said. “Levels are set.”

Caleb nodded. He swallowed once.

Tessa walked to Naomi and said something soft. Naomi nodded and moved to the side wall to make room for people. She started to set chairs where a row sat crooked. She adjusted them until the aisle looked clean.

Caleb watched her line up chairs while the room filled. He had known Naomi Reyes since he had been a teenager in Maple Ridge. He had known her smile before it learned restraint. He had known her laugh before it got careful. Back then, she had stood with her parents after church and talked to anyone who stopped by. She had carried a tray of rolls into the fellowship hall and offered them as if it mattered.

She still moved as if it mattered. That part had not changed.

Caleb shifted his weight. He looked toward the back door and the windows streaked with rain. The storm had turned the world into gray sheets, but the room stayed warm with yellow light, bodies, and the smell of coffee.

He checked his set list on a folded paper. The first song sat at the top. A familiar one. A safe one.

The song he almost did not lead sat lower on the page.

He had written it last semester in his dorm room. He had written it after a night when he could not sleep. He had written it after he sat on his bed, tried to picture his future, and saw only fog.

He had never planned to play it here.

He had brought it anyway.

He told himself it belonged in a different place, with a different crowd. He told himself it sounded too personal. He told himself Maple Ridge did not need it.

He told himself many things when he wanted to stay guarded.

Cole sat behind his kit and rolled his shoulders. “What are we opening with?” he asked.

Caleb leaned toward him. “Same as the last two nights,” he said.

Cole nodded. “Okay.”

Tessa stood near her mic and looked down at her hands. She wore a simple blue dress with a cardigan. Her hair sat in a braid. She looked calm. She always did.

Logan glanced at the room, then back at Caleb. “You good?” he asked.

Caleb nodded. “Yes.”

Logan studied him a moment longer, then looked away.

Pastor Whitaker stepped down and moved to the front row. He sat beside Hannah Whitaker. Hannah held a notebook on her lap. Eli Brooks sat on the other side of her with his hands folded. He watched the room with the steady calm of a man who had lived through storms and did not panic when the wind rose.

Caleb’s uncle sat three rows back, close enough for Caleb to see his face. His uncle nodded when their eyes met. No words. Only support.

Naomi stayed near the side wall. She greeted people as they came in. She leaned close to an older woman and listened. She touched the woman’s hand. She pointed her toward a seat.

Then Naomi turned and looked toward the platform again.

Caleb felt it in his chest. He did not know how to name it. He did not try.

Pastor Whitaker stood again. “We will begin,” he said.

The room quieted. Chairs scraped and then stilled. Someone coughed. A baby fussed and then settled.

Caleb stepped to his mic. The cord pulled at his foot. He moved it back with a small kick.

He looked out and saw faces he had known a long time. Faces from his childhood summers. Faces from his last year in high school when he had come less and less. Faces who had prayed for him when he stopped returning their calls.

He saw Naomi’s face too. Her eyes stayed on him, clear and steady.

He lifted his pick. His thumb trembled once. He forced it still.

“Good evening,” Caleb said. His voice sounded too loud in the hall. He lowered the mic a fraction. “We had a change of location, but we have the same God. We will sing to Him.”

A few amens rose again.

Caleb nodded at Cole. Cole clicked his sticks. One, two, three, four.

The first song began. Familiar chords. A steady beat. Voices joined after the first line. The room filled with sound. It did not soar like the tent. It gathered. It held.

Caleb watched people sing. He watched a teenage boy who had stood in the back all week finally open his mouth and sing with his eyes shut. He watched a middle-aged man wipe his face with the back of his hand while he kept singing. He watched Mrs. Alder lift

her hands a little, then a little more, as if she decided she no longer cared who noticed.

Caleb sang too. He meant it.

Between songs, Pastor Whitaker read a short passage and prayed. His prayer stayed simple. He thanked God for shelter and for storms that did not outrun mercy. He asked for soft hearts.

Caleb played again, another familiar one. Tessa's voice carried clean over the room. The people followed her lead, then followed Caleb's.

Two songs in, Caleb felt his shoulders lower. The tension eased. He started to breathe again.

Then the moment arrived.

He glanced down at the set list. He saw the title written in his own hand. Small letters. A song no one knew. A song he had written for his own fear.

His mouth went dry.

Cole looked at him, waiting for the count.

Logan watched him from the side, hand on the soundboard.

Tessa glanced over with a question in her eyes.

Naomi stood at the wall and waited too. She did not rush him with her gaze. She only stayed present.

Caleb swallowed. He leaned toward the mic. "We are going to sing a song we have not done here," he said. He kept his voice even. "I wrote it during the school year."

A few heads lifted. A few people smiled as if they were proud of him.

Caleb's stomach tightened.

He had not written it for pride. He had written it because he had needed air.

"I will teach it to you," he said. "If you want to join, please do."

He looked down at his hands again. He placed his fingers on the strings. He did not move yet.

In his mind he saw his dorm room. A narrow bed. A desk with textbooks. A window that looked out on a parking lot. The hum of other people's lives through thin walls. He had sat on the edge of his bed and held his guitar like it was the only steady thing.

He had prayed, but his words had felt thin.

Lord, what are You doing with me?

He had heard no clear answer. Only silence. Only the ache of wanting.

He had opened his Bible to Psalms because that felt safe. He had read words he had sung since he was young. Trust. Refuge. Light. He believed them, but he did not feel them.

Then he had started to play.

A simple melody. A line that kept circling back like a thought that would not leave. Words came slowly. Honest. Plain.

He had written them down, crossed them out, and written them again.

He had ended with a prayer he did not want anyone to see.

Caleb lifted his head. Maple Ridge sat before him. The fellowship hall with its scuffed floor, old kitchen, and smells of cocoa and coffee. People who would not mock him. People who would not clap for his pain. People who would hold it with care.

He still hesitated.

He did not want to open a door he had kept shut for years.

He saw Naomi again. Her face stayed calm, but something in her eyes changed. A softness. An invitation.

Caleb took a breath and spoke. “Sometimes people think worship means a strong voice and a steady heart,” he said. “Sometimes it does. Sometimes worship starts with a shaky voice and a tired heart.”

The room grew quieter. Even the kids settled.

Caleb rested his fingers on the strings and began.

The chords moved slowly. Simple. He kept the rhythm soft. Cole used brushes on the snare. A hush fell across the room.

Caleb sang the first verse with his eyes open. His voice stayed steady, but he felt the words cut through him.

He sang about wanting to run ahead. About making plans and calling it wisdom. About leaving God behind while asking God to bless the distance.

He did not use big language. He did not want it. He sang what was true.

By the chorus, Tessa joined him, low and gentle. Her harmony wrapped around his voice. The room listened. A few people started to hum.

Caleb sang the second verse and felt his throat tighten. He pushed through it.

He saw his own face at seventeen, full of pride. He saw the day he had told his uncle he would leave Maple Ridge for good. He saw his parents' faces when he said it. He had called it ambition. He had called it growth. He had called it a life bigger than a small town.

He had never named the fear under it. The fear that staying meant being known. The fear that God would ask something of him he did not want to give.

The chorus came again. This time, more voices joined. Not many. A few. But they sang with care, as if they held a fragile thing and did not want to crush it.

Caleb felt his eyes sting. He blinked hard and kept his gaze on the back wall. He kept his voice steady. He did not let it break.

He reached the bridge. The words there had always scared him. They asked for surrender. They admitted he did not know his own future and he did not control it.

He sang them anyway.

His voice roughened. He felt it. He did not hide it.

As he sang, he heard other voices rise. The room joined him. Not perfect. Not polished. But present. The fellowship hall filled with a sound that felt like prayer.

Caleb's chest ached. He held the last note, then let it fall.

Silence followed.

No one clapped. Maple Ridge did not treat worship like a show. They treated it like an offering.

Caleb lowered his head. He breathed in and out. He tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

Pastor Whitaker stood from the front row. He did not go to the stage. He only spoke from where he stood. “Thank you,” he said, voice quiet. He looked at Caleb with warmth and something else, a gravity that made Caleb feel seen. “The Lord meets us in the honest places.”

Caleb nodded once. He could not speak yet.

Pastor Whitaker lifted his Bible. “Scripture says in Ecclesiastes, whoever watches the wind will not plant,” he said. “Whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.” He paused. “Storm or no storm, the Lord calls His people to obedience.”

A murmur moved through the room. Agreement. A few amens.

Caleb kept his hands on his guitar. He stared at the wood grain by the sound hole. He focused on the small details so he did not fall apart in front of everyone.

Pastor Whitaker continued, “There are young men and young women in this room who feel the wind. They look at clouds and feel fear. The Lord does not shame them for fear. He invites them to trust Him while they plant anyway.”

Caleb’s breath caught. He did not look up.

Pastor Whitaker’s voice softened. “Caleb, thank you for planting in front of us tonight.”

Caleb lifted his head then. He met Pastor Whitaker’s eyes. Caleb saw no judgment there. He saw gratitude. He saw a shepherd who knew storms by name.

Caleb nodded again. “Yes, sir,” he managed.

Pastor Whitaker sat down.

Caleb looked toward Naomi without thinking. She stood still. Her hands clasped in front of her. Her eyes shone. She did not smile. She looked like she held back words.

Caleb glanced away fast.

He started the next song. Familiar again. One the congregation knew by heart. The room sang louder now. People lifted their voices as if they had been waiting to do so.

Caleb played and sang, but part of him stayed tender from the song he had shared. He felt exposed. He also felt lighter.

When the final chord rang out, Pastor Whitaker stood and preached a short message. He spoke about God meeting people in storms. He spoke about young faith and old faith sharing the same altar. He quoted Joel, about God pouring out His Spirit on sons and daughters. He spoke it like a promise for Maple Ridge, not a distant line on a page.

Caleb listened from his chair on the platform, guitar in his lap. He watched heads nod. He watched people lean forward. He watched teenagers in the back row sit straighter when Pastor Whitaker talked about God using young voices.

When Pastor Whitaker invited people to pray, the room moved. Some walked to the front. Some stayed in their seats. Some turned and knelt beside chairs.

Naomi moved down the side aisle and stopped near a young girl from the youth group who looked overwhelmed. Naomi knelt beside her and put an arm around her shoulders.

Caleb watched from the platform, heart tight again.

He had always admired Naomi's steadiness. He had told himself he admired it from a safe distance.

Tessa stepped down from the platform and walked toward the prayer groups too. Cole set his sticks down and went to the back row where a friend sat with his head bowed.

Logan stayed near the soundboard, eyes scanning the cables, but he bowed his head and prayed where he stood.

Caleb sat alone on the platform for a moment. He held his guitar as it anchored him. He wanted to go pray for someone. He did not know who. He also wanted to disappear.

He stood. He stepped off the platform and moved down the aisle.

He passed Pastor Whitaker, who prayed with an older man near the front. Pastor Whitaker opened his eyes and saw Caleb. He gave a small nod, like a blessing without words.

Caleb kept walking.

Naomi still knelt with the girl. The girl's shoulders shook. Naomi leaned close and whispered something. She did not pry. She did not press. She stayed there.

Caleb stopped a few feet away, uncertain. He did not want to interrupt. He also did not want to hover and make it strange.

Naomi looked up and saw him. Her eyes flicked to the girl, then back to Caleb. She gave a small motion with her hand, a signal to wait.

Caleb stood with his hands at his sides. He listened to the rain on the windows. He listened to murmured prayers around him. He smelled cocoa and wet clothes and the old wood of the hall.

He waited.

The girl wiped her face with a towel Naomi offered. She nodded at Naomi, then stood and walked toward the kitchen. Naomi watched her go until she disappeared through the doorway.

Naomi rose. She smoothed her skirt once. She looked tired, but her posture stayed firm. She turned to Caleb.

Caleb found his voice. “She is okay,” he said.

Naomi nodded. “She will be. She needed a place to say it out loud.”

Caleb looked toward the kitchen door. “You do that a lot,” he said.

Naomi tilted her head. “What?” she asked.

“Give people a place,” he said.

Naomi looked down for a moment, then back up. “People gave me one,” she said.

Caleb held her gaze. The noise of the room faded behind him. He felt like he stood in a smaller space with only her.

Naomi’s eyes flicked to his guitar, then back to his face. “That song,” she said.

Caleb’s throat tightened again. “Yes.”

Naomi did not rush. “You wrote it,” she said.

“Yes.”

“It sounded… honest,” Naomi said.

Caleb swallowed. “It was.”

Naomi nodded slowly, like she took in the weight of it. “I did not know you wrote songs,” she said.

Caleb almost laughed, but he stopped himself. “I do,” he said. “I do not show people.”

Naomi’s gaze stayed steady. “Why did you show them tonight?” she asked.

Caleb’s fingers tightened around the neck of the guitar. He wanted to answer with something light. Something safe. He wanted to say it fit the theme or it felt right. He wanted to say the set list needed one more slow song.

He told the truth instead. “Because I almost did not,” he said.

Naomi’s face softened again. “What stopped you?” she asked.

Caleb looked toward the windows. Rain traced lines down the glass. Lights from the parking lot glowed faint outside. “Fear,” he said.

Naomi did not look shocked. She only nodded, like she understood fear like a language.

Caleb kept going, because he had started. “I have led worship for years,” he said. “I have played in rooms bigger than this. None of that scares me. But letting people see what goes on in my head… it does.”

Naomi’s voice stayed quiet. “Because people might think less of you,” she said.

Caleb looked at her. “Because I might think less of me,” he said.

Naomi held his eyes. Something in her expression shifted, like she felt his words land in her own chest.

Caleb breathed out. “Music matters to me because it says what I cannot say in a conversation,” he continued. “It gives me a way to pray when my prayers feel stuck.”

Naomi's hand moved to the cross necklace at her throat. She touched it once, then let it go. "So you wrote a prayer," she said.

"Yes," Caleb said.

Naomi nodded again. "It helped people," she said. "I saw faces. They heard their own thoughts in it."

Caleb let out a breath. "That scares me too," he admitted. "If I help them, then I have to believe God can help me."

Naomi's eyes shone more. She blinked once, slowly. "God already has," she said.

Caleb frowned. "How do you know?" he asked.

Naomi glanced at the platform, then back at him. "Because you stood up there and sang it," she said. "You did the hard part."

Caleb's chest ached. He looked at the floor. "I do not feel brave," he said.

Naomi's mouth curved, small and sad. "Brave people rarely do," she said.

A pause stretched between them. Voices murmured around them. A man cried softly near the front row. Someone prayed in a low voice near the back. The room stayed sacred in a simple way.

Caleb looked at Naomi's hands. They held a faint redness from work, from carrying chairs, from wringing towels. He thought of her in the rain, directing people with calm.

He lifted his gaze back to her face. "You always know what to do," he said.

Naomi's shoulders tensed. The softness in her face pulled back. "No," she said. "I do not."

Caleb watched her. He saw something flicker there, fast. He did not understand it yet.

Naomi looked past him toward the kitchen and the hallway, like she checked for needs before she checked her own heart. “I only keep moving,” she said.

“I run,” he said. “You keep moving. Maybe those are the same thing.”

Naomi looked at him then, sharp. For a moment, tension rose. Not anger. Something closer to being seen when she did not want it.

She took a breath. Her voice stayed controlled. “Do you feel called to music?” she asked.

The question hit him like a hand to the chest.

Caleb blinked. “I do not know,” he said.

Naomi watched him closely. “You lead as you care,” she said. “It does not look like a hobby.”

Caleb felt his face heat. He glanced away. “I care,” he said.

Naomi waited.

Caleb forced himself to keep talking. “I used to think my future would be clear,” he said. “School, career, a city. A church with a stage and screens. I thought it would fit.” He tightened his grip on his guitar. “Now I do not know what fits. I do not know what I want. I do not know what God wants.”

Naomi’s voice softened again. “So you write songs,” she said.

Caleb nodded. “It helps me stay honest,” he said. “It helps me stay close to the Lord when I want to pretend I am fine.”

Naomi looked down. When she looked up, her eyes held tears she did not let fall. “Thank you for singing it,” she said.

Caleb’s throat tightened again. “You are welcome,” he said.

Naomi hesitated, then spoke as if she had decided to say it no matter what it cost. “It makes me feel less strange,” she said.

Caleb’s brow furrowed. “Less strange?” he asked.

Naomi pressed her lips together, then released them. “I love this town,” she said. “I love this church. I love these people.” She glanced around the hall. “And sometimes I feel like I am standing on a line. One foot here. One foot somewhere else. Like if I step wrong, I will lose something.”

Caleb held still. He listened.

Naomi’s gaze stayed on the floor for a beat. “When you sang, it sounded like someone standing on a line too,” she said.

Caleb felt the words settle between them. He did not know what to do with them. He only knew they mattered.

A small voice called Naomi’s name from the kitchen door. Naomi turned. Mrs. Alder stood there holding a stack of cups. “Naomi, honey, we need more hot water,” she said. “The cocoa is going fast.”

Naomi nodded at once. She looked back to Caleb. Her expression shifted, regretful, like she did not want to break the moment.

Caleb stepped back to give her space. “Go,” he said.

Naomi started to move, then paused. “Caleb,” she said.

He looked at her.

Naomi's eyes held his. "Do not stop writing," she said. "Do not stop telling the truth to the Lord."

Caleb's chest tightened. He nodded once. "I will try," he said.

Naomi turned and went into the kitchen.

Caleb stood alone for a moment in the aisle. The room still held pockets of prayer. He watched Naomi disappear behind the swinging door. He heard her voice rise as she asked where the kettle sat.

He looked down at his guitar. The strap cut across his shoulder. He shifted it, but the ache stayed deeper than the strap.

He returned to the platform and set his guitar on its stand. He sat on the edge of a folding chair and watched the room.

Hannah Whitaker walked toward him after she finished praying with a woman near the front. She carried her notebook. She stopped at the steps of the platform and looked up.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi, Hannah," Caleb said.

She smiled, small. "I liked your song," she said.

Caleb felt his face heat again. "Thank you," he said.

Hannah stepped closer. Her voice stayed gentle. "It takes courage to lead with honesty," she said.

Caleb shook his head. "It felt like the opposite," he said.

Hannah nodded as she understood. "It always feels like loss before it feels like freedom," she said.

Caleb looked at her notebook. "You always take notes," he said.

Hannah glanced down and smiled. “It helps me,” she said. “I forget what God says to me if I do not write it down. I forget on hard days.”

Caleb nodded. “I write songs for the same reason,” he said.

Hannah’s eyes softened. “Then keep writing,” she said. “Maple Ridge needs young voices who do not perform faith. They live it.”

Caleb’s throat tightened again. He did not trust himself to speak much. “Yes, ma’am,” he said.

Hannah laughed once, quietly. “Do not call me that,” she said. “I am not old.”

Caleb’s mouth curved. “Yes, Hannah,” he said.

She stepped back. “Pastor Whitaker will close in a few minutes,” she said. “People will need help stacking chairs after. Naomi will already be doing it.”

Caleb’s smile faded. “She always does,” he said.

Hannah watched him. Her gaze held something knowing, but she did not press. “Then you can help,” she said.

Caleb nodded. “I will,” he said.

Hannah moved away to speak to someone else.

Eli Brooks walked up next, hands in his pockets. He stood beside Caleb without saying anything at first. He looked out at the room like he measured the moment.

“You wrote that,” Eli said.

Caleb nodded. “Yes.”

Eli glanced at Caleb. “Good,” he said.

Caleb almost smiled. “That is all?” he asked.

Eli’s mouth twitched. “That is plenty,” he said. Then his expression turned serious. “Music helps people say what they are scared to say. It helped me once.”

Caleb looked at him. “When?” he asked.

Eli’s gaze stayed on the room. “When I had to decide if I would stay in church after I had made a mess of my life,” he said. “A song made me stay in the pew one more minute.” He looked at Caleb then. “One more minute turns into a new life.”

Caleb swallowed. He nodded. “Thank you,” he said.

Eli patted Caleb’s shoulder once, firm and brief. Then Eli walked away.

Caleb sat still. He listened as the prayers slowed and people began to lift their heads. He watched Naomi come out of the kitchen again with a tray of cups. She moved through the crowd and offered them to people who looked drained.

Caleb felt something in him shift. He did not name it yet. He only knew he wanted to be near her, to understand her, to earn trust he had not earned when he left town.

Pastor Whitaker returned to the front and spoke again. “If you prayed tonight,” he said, “do not walk away alone. Find someone to talk to. Find someone to pray with tomorrow. Revival does not live in one night.”

He thanked everyone for their flexibility and their help. He prayed a closing prayer, asking God to guard hearts and deepen the work.

People began to stand. Chairs scraped. Voices rose again, softer than before, like folks did not want to break what had happened.

Teenagers clustered in small groups. Older women hugged each other. Men shook hands and talked about the storm, the sandbags, and the tent.

Caleb stepped down from the platform and started stacking chairs at the back. He worked beside Logan for a few minutes. Logan did not talk much, but he handed Caleb rolls of tape and gathered cords with careful hands.

Cole hauled the drum kit toward the storage closet. Tessa carried mic stands to the corner, then wiped them down with a towel.

Naomi moved with purpose through it all. She directed kids to carry hymnals back to the cart. She asked two men to help fold tables. She checked the kitchen again.

Caleb caught her near the doorway to the hall. She held a trash bag in one hand. She paused when she saw him.

“Do you need help?” Caleb asked.

Naomi looked at the chairs he held. “You are already helping,” she said.

Caleb set the chairs down and faced her. “With the rest,” he said.

Naomi hesitated. “Mrs. Alder asked me to take out trash,” she said. “It is not… it is not hard.”

Caleb reached for the bag. “I will do it,” he said.

Naomi tightened her grip. “No,” she said, then her voice softened as if she heard herself. “I mean… thank you, but I have it.”

Caleb held his hand out and waited. He did not press. He only stayed.

Naomi looked at him for a long moment. Then she let go of the bag and placed it in his hand. Their fingers brushed. A small contact, but it held weight.

Caleb felt his pulse jump. He kept his face calm.

Naomi's gaze flicked to his face, then away. "The dumpster is behind the kitchen," she said. "The rain is lighter."

Caleb nodded. "I will be back," he said.

He walked down the hallway with the bag. The church smelled like floor cleaner, old wood, and coffee. He pushed through the back door and stepped into damp air. The rain had eased into a fine mist. The night stayed warm. The parking lot shone with wet reflections under the lights.

He carried the bag to the dumpster and tossed it in. The lid clanged. He stood there for a moment and breathed.

He looked toward the field where the tent stood dark and battered. The ropes hung slack. The canvas sagged in places, but it still stood.

Caleb thought of the song again. The bridge. The words he had sung with his voice rough.

He had meant them. That mattered.

He turned and walked back toward the church. Through the window he saw movement in the fellowship hall, people finishing up, Naomi near the wall with a stack of cups in her hands.

Caleb opened the door and stepped inside, carrying the damp night with him. He shut the door and stood for a second, listening to voices and laughter and the soft scrape of chairs.

He had almost kept his song to himself.

He had not.

And now the week felt different in a way he did not know how to control.

Chapter 10

Naomi’s Quiet Fear

Naomi Reyes rinsed the last coffee urn and set it upside down on a towel. The fellowship hall lights buzzed. Water ran warm over her hands, then cooled as she turned the tap. The rain had stopped, but the air still held damp weight. It clung to her hair at her neck.

Voices carried down the hall. A few men laughed as they stacked folding chairs. Someone sang a line from tonight’s last song, off-key, and someone else shushed him with a soft joke. Naomi kept her focus on the sink. She let the ordinary tasks steady her.

She dried her hands. She wiped the counter. She lined up the plastic cups Mrs. Alder saved in a box for “church use,” even though they all knew it meant revival week and funeral dinners.

Naomi heard footsteps behind her. She did not turn at first. She recognized the pace.

Caleb Monroe stopped at the kitchen doorway. He held the trash bag like it weighed nothing. His hair looked darker from the mist. His shirt clung at the collar.

“I put it in,” he said.

Naomi nodded. “Thank you.”

He stepped inside and set the bag by the empty bin as if he wanted to prove he had done it right. He looked around the kitchen, then back to her.

“Do you need anything else?” he asked.

Naomi reached for a towel and folded it, then folded it again. Her hands wanted work.

“No,” she said. “Mrs. Alder will check behind everyone when we leave. She always does.”

His mouth lifted, small and quick. “She does.”

Naomi felt her face warm. She did not know why. It annoyed her. She slid the towel into a drawer and shut it with care.

Caleb leaned a shoulder against the doorway. He did not crowd her. He did not leave.

“I heard you in there,” he said.

Naomi stilled. “In the hall.”

“After the last song,” he said. “You were praying with Rachel Moreno. I heard your voice.”

Naomi turned to face him. She kept her hands at her sides so he would not see them fidget.

“I did not say much,” she said.

“You did,” he said. “It mattered.”

Naomi held his gaze for a moment. The overhead light caught in his eyes. He looked tired in a clean way, like a man who had worked hard and still meant to work more. It made her think of the ropes on the tent and the way the poles had held under the wind.

“It was for a girl from Pine Hollow,” Naomi said. “She came with her cousin. She wanted prayer for college.”

Caleb nodded once, slow. “College does that,” he said.

Naomi gave a small shrug. “Life does that.”

He watched her, like he waited for her to keep going.

Naomi turned back to the counter and picked up the sponge again. The urn already shone. Still, she wiped it. She needed distance. Her chest felt tight, and she did not know where it came from. She did not like how close it sat to hope.

“You are leaving after this week,” Naomi said.

Caleb did not answer right away. She heard his breath. Then his shoes shifted on the tile.

“Yes,” he said. “When my uncle drives me to the bus station.”

Naomi nodded, as if she had asked about the weather. “Right.”

“You sound glad,” he said.

Naomi kept her back to him. “It is your plan,” she said. “Plans matter.”

Caleb stepped closer. He stopped behind her, still a respectful space away. His presence filled the room anyway. It did not feel like pressure. It felt like heat from a stove.

“Are you staying?” he asked.

Naomi turned off the faucet. She set the sponge down with care.

“Yes,” she said. “I am here.”

Caleb’s voice softened. “For summer,” he said. “Or for life.”

Naomi’s throat tightened. The question landed in a place she tried to keep covered. It made her think of her bedroom at home, the posters she had taken down last year because they felt childish. It made her think of her mother folding laundry with a quiet face. It made her think of her father’s hands, stained with engine oil, and the way he prayed before he ate, short prayers. Honest ones.

Naomi faced Caleb. “I do not know,” she said.

He did not react like she had given a wrong answer. He only watched her, steady.

Naomi felt the urge to smile and dismiss it. She refused. She had done that for too long. She swallowed.

“I am in the education program,” she said. “I start student teaching soon. I have options. A school in a bigger district offered a placement. It is two hours away.”

Caleb nodded. “That is good.”

“It is,” she said, but her voice sounded thin. “It is what I asked for.”

“Then why do you look like you are bracing?” he said.

Naomi’s eyes stung, sudden and sharp. She blinked hard. She hated crying. She hated how it made people hurry to fix her.

“I do not want to choose wrong,” she said.

Caleb’s brows drew together. “Wrong how.”

Naomi took a breath. The kitchen smelled like coffee grounds and damp towels.

“Wrong like leaving and finding out I left something God wanted me to do here,” she said.

Caleb stayed still.

“Wrong like staying and waking up at thirty and realizing I stayed because I was afraid,” she said.

Caleb’s eyes held hers. He did not look away. He did not offer a quick answer.

Naomi pressed her fingers against the edge of the counter. “Everyone talks like the path is clear if a person prays hard enough,” she said. “I pray. I read Scripture. I serve. I still do not feel clear.”

Caleb spoke in a low voice. “I do not feel clear either.”

Naomi blinked. “You do not.”

He shook his head once. “No.”

Naomi searched his face. She had seen him lead worship with calm hands and a steady voice. She had seen him fix a buzzing mic without snapping at the sound guy. She had seen him kneel with teenagers and listen without acting like their problems were small. He looked like certainty when he stood on stage.

“You look clear,” she said.

His mouth tightened. “I look trained,” he said. “I grew up around people who led worship like it was as normal as breathing. I learned what to do with my hands. I learned how to count in a song. I learned how to smile at the right time.”

Naomi felt her shoulders ease a fraction. Honesty did that. It made room.

Caleb’s gaze dropped to the towel on the counter, then rose again. “I came for summer,” he said. “I told myself it would be simple. Lead music. Serve. Get through break without wasting it. Then go back.”

“And you will,” Naomi said, because she needed him to say it.

Caleb did not answer. He looked past her toward the small window over the sink. Rain streaks clung to the glass.

Naomi felt the silence stretch. She heard the hall door open and close. Someone called goodnight. A car started outside. Its headlights swept past the kitchen window and slid away.

Naomi forced her voice steady. “People depend on you,” she said. “You have gifts.”

Caleb looked back at her. “Gifts do not tell a man where to live,” he said.

Naomi flinched because it hit close.

Caleb saw it. His face softened. “I did not mean it harshly,” he said. “I mean it is hard. I mean I do not want to pretend it is easy.”

Naomi nodded once. Her throat felt tight again.

She reached for the stack of cups and carried them to the cabinet. The cabinet door squeaked. She wished someone would fix it. Eli Brooks would have fixed it in five minutes. Eli always seemed to know where the screwdriver lived.

Naomi shut the door. She turned back to Caleb.

“Do you ever worry?” she asked, “that God will let you choose wrong?”

Caleb breathed out. “I worry God will tell me, and I will not like it,” he said.

Naomi’s mouth went dry. She understood. She understood too well.

Caleb shifted his weight, as if he were debating whether to say more. Then he did.

“My uncle says God does not hide His will like a trick,” Caleb said. “He says the Lord leads step by step. He says obedience comes before clarity sometimes.”

Naomi gave a small nod. Pastor Whitaker had said similar things from the pulpit, gentle and firm. Naomi believed it when she heard it there. It felt harder in a quiet kitchen with a man watching her as her answer mattered.

“Step by step feels slow,” Naomi said.

Caleb’s eyes held hers. “Slow feels safe,” he said.

Naomi let out a short breath. “Safe does not always mean right.”

“No,” he said. “But safe helps a person breathe.”

Naomi did not know how to respond to the way he said it. He sounded like he cared if she breathed.

She looked down at her hands. She saw the faint red line on her ring finger where her class ring had been. She had taken it off for the dishes. She had not put it back on. She did not know why. It felt like a small sign of who she had been in high school. A good girl. A faithful girl. A girl people trusted.

Now she still served, still showed up, still smiled at the right times. Yet fear sat under her ribs like a stone.

“I feel selfish,” Naomi said.

Caleb’s voice stayed calm. “Why?”

“Because I want to do something that matters,” she said. “And Maple Ridge matters. This church matters. My family matters. It feels wrong to want more than this.”

Caleb shook his head. “Wanting more does not mean you hate what you have,” he said.

Naomi looked up, surprised.

He stepped back a half step, as if he realized he had moved close without meaning to. “My mother used to say that,” he added. “When I talked about leaving for school.”

Naomi’s mind reached for what she knew. “Your mother lives in the city,” she said. “Right.”

Caleb nodded. “She does.”

Naomi thought of her own mother’s face when Naomi mentioned the placement two hours away. Her mother had smiled. She had said she felt proud. Her eyes had looked wet. Naomi had gone to her room after and pressed her forehead to the wall. She had prayed without words.

Naomi’s voice turned small. “My parents do not say I should stay,” she said. “They tell me to go where God sends me. But I see my mother’s hands shake when she folds my clothes.”

Caleb’s gaze softened. “You are their oldest,” he said.

Naomi nodded. “My brothers pretend they do not care. They care.”

Caleb looked toward the hall again. The noise had quieted. Most people had gone. The building settled into a late-night hush.

“Do you want to talk somewhere else?” he asked. “We are in the way.”

Naomi almost laughed. No one would come in now. Still, she understood his point. The kitchen felt too bright. It felt like a workplace, not a place to say fear out loud.

“There is a bench by the side garden,” Naomi said. “It is still damp.”

Caleb nodded. “I will get my jacket.”

“You do not need it,” Naomi said, then stopped. She had learned. Do not tell a person what he needs.

Caleb’s mouth lifted again, briefly. “I want it,” he said.

Naomi picked up her purse from the chair by the door. They walked down the hall together. Their footsteps echoed on the tile. The building smelled like old hymnals and lemon cleaner. A light burned near the office door. Pastor Whitaker left it on late during revival week. Naomi had asked him once why.

“So no one feels locked out,” he had said. “People come when they come.”

Naomi and Caleb passed the sanctuary doors. Naomi glanced through the narrow window. The room sat dark, pews in shadow, the pulpit faint in the spill of hall light. She pictured the place full on Sunday mornings. She pictured heads bowed and hands raised. She pictured teenagers sitting with their arms crossed, then slowly uncrossing.

They stepped out the side door and into thick summer air. The smell of rain rose from the grass. Frogs sang from the creek beyond the church lot. Crickets stitched the dark steady. The sky held low clouds, but a thin gap showed a few stars.

The revival tent stood out on the field. String lights still glowed along the edge of the canvas. They made a soft halo around the ropes and stakes. The canvas moved with the breeze, slow and alive.

Naomi led Caleb along the gravel path beside the prayer garden. A few solar lights marked the way. The garden held stones with Scripture engraved on them, gifts from families over the years. Naomi’s favorite sat near the small fountain.

“Unless the Lord builds the house,” it read.

She stopped by the bench. Water gathered on the wood slats. Naomi brushed it with her hand, then sat anyway. Her skirt dampened at the back of her thighs. She did not care.

Caleb sat at the other end of the bench. He kept space between them. It felt considerate. It also felt like restraint.

A moth bumped the solar light and fluttered away. The fountain made a small trickling sound. Somewhere near the field, a door shut on a truck.

Naomi folded her hands in her lap. She stared at them, then forced herself to look at Caleb.

He watched the tent.

“Revival always makes me feel exposed,” Naomi said.

Caleb turned his head. “How?”

“Like the Lord shines a light and everything hidden starts to show,” she said. “I serve all year. I teach Sunday school. I help with children’s choir. Then revival comes, and I sit under the singing, and the preaching and the prayers and I feel…” She shook her head. “I feel like a child who has not done her homework.”

Caleb’s face stayed still, but his eyes warmed. “I feel like that too,” he said.

Naomi studied him in the dim. “You lead worship,” she said.

“I lead songs,” he said. “God leads worship.”

Naomi swallowed. She liked the way he said it. Plain. Clean.

Caleb looked back toward the tent lights. “Tonight when you prayed with that girl,” he said, “I heard you ask the Lord to keep her heart clean in a loud world. You sounded like you believed He would.”

Naomi held her breath. “I do believe it.”

“Then why do you think He will not do it for you?” Caleb asked.

Naomi’s eyes stung again. She blinked hard.

“I do not know,” she said. “I think I fear disappointment. I fear telling God yes and ending up in a place where I feel alone.”

Caleb’s voice turned quiet. “You fear leaving Maple Ridge.”

Naomi stared at the fountain. Water caught light in small flashes. “Yes,” she said.

Caleb did not speak for a moment. Naomi waited. She watched his hands. They rested on his knees. Strong hands. Guitar hands. Work hands. Steady hands. She wanted those hands to hold her fear and make it smaller. She hated that she wanted it.

Caleb spoke. “When I left for university,” he said, “I thought it would feel like freedom. Some days it does. Some days it feels like running.”

Naomi’s chest tightened. “From what?”

He took a breath. “From being known,” he said. “From being expected to live up to things. From people watching my life and thinking they know who I am.”

Naomi understood. Maple Ridge did that. It watched. It cared. It sometimes tangled those together.

“You are known here too,” she said.

Caleb nodded. “Yes.”

Naomi hesitated, then asked, “Is it why you keep saying you will leave when autumn comes?”

Caleb did not flinch, but his eyes sharpened. “I say it because it is true,” he said.

Naomi forced herself to hold his gaze. “It sounds like armor,” she said.

The words slipped out before she weighed them. Naomi waited for him to shut down. She waited for him to tell her she had crossed a line.

Caleb looked away first. He watched the prayer garden stones. His jaw worked once.

“It might be,” he said.

Naomi breathed out. The honesty in his answer made her ribs ache.

She rubbed her thumb over her other hand. “I think my own plan is armor too,” she said. “This placement. This bigger district. It feels like proof I am brave. It feels like proof I am not stuck.”

Caleb’s gaze returned to her. He did not smile. He looked serious now, present.

“Are you stuck?” he asked.

Naomi shook her head. “No,” she said. “I love this town. I love the people. I love the kids at church. I love my family. But I also want to learn. I want to teach somewhere with more support and more training and more…” She stopped. The word did not come. Or it did, and she did not like it.

Caleb waited.

Naomi’s voice went softer. “More doors.”

Caleb nodded once. “It makes sense.”

Naomi stared at him. “Do you think it makes me faithless?”

His eyebrows drew together. “No,” he said. “I think it makes you alive.”

Naomi’s throat tightened again. She looked away, ashamed of how much she needed to hear it.

The night breeze moved through the garden. It carried the smell of wet soil and cut grass. Fireflies blinked along the edge of the field near the tent ropes. Naomi watched them and remembered being ten years old, running with her cousins during revival week, trying to catch light in her hands.

Back then the future had felt simple. Grow up. Serve. Stay close. Marry a good man from town. Teach school. Raise children in a place where people waved from porches.

Naomi did not hate that picture. She feared only that it might become a cage if God asked her to step outside it.

“I have prayed for a sign,” she said.

Caleb’s head tilted slightly. “What kind?”

“I do not know,” she said. “Something clear enough I cannot argue with it. Something like… a door slamming or a door opening wide.”

Caleb looked down at his hands, then up again. “What if God does not slam doors?” he said. “What if He asks you to walk through a normal one?”

Naomi gave a small laugh, but it held no humor. “Normal feels risky,” she said.

Caleb’s voice stayed gentle. “Everything is risky,” he said. “Following Christ is risky.”

Naomi's laugh died. She watched the tent breathe. The canvas rose and fell, slow, like a chest in sleep.

"I know," she said. "I know the verses. I know the sermons. I teach little girls to trust the Lord with their whole hearts. Then I sit here and fear making a choice."

Caleb's eyes held hers. "What do you fear losing?" he asked.

Naomi opened her mouth, then closed it. The answer came fast. It scared her.

"I fear losing who I am in this town," she said. "Here, I know my place. I know what people expect. I know how to serve. If I go, I become…" She swallowed. "I become someone no one knows."

Caleb nodded, slow. "That scares me too," he said.

Naomi looked at him. "Why?"

He drew a breath. "Because when no one knows a man," he said, "he can pretend."

Naomi felt his words land heavy. She watched his face. He looked like he spoke from experience.

"Pretend what?" she asked.

Caleb's voice turned rough. "Pretend he is fine," he said. "Pretend he does not need people. Pretend his faith stands strong when it does not."

Naomi's chest tightened. She leaned back against the bench. Damp wood pressed through her dress. She did not move away.

She whispered, "Do you feel weak?"

Caleb's gaze held hers. He did not dodge.

“Yes,” he said. “More than I admit.”

Naomi’s eyes filled. She blinked, and one tear slipped free anyway. It rolled down her cheek. She wiped it fast with the back of her hand, angry at herself.

Caleb did not speak. He did not stare. He gave her dignity. He looked toward the fountain and waited as if he trusted her to come back to herself.

Naomi took a breath. “I do not cry,” she said, like a defense.

Caleb’s mouth moved, but he did not smile. “You are crying,” he said. His voice stayed calm. No shame in it.

Naomi let out a breath that shook. “I do not want to disappoint God,” she said. “I do not want to waste my life.”

Caleb’s gaze returned to her. “You will not waste it if you belong to Him,” he said.

Naomi wanted to believe him without effort. She did believe him, but fear fought her belief like a stubborn thing.

“What if I choose the placement?” she said, “and it pulls me away from the church? What if I get busy and tired? What if my faith dries up?”

Caleb’s eyes narrowed, thoughtful. “Do you think Maple Ridge is the only place God meets you?” he asked.

Naomi pressed her lips together. “No,” she said, but the word felt like a lie at first because Maple Ridge held so many of her God memories. The altar calls. The baptisms in the river. The funerals where she felt grace hold the room. The songs her father sang while he fixed the truck. The way Pastor Whitaker prayed over her when she graduated.

Caleb spoke again. “Faith dries when a person stops drinking,” he said. “Not when the scenery changes.”

Naomi looked at him in surprise. The words sounded like something Pastor Whitaker might say, yet Caleb said them as if he had learned them the hard way.

Naomi let silence sit for a moment. The tent lights glowed steady. A late car rolled past on the road. Tires hissed on wet pavement.

Naomi’s voice turned small. “What if staying is wrong too?” she said. “What if I stay because it feels safe and I miss what God wanted to teach me somewhere else?”

Caleb watched her, eyes steady. “Then you pray,” he said. “Then you ask wise people. Then you obey the best you know.”

Naomi shook her head. “And if I obey wrong.”

Caleb’s jaw tightened again. He looked toward the Scripture stone near the fountain. Naomi followed his gaze.

Unless the Lord builds the house…

Caleb’s voice went low. “If the Lord builds,” he said, “He holds it even when the builder shakes.”

Naomi’s chest hurt. She stared at the stone and felt the words press into her.

She whispered, “I want to trust Him like that.”

Caleb’s voice stayed gentle. “Then tell Him,” he said.

Naomi looked at him. “Now.”

Caleb nodded. “Yes,” he said. “If you want.”

Naomi's hands trembled in her lap. She felt foolish. She also felt tired of hiding.

"Will you pray with me?" she asked.

Caleb did not hesitate. "Yes," he said.

Naomi swallowed hard. She turned slightly on the bench, facing the fountain. Caleb stayed at his end, but he leaned forward a little. Naomi did not reach for his hand. She did not know if she should. Her heart beat too fast.

She closed her eyes.

"Lord," Naomi said. Her voice shook. She hated it, but she did not stop. "Thank You for this week. Thank You for the teens who came. Thank You for the ones who are hungry for You."

She paused. She drew a breath.

"Lord, I am afraid," she said. "I fear choosing wrong. I fear leaving home. I fear staying. I fear what people will think of me. I fear I will miss Your will and waste time."

Her throat tightened. "Please lead me. Please make me willing to obey. Please give me a clean heart. Please do not let fear be my guide."

Silence held for a beat. Naomi kept her eyes closed. She waited for Caleb.

Caleb's voice came quiet and steady. "Father," he said, "thank You for Naomi. Thank You for the way she serves without needing praise. Thank You for the way she listens to people and prays for them."

Naomi's breath caught. She did not know he saw her like that.

Caleb continued. “Lord, give her wisdom. Give her peace. Give her courage. Lead her step by step. Guard her from fear. Guard her from pride. Help her trust You with her future.”

He paused. Naomi heard his breath.

“And Lord,” he said, “help me trust You too. Help me stop running. Help me obey when it costs me comfort.”

Naomi opened her eyes. She turned her head. Caleb still looked toward the garden, eyes closed, his face drawn with quiet honesty.

He finished, “In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Naomi whispered, “Amen.”

They sat in silence. The fountain trickled. A firefly blinked near the bench, then lifted away into the dark.

Naomi wiped her cheek again. Her tears had slowed, but her face stayed warm.

Caleb opened his eyes and turned toward her. He did not look startled by her tears. He looked present.

“Thank you,” Naomi said.

Caleb nodded once. “You are welcome.”

Naomi tried to laugh again. This time a little sound came out. “I feel silly,” she said.

Caleb’s gaze stayed gentle. “You do not look silly,” he said.

Naomi stared at him. The words warmed her in a way prayer did, but different. Human. Close.

She looked away first. She focused on the tent in the field. The string lights looked like small stars caught under canvas.

“Do you ever wish?” Naomi said, “Someone would tell you what to do.”

Caleb’s mouth moved, almost a smile. “Yes,” he said. “Then I remember I do not like being told what to do.”

Naomi let out a small laugh. It eased something in her chest. “Same,” she said.

Caleb shifted on the bench. The wood creaked. “Who have you talked to about the placement?” he asked.

Naomi swallowed. “Mrs. Alder,” she said. “She told me the Lord sends people out for a reason. She told me Maple Ridge will still be here.”

Caleb nodded. “That sounds like her.”

Naomi glanced at him. “And Pastor Whitaker,” she said. “He asked me what I wanted. I did not know how to answer.”

Caleb’s eyes held hers. “What do you want?” he asked, voice quiet.

Naomi’s stomach tightened. She did not want to say the wrong thing out loud. Words held weight. Words could turn into decisions.

“I want to teach,” she said. “I want to do it well. I want to help kids who feel unseen.”

Caleb nodded. “That is clear.”

Naomi pressed her lips together. “And I want to stay close to my family,” she said. “I want to serve here. I want to be part of what God is doing in Maple Ridge.”

Caleb kept his gaze steady. “That is clear too.”

Naomi let out a breath. “Those things feel like they pull opposite,” she said.

Caleb shook his head once. “They might,” he said. “Or they might line up in a way you do not see yet.”

Naomi stared at the fountain again. “I do not like waiting,” she admitted.

Caleb’s voice turned thoughtful. “I do not either,” he said. “At school, everyone asks what a man is doing after graduation. They speak like life is a straight line. They post internships online. They move across states like it is nothing.”

Naomi looked at him. “And you,” she said. “What do you say?”

Caleb looked down. “I say I am in music,” he said. “I say I am exploring options.”

Naomi heard the strain under the words. “And what do you feel?” she asked.

Caleb lifted his gaze. “I feel the Lord asking me to pay attention,” he said. “To people. To needs. To the way worship changes a room. I feel Him asking me to stop treating service like a summer project.”

Naomi’s heart beat harder. She kept her voice calm. “That scares you,” she said.

Caleb gave a short nod. “Yes,” he said.

Naomi held her hands tighter in her lap. She thought of him leaving after revival. She thought of how the teens looked at him during worship. She thought of how his voice had cracked on the bridge of the song in Chapter 9, and how it had made the room feel holy and raw.

“You matter here,” Naomi said before she could stop it.

Caleb's eyes sharpened. "Do you mean the team?" he asked. "Or do you mean you?"

Naomi froze. Her lungs forgot how to work for a second.

"I mean," Naomi said, voice low, "Maple Ridge needs people who lead with honesty."

Caleb watched her as he waited for the rest.

Naomi's face warmed again. She felt her fear shift. Not gone. Changed shape.

"And I mean," Naomi said, "it has been good to have you here."

Caleb's throat moved. He looked away toward the tent. His voice came quiet. "It has been good to be here," he said.

Silence settled again. It did not feel empty. It felt full of things neither of them wanted to name too fast.

A door opened at the side of the church. Light spilled onto the grass. Naomi turned. Mrs. Alder stepped out, small and sharp, her gray hair pinned back. She carried a box against her hip. She stopped when she saw Naomi and Caleb on the bench.

Mrs. Alder lifted her chin. "There you two are," she said. "I wondered where my kitchen helpers went."

Naomi stood at once. "I finished the cups," she said. "Everything is clean."

Mrs. Alder's eyes moved from Naomi to Caleb and back again. Her expression stayed plain, but her gaze missed nothing.

"I see," she said. "Well. I locked the hall. Pastor Whitaker will set the alarm on his way out. Naomi, your mother called the church line. She said you need to come home."

Naomi's stomach dropped. "Is she okay?" Naomi asked.

Mrs. Alder waved a hand. "She is fine. One of your brothers forgot his lunch for tomorrow's camp job. She wanted to know if you were still here or if she needed to wake your father."

Naomi let out a breath. "I will go," she said.

Mrs. Alder nodded. "Good," she said. She looked at Caleb. "And you, Mr. Mercer. Your uncle asked me to tell you he has coffee set up for the morning. He expects you awake."

Caleb's mouth moved, a quick smile. "Yes, ma'am," he said.

Mrs. Alder huffed as she approved. "The Lord loves a cheerful servant," she said, then turned and walked toward the parking lot with her box. Her shoes clicked on the walkway. The light from the open door shrank as it swung shut behind her.

Naomi stood with her purse strap tight in her hand. The night air felt thicker now. She turned back to Caleb. He had stood as well. He waited, hands at his sides.

"I should go," Naomi said.

Caleb nodded. "Yes," he said.

Naomi hesitated. The bench sat damp behind her. The fountain kept trickling as nothing had happened.

"Thank you for listening," Naomi said.

Caleb's eyes held hers. "Thank you for trusting me with it," he said.

Naomi swallowed. She shifted her purse higher on her shoulder. "Goodnight," she said.

"Goodnight," Caleb said.

Naomi started down the path toward the parking lot. Gravel crunched under her sandals. She kept her pace steady. She did not look back right away. She did not want to see him watching her.

But near the corner of the garden she did look back. She could not help it.

Caleb still stood by the bench. The tent lights caught the edge of his face. He looked out toward the field, hands still, shoulders set like he carried his own questions like weight.

Naomi turned forward again and kept walking.

Her car sat under the lot light, rain spots drying on the hood. She unlocked it and slid into the driver's seat. The air inside held the day's heat. She gripped the steering wheel and rested her forehead against it for one quiet second.

Fear still lived in her. It did not leave because she prayed. Yet something had shifted. She had spoken it out loud. She had let another person hear it. She had heard Caleb admit his own.

Naomi started the engine. The radio blinked on, then she turned it off. She backed out and drove toward home on the wet road.

The church steeple faded behind her. The tent lights grew small in her mirror. She kept her eyes on the road, but her mind stayed in the garden, on the bench, on Caleb's voice as he prayed.

At a stop sign, she whispered, "Lord, step by step," as if she were trying the words on her tongue like a promise.

The night stayed warm. The town slept. Naomi drove through familiar streets and felt, for the first time in weeks, that God might not demand she solve her whole life at once. She did not know where she would teach in the fall. She did not know if she would stay or

go. Yet she sensed the Lord near her fear, steady and patient, and she carried that quiet nearness all the way home.

Chapter 11

Revival Firelight

Naomi Reyes was awake before the sun cleared the fields.

The house stayed still. The air smelled like last night's rain and the sweet cleaner her mother used on the kitchen floor. A ceiling fan turned slowly above her bed. It clicked once each rotation.

Naomi lay on her back and stared at the pale line of light on the wall. She held her breath and listened. No footsteps. No voices. Only the far sound of a truck on the highway and the soft churn of the fan.

Her chest felt tight, then eased.

She rolled to her side and pressed her face into her pillow for a moment. Her hair still held a little damp curl at her neck from the humidity. She thought of the prayer garden bench. She saw the tent lights on Caleb Monroe's face. She remembered how he said thank you, as her fear mattered.

She sat up.

Her phone sat on the nightstand, no new messages. The screen reflected her eyes, wide and tired.

Naomi swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood. The floor felt cool under her feet. She pulled on a soft T-shirt and shorts and went to the window.

Outside, Maple Ridge held early morning quiet. The street looked darker under the trees. A few puddles still shone on the road. The sky stayed clear now, washed clean by the storm.

She rested her hand on the window frame.

"Lord," she whispered, "step by step."

The words felt steadier this morning. Her fear still waited close, like it always did. Yet it did not sit on her throat the same way.

A door creaked down the hall. Her mother moved around in the kitchen. A cabinet opened. A kettle clinked on the stove.

Naomi went to the bathroom. She brushed her teeth and washed her face. When she looked in the mirror, she saw the faint shadow under her eyes. She saw her own honest expression. She did not look like someone who had answers. She looked like someone who had started to tell the truth.

She tied her hair into a low ponytail and went to the kitchen.

Her mother stood at the counter with a mug. Mrs. Reyes wore her robe and her reading glasses. Her hair sat clipped back. She looked up and smiled.

“Morning, mija,” she said.

“Morning,” Naomi said.

Mrs. Reyes studied her for a second. She did not pry. She never rushed Naomi when Naomi did not rush herself. She lifted the kettle and poured water into a mug, then slid it across the counter.

“Tea,” she said. “You looked tired when you came in.”

Naomi wrapped both hands around the warm mug. “I was tired.”

Mrs. Reyes leaned one hip against the counter. “Revival week keeps everyone up,” she said. “You helped late.”

Naomi nodded. “Yes.”

Silence settled. It felt comfortable, like their kitchen always did. The window over the sink faced the small backyard. The grass shone bright. The lemon balm by the fence had lifted again after the rain.

Mrs. Reyes spoke softly. “You do not have to carry everything alone.”

Naomi swallowed. “I know.”

Her mother waited, steady.

Naomi looked down at the tea. Steam rose and dampened her glasses. She set the mug down.

“I talked to Caleb Monroe last night,” she said.

Mrs. Reyes did not react with surprise. She only lifted her eyebrows a little, like she had tucked the information into a safe place.

“Caleb,” she said.

Naomi nodded again. “We talked in the prayer garden.”

Mrs. Reyes took a slow sip of her own tea. “Was it good?”

Naomi searched for the right word. “It was honest.”

Her mother’s mouth softened. “Honest is good.”

Naomi breathed out. She did not say more. She did not need to. Her mother did not push. She only stood with her, the way she always did. Naomi felt gratitude rise in her like a quiet song.

Mrs. Reyes set her mug down. “You should eat,” she said. “I have eggs.”

Naomi managed a small smile. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Reyes started moving around the stove. The smell of butter warmed the air. Naomi leaned on the counter and watched her mother’s hands, quick and sure.

She thought about tonight.

Revival had already filled the town in ways Naomi did not expect. People talked at the bakery. People lingered in the church parking lot. Teenagers walked in groups, laughing, then growing quiet when someone mentioned prayer. Naomi had seen boys who never came to church sit through the whole service with their heads down. She had seen girls who stayed on the edges step forward to sing.

Tonight, the youth leaders planned a bonfire behind the tent.

A simple thing. Hot dogs. Marshmallows. Folding chairs. Guitar songs. Prayer for those who still hesitate to step into the tent.

Firelight did something to people. It made them speak softer. It made them honest.

Naomi took a sip of tea and tried to calm the strange mix inside her. Hope. Fear. Curiosity. A gentle pull toward a man who had left Maple Ridge for college and came back with his shoulders set like he did not know where he belonged.

Her mother slid scrambled eggs onto a plate and set it in front of her. “Eat,” she said.

Naomi picked up a fork. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Reyes patted her shoulder as she passed. “Your father will need help later,” she said. “He promised Pastor Whitaker he would haul more wood for the fire.”

Naomi chewed. “I will help.”

Her mother nodded and went to the sink.

Naomi ate slowly. She let the warmth settle in her stomach. She let the day begin.

By late afternoon the sun baked the roads again. The storm had left the air thick. The sky held a bright, hard blue. Cicadas started up in the trees.

Naomi drove to the church with a trunk full of supplies. Paper plates. Napkins. Two bags of marshmallows. A box of graham crackers. A jar of peanut butter because the little kids always asked for it. She had learned this through years of church events, years of watching adults scramble when someone forgot a small thing.

She pulled into the gravel lot and parked beside the fellowship hall. The white church building stood clean and steady. The steeple rose sharp against the sky.

Beyond it, the revival tent sat in the field. The canvas looked bright under the sun. The ropes ran out like spokes. The poles cast thin shadows on the grass.

A few cars already sat near the tent. Naomi heard voices. Laughter. The sharp sound of someone hammering a stake back into the ground.

She carried a box inside the fellowship hall. The air in there smelled like coffee and floor wax. The lights buzzed overhead.

Mrs. Alder stood by a folding table, sorting plastic cups into neat stacks. She wore a loose blouse and a long skirt. Her gray hair sat in a bun. She looked up when Naomi came in.

“Naomi,” Mrs. Alder said. “Good. I hoped you would come.”

Naomi set the box down and wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. “I brought what you asked for.”

Mrs. Alder smiled. “You always do.”

Naomi opened the box and started placing items on the table. She worked with quick hands. She liked tasks. She liked the feeling of order.

“People have been asking about you,” Mrs. Alder said casually.

Naomi kept her eyes on the napkins. “About me?”

Mrs. Alder shrugged. “About your teaching. Where you will go.”

Naomi paused. Her throat tightened, then she kept stacking plates. “I do not know yet.”

Mrs. Alder watched her with a steady look. “The Lord knows,” she said.

Naomi did not answer. She did not want a phrase. She wanted a map.

Mrs. Alder stepped closer and lowered her voice. “Pastor Whitaker told me you helped after the storm,” she said. “He said you stayed late.”

Naomi’s cheeks warmed. “Yes. A few of us did.”

Mrs. Alder nodded, as she filed it away. “The young ones need you,” she said. “They watch you.”

Naomi felt something prick behind her eyes. She kept working. “I do not feel like anyone should watch me,” she said.

Mrs. Alder’s tone stayed gentle. “People watch the ones who show up,” she said. “You show up.”

Naomi set down the last stack of cups. She forced a breath in. “I will keep showing up for this week.”

Mrs. Alder’s face softened. “Good,” she said. “One week at a time.”

Naomi glanced at her, surprised by the echo of her own prayer.

Mrs. Alder gave a small smile, as if she knew. Then she turned back to the table.

Naomi went to the kitchen area and started filling a cooler with ice. The machine clattered. Cold air poured out when she opened the freezer door. She welcomed it.

Voices drifted in from outside. She heard a young man laugh, loud and easy. She knew that laugh. Logan. He ran sound for the revival and acted as if the whole world belonged to him. He also had a good heart.

She heard another voice, lower.

Caleb.

Naomi froze with her hand on the cooler lid.

She did not hear his words. The fellowship hall walls muffled them. Yet she knew the shape of his voice. It carried steadiness. It carried restraint.

She pressed the cooler lid closed and forced herself to keep moving. She grabbed soda cases from a stack and carried them toward the back door.

When she stepped outside, heat hit her face. The sun sat lower now, but the air still held weight. The smell of cut grass rose from the field. The tent canvas fluttered once in the breeze.

Behind the tent, near the tree line, a circle of stones held the beginning of a fire pit. Men had piled split wood nearby. A few teenagers stood around, holding long sticks like spears. Someone had set up folding chairs in a wide, uneven ring.

Pastor Whitaker stood near the wood pile with Mr. Reyes. Naomi's father wore his work gloves and a T-shirt with a faded logo. He lifted a log and set it down with a grunt.

Naomi's heart eased at the sight of her father. He belonged here. He never acted as if he belonged, yet he did. He had served Maple Ridge Community Church for years in quiet ways. He hauled. He fixed. He stayed late.

Pastor Whitaker turned and saw Naomi. His expression warmed.

"Naomi," he called.

She walked over, careful with the soda case against her hip. "Pastor Whitaker," she said.

He smiled. "Thank you for helping again."

Naomi set the case on the grass. "Of course."

Mr. Reyes looked at her and lifted his chin in greeting. "Hola, mija," he said.

"Hola," Naomi said. She brushed her fingers across his shoulder, a small touch.

Pastor Whitaker glanced toward the tent. "Caleb is helping with music again tonight," he said. "Logan asked him to lead a few songs at the fire too."

Naomi's mouth went dry. "Yes," she said.

Pastor Whitaker watched her for a beat, then looked away, as if he respected the boundary. He pointed toward the chairs. "You can set those drinks by the table near the coolers," he said. "Hannah is setting up snacks."

"Hannah Whitaker?" Naomi asked, though she already knew.

Pastor Whitaker's eyes softened. "Yes," he said. "She came early with Micah Carter to help. Eli Brooks brought more folding chairs."

Naomi nodded. The names settled in her like a familiar hymn. Maple Ridge held its people close. Even when life moved forward, the church ties stayed.

She carried the soda toward the snack table. It sat under a few strings of lights stretched between posts. Someone had already turned the lights on even though dusk had not settled. The bulbs glowed faint in the brightness, like small pearls.

Hannah Whitaker stood behind the table arranging trays. She wore a simple sundress and flat sandals. Her hair sat braided over one shoulder. She looked up and smiled wide when Naomi approached.

"Naomi," Hannah said. "I am glad you are here."

Naomi set the sodas down. "I am glad too. Do you need anything?"

Hannah's smile stayed. "I need you to tell me where you want the marshmallows," she said.

Naomi laughed once, surprised at herself. "I brought too many."

Hannah leaned closer. "There is no such thing," she said, then lowered her voice. "Teen boys eat like locusts."

Naomi smiled again. She opened her trunk and carried the supplies over in two trips. Hannah helped her arrange them. Their hands moved in rhythm. Plates. Napkins. Graham crackers. Chocolate bars.

Micah Carter ran up and skidded to a stop. He looked around ten now, all elbows and restless energy. He held a bag of hot dog buns.

"Miss Naomi," he said.

Naomi's chest warmed. "Hi, Micah. Thank you for helping."

Micah puffed up a little. "My dad said I had to work," he said. "He said revival week is family."

Hannah's eyes softened. "Your dad is right," she said.

Micah set the buns down and looked toward the fire pit. "When does the fire start?"

"Soon," Naomi said. "When it gets darker."

Micah made a face. "It is taking forever."

Hannah laughed. "Go find Eli," she said. "He will give you something to do."

Micah ran off like a shot.

Naomi glanced around. Teenagers gathered in small groups, some from Maple Ridge and some from other towns. A few sat on the grass with their knees pulled up. Some played with a football near the edge of the field. Laughter rose and fell.

Near the tent opening, Caleb stood with Logan and another young man from the worship team. Caleb held his guitar case in one hand. He wore a plain T-shirt and jeans. His dark hair looked damp at the edges from the heat. He listened while Logan talked, nodding once in a while. He did not smile much. Yet his eyes looked alert, present.

Naomi watched him longer than she meant to.

Hannah's voice broke gently into her focus. "He is back for the summer," Hannah said.

Naomi turned fast. "What?"

Hannah did not look amused. She looked kind. “Caleb,” she said. “He came back to help with revival. Pastor Whitaker told me.”

Naomi forced her face into calm. “Yes. I know.”

Hannah tilted her head. “You know him well?”

Naomi hesitated. “I knew him when we were younger,” she said. “He left.”

Hannah nodded once, as she understood. “Leaving does not always mean abandoning,” she said. “Sometimes it means growing.”

Naomi swallowed. “Sometimes it means running.”

Hannah did not argue. She set a tray down and smoothed the tablecloth. “You and I will not solve his heart,” she said. “Only the Lord does that.”

Naomi looked at her hands. “I know.”

Hannah turned and gave Naomi a steady look. “And the Lord is patient,” she added.

Naomi pressed her lips together. She nodded.

Hannah’s face softened again. “Go sit when you finish. You have worked enough.”

Naomi wiped her palms on her shorts. “I will sit when the fire starts,” she said.

Hannah smiled. “Spoken like someone raised in the fellowship hall.”

Naomi let out a small breath that felt close to laughter. “Yes,” she said.

Dusk came slowly.

The sky faded from hard blue to a softer shade. The sun dropped behind the trees and left a strip of gold along the horizon. The field cooled a little. A breeze moved through and stirred the tent canvas. The string lights grew brighter against the darkening air.

Someone struck a match at the fire pit. The first flame caught on dry kindling. Smoke curled up and drifted toward the trees. The smell hit Naomi's nose and took her back to childhood church campouts, to her father's hands lighting charcoal, to laughter and sticky marshmallow fingers.

The fire built quickly. Wood popped. Flames rose and threw light on the faces nearest the pit. Shadows moved behind people as they shifted in their chairs.

Pastor Whitaker stood beside the fire for a moment, hands clasped in front of him. He did not take the center as he did in a service. He stood like a shepherd on the edge of his flock.

"All right," he said, voice carrying. "Come close. Grab a chair. Grab a hot dog. We will sing a few songs, then we will pray. No pressure. No performance. We want the Lord near us tonight."

People moved in. Folding chairs scraped. Teenagers settled with paper plates in their laps. Someone handed out long roasting sticks.

Naomi took a chair near the edge of the circle. She sat with her knees together and her hands folded in her lap. She watched the flames.

Across the fire, Caleb took a seat with his guitar. Logan sat nearby with a small hand drum between his knees. A girl from another town held a shaker egg. They looked like a simple band, the kind Maple Ridge always built out of whoever showed up.

Caleb glanced up once and found Naomi's face.

For a heartbeat he held her gaze.

Naomi felt heat rise to her cheeks, though the fire already warmed her skin. She looked down at her hands, then lifted her eyes again.

Caleb looked away first. He adjusted the guitar strap and checked the tuning pegs.

Naomi breathed out slowly.

Pastor Whitaker nodded toward Caleb. “Lead us,” he said.

Caleb lifted his chin. “All right,” he said.

His voice sounded steady, yet Naomi caught the slight tension in his shoulders. He did not act like a man hungry for attention. He acted like a man willing to serve, even when he wanted to disappear.

He strummed a chord. The sound cut through the crackle of the fire. He started a familiar worship song, one Naomi knew from youth group, one with simple words and a melody that held people together.

Voices joined in. Some sang strong. Some mouthed words. Some stayed quiet and listened.

Naomi sang. Her voice felt small, but it belonged.

The firelight flickered over faces. Naomi saw boys who acted tough in the school hallway soften around the eyes. She saw girls who carried pain behind makeup stare into the flames as they searched for hope there. She saw adults sitting behind them, hands lifted, praying without show.

Caleb led two songs, then paused. He glanced at Logan. Logan nodded, then leaned forward and tapped the drum with his palms, a soft rhythm.

Caleb spoke into the quiet. “Pastor Whitaker asked if we would share a verse tonight,” he said. “One that fits this week.”

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded slip of paper. Naomi's chest tightened at the thought of him writing something down. It felt vulnerable.

He unfolded it and looked at it once. Then he lifted his eyes to the circle.

"Joel two, twenty-eight," he said. "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh."

The words hung in the air. The fire popped once, like punctuation.

Caleb looked down at the flames. "I grew up hearing that verse," he said. "I thought it meant something distant. Something for other places. Other times."

He paused. His throat moved when he swallowed.

Naomi leaned forward without thinking, elbows resting on her knees, like her body wanted to catch his words.

Caleb's gaze moved around the circle. "This week I keep hearing you sing," he said. "I keep seeing people come in. I keep watching the Lord move in small ways."

He cleared his throat. "I think the Spirit pours out in quiet ways too," he said. "In a conversation on a bench. In someone showing up to stack chairs. In a teenager saying yes to prayer even when they feel embarrassed."

Naomi's heart thumped hard.

Caleb's eyes flicked toward her again, quick. Then he looked away.

"I do not know what the Lord will do in my life," Caleb said. "I do not say that for drama. I say it because I mean it."

The circle stayed still. Even the teenagers quieted. The fire crackled, steady.

Caleb held the guitar neck tighter for a second. “Yet I know the Lord meets people,” he said. “He meets us when we tell the truth. He meets us when we stop pretending we have to be strong alone.”

Naomi’s eyes burned.

Caleb nodded once, like he finished something hard. He strummed again. “Let us sing another,” he said.

They sang.

The sky darkened fully now. Stars came out, sharp in the clear air. Fireflies blinked at the edge of the trees. The string lights glowed warm overhead.

After the songs, Pastor Whitaker stepped forward again. “Thank you,” he said, looking at Caleb with quiet approval. Then he looked at the group. “We will pray in small groups,” he said. “If anyone wants prayer alone, ask. If anyone wants to sit and listen, that is fine.”

People shifted. Chairs scraped, teens grouped with friends. Adults moved closer to younger ones. Naomi saw Hannah Whitaker place a hand on a girl’s shoulder and bow her head. Eli Brooks knelt near a group of boys, his posture relaxed, his head bent.

Naomi started to stand, unsure where to go.

Mrs. Alder touched her elbow. “Come with me,” she said.

Naomi followed her to a small cluster near the edge where two younger girls sat. One had mascara smudged under her eyes. The other hugged her knees to her chest. Mrs. Alder sat and motioned Naomi to sit beside her.

The four of them formed a close circle, knees almost touching.

Mrs. Alder spoke softly. “We will pray for courage,” she said. “For faith. For listening.”

Naomi nodded. She swallowed.

One of the girls whispered, “I do not know how.”

Mrs. Alder’s voice stayed calm. “Speak to the Lord as he sits here,” she said. “He does.”

Naomi bowed her head. Heat from the fire warmed her face. Smoke drifted and made her eyes water. She welcomed it.

The smudged-mascara girl prayed first. Her words came broken. She asked God to forgive her. She asked him to help her stop hurting herself with choices she kept making. Naomi’s throat tightened as she listened.

The other girl prayed next, a quick, trembling prayer for her parents to stop fighting and for her brother to come home safe.

Mrs. Alder prayed steadily, as if she held the whole group in her hands and lifted it to heaven without strain.

Then silence fell.

Naomi knew it came to her. Her fear rose again, sharp and familiar. She breathed in. She forced her voice to come out.

“Lord,” she whispered, “thank you for meeting us this week.”

Her voice shook. She kept going.

“Thank you for the songs,” Naomi said. “Thank you for the people who keep showing up. Thank you for… for helping me speak when I do not want to.”

Her lips pressed together for a second. She felt her own courage wobble.

“Lord, please lead me,” she said. “Step by step. I do not want to choose out of fear. I want to choose out of obedience. I want to trust you with the fall. I want to trust you with my life.”

Her eyes filled. She kept her head down.

“And please help Caleb,” she added before she could stop herself. “Help him hear you. Help him know where he belongs.”

The last words came out like a plea. Naomi’s face warmed with embarrassment even though no one could see it.

Mrs. Alder said softly, “Amen.”

The girls murmured amen too.

Naomi lifted her head. Mrs. Alder did not look surprised. She looked tender.

The prayer groups slowly ended. People hugged. Some teens wiped their cheeks and looked away, ashamed of their own tears. Adults spoke in low voices. A few young people walked toward the tent as if the fire had pushed them closer to something else.

Naomi stood and walked toward the snack table. Her hands felt unsteady. She picked up a paper cup and poured lemonade into it. The coolness steadied her.

She turned and found Caleb a few steps away. He stood alone near the edge of the circle, guitar case now at his feet. Firelight moved across his face. He watched the crowd for someone who might need him.

He saw Naomi.

This time he did not look away.

Naomi's pulse quickened. She held the lemonade with both hands, as it anchored her.

Caleb started toward her. His steps looked careful, measured.

Naomi waited.

He stopped in front of her, close enough that she smelled smoke on his shirt. His eyes looked darker in the night. Tired too.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," Naomi answered.

For a second neither of them spoke. The noise around them faded into a soft blur.

Caleb nodded toward the cup in her hands. "You stayed for the prayer groups," he said.

Naomi lifted the cup a little, then lowered it again. "Yes."

Caleb's gaze moved to the fire. "It felt good," he said. "It felt… honest."

Naomi's throat tightened. "Yes."

Caleb looked back at her. "Did you pray with Mrs. Alder?"

Naomi nodded. "Yes."

He hesitated. "Thank you for being here," he said.

Naomi held his gaze. "Thank you for leading," she said.

His jaw flexed. "I almost did not," he admitted.

Naomi's heart pulled tight. "Why?"

He looked down. Firelight caught on his lashes. “Because I do not like speaking,” he said. “And because it felt like a lie to stand up and talk about the Spirit when I do not know what the Lord wants from me.”

Naomi stepped closer without meaning to. She stopped herself before she crossed into his space too far. “It did not sound like a lie,” she said.

Caleb’s eyes lifted. “No?”

Naomi shook her head. “It sounded like a man telling the truth,” she said. “And the Lord uses that.”

Caleb held her gaze, something softening in his expression. “You prayed,” he said, more statement than question.

Naomi froze. Her fingers tightened on the cup. “Yes.”

He watched her face, careful. “You said step by step last night,” he said. “I heard you say it again when the groups prayed.”

Naomi swallowed. She did not deny it. “It helps,” she said.

Caleb nodded slowly. “I need something like that,” he said.

Naomi’s voice came out quiet. “What do you need?”

Caleb looked away, as if the answer felt too personal to say out loud. He rubbed his jaw. “I need the Lord to make it clear,” he said. “I keep planning my life as I own it.”

Naomi’s chest tightened. “Yes,” she whispered.

Caleb looked back at her. The firelight made his eyes shine. “And I need… I need to stop acting like leaving is the only way I grow,” he said.

Naomi went still. He spoke the thing she had thought earlier. He had said it first. He had named it.

A laugh rose behind them, loud. Someone shouted Micah's name. The moment did not break, but it shifted. The world reminded them they stood in a field with a church behind them and a community all around.

Caleb glanced toward the noise, then back at Naomi. "Do you want to walk?" he asked.

Naomi's fear jumped. Then she thought of her own prayer. Obedience. Step by step.

"Yes," she said.

They moved away from the fire circle, toward the darker edge of the field. The grass felt soft under Naomi's sandals. The air cooled more as it moved away from the heat. She heard crickets. She heard the low murmur of voices behind them.

They walked toward the tent, where the canvas rose tall and pale. The string lights along the ropes glowed. Shadows of people moved inside near the chairs.

Caleb walked beside her, hands at his sides. His presence felt steady. It also felt new.

Naomi looked at the ground for a moment, then up at the tent. "Do you remember revival when we were kids?" she asked.

Caleb's voice turned softer. "Yes," he said. "I remember getting bored and counting the ceiling fans."

Naomi let out a quiet laugh. "There were no fans in the tent back then," she said.

"I counted hymnbook pages then," he said.

Naomi smiled, then sobered. “I remember my father bringing us,” she said. “He would sit in the back with his arms crossed. He acted like he did not want to be there.”

Caleb glanced at her. “And he stayed anyway,” he said.

Naomi nodded. “He stayed anyway,” she repeated.

They reached the side of the tent and followed the rope line toward the back. The ground here held fewer footprints. The grass stood taller. A few wildflowers grew near the fence, small and stubborn in summer heat.

Caleb stopped near one of the support poles. He rested his hand on the rope, then let it go.

“Last night,” he said, “you said you were afraid of choosing wrong.”

Naomi’s hands stilled. “Yes.”

Caleb looked at the dark tree line. “I feel the same,” he said. “I do not talk about it. I make jokes. I play songs. I keep moving. Yet it stays there.”

Naomi’s voice came out thin. “Why do you feel it?”

Caleb’s jaw tightened. He breathed out through his nose. “Because I thought the path was simple,” he said. “College. A job in the city. Music on the side. Maybe work at a church bigger than this one, in a place where no one knows me.”

Naomi’s chest tightened at the last words. “No one knows you,” she repeated, quiet.

Caleb nodded once. “Yes,” he said. “I thought it would feel lighter.”

Naomi stared at him. “Does it?”

He met her eyes. His expression looked raw in the low light. “No,” he said.

Naomi’s throat burned. She held herself still.

Caleb looked down, then back up. “I did not leave Maple Ridge in a good way,” he said. “I did not say goodbye to everyone I should have.”

Naomi’s hands curled at her sides. She remembered a younger Caleb, restless and sharp. She remembered a night after youth group when someone had found beer bottles behind the shed. She remembered whispers. She remembered his mother’s face at church, tight with shame. She remembered Caleb disappearing from her world.

She did not say it. She let him speak.

Caleb swallowed. “I hurt people,” he said. “I did not do the worst things. I did not ruin my life. Yet I left a mess behind me.”

Naomi’s voice came out soft. “Maple Ridge remembers,” she said.

Caleb’s mouth tightened. “Yes,” he said. “And I remember too.”

A silence fell. The tent canvas shifted with the breeze. The rope hummed faintly.

Naomi forced herself to speak. “I remember you as a boy who wanted someone to see him,” she said. “I also remember you as a boy who did not let anyone close enough to do it.”

Caleb’s eyes held hers, startled. “Do you remember me?” he asked, “or do you remember what people said about me?”

Naomi flinched. The question hit close.

She lifted her chin. “Both,” she said. “I remember you sitting in the third row with your head down, drawing on the church bulletin. I remember you leaving fast after service like you did not want anyone to stop you. I remember you helping Mrs. Alder carry groceries once, and you acted as if you hated it, but you did it.”

Caleb’s eyes softened at the mention of Mrs. Alder. “She does not forget,” he murmured.

“No,” Naomi said. “She does not.”

Caleb looked away toward the trees again. “I thought I would come back for one summer and help with revival and leave,” he said. “I told myself it would be simple. I told myself it would be service, nothing else.”

Naomi’s heart beat hard. “And it is not,” she said.

Caleb’s gaze returned to her face. “It is not,” he said.

The air between them tightened, not with heat, but with awareness. Naomi felt it down her arms. She held herself still. She knew the boundaries they both carried. She knew faith did not erase feelings. It shaped them.

Naomi steadied her voice. “Revival does that,” she said. “It brings things up.”

Caleb’s mouth twitched, almost a smile. “Yes,” he said. “It brings things up.”

They stood there, close to the tent, close to the sound of their community behind them. Naomi felt the weight of what could grow here, and the fear of it too.

Caleb shifted his stance. “I heard you pray,” he said.

Naomi’s stomach dropped. “You did?”

Caleb nodded. “I did not mean to listen,” he said. “I walked by. I heard my name.”

Naomi’s cheeks burned. She turned her face away. “I should not have,” she said.

Caleb stepped a little closer. He kept his hands to himself. His voice turned gentle. “No,” he said. “Do not be sorry.”

Naomi looked back at him, confused.

Caleb’s eyes looked steady. “No one has prayed for me in a long time,” he said. “Not out loud. Not where I could hear it.”

Naomi’s throat tightened. “People have prayed,” she said.

Caleb shook his head. “People have spoken about me,” he said. “Prayer sounds different.”

Naomi stared at him. The sincerity in his face made her chest ache.

“I do not know why I prayed your name,” Naomi admitted. “It came out.”

Caleb nodded as if he understood. “Thank you,” he said again, quieter.

Naomi’s eyes stung. She looked down at the grass. “I do not want to fix you,” she said, voice low. “I do not want to make you a project.”

Caleb’s answer came fast. “I do not want that either,” he said.

Naomi turned to face him. “Then what do we do?” she asked.

Caleb answered without hesitating. “We keep showing up,” he said. “We keep telling the truth. We let the Lord lead it.”

Naomi’s breath caught. She had asked a question from fear. He answered with something steady.

She nodded once. “Step by step,” she whispered.

Caleb’s mouth softened. “Yes,” he said. “Step by step.”

They walked back toward the fire.

As they approached, the noise grew louder again. Someone roasted marshmallows and caught one on fire. Micah yelled and ran in circles until Eli Brooks caught him by the shoulder and guided him back toward the chairs with a calm word.

Hannah Whitaker sat with a group of girls, her posture relaxed. She looked up when Naomi and Caleb neared. Her eyes flicked between them, then she smiled, small and knowing, and returned to the conversation.

Naomi felt exposed. She also felt safe. The community held them without forcing anything.

Caleb stopped beside the snack table. “Do you want something?” he asked.

Naomi lifted her cup. “I have lemonade.”

Caleb nodded. He picked up a bottle of water and twisted the cap off. He took a long drink, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Logan called out, “Caleb. One more song.”

Caleb lifted a hand in acknowledgment. He looked at Naomi. “Will you stay close?” he asked, voice low.

Naomi’s heart stuttered. The words sounded simple. Yet they held meaning.

“Yes,” she said.

Caleb's eyes softened. "Thank you," he said, then grabbed his guitar case and walked back toward the fire circle.

Naomi took a seat again, this time closer to the center. She watched Caleb sit and pull the guitar across his lap.

Logan tapped the drum lightly. Caleb strummed a chord, then another, and started a slow song, quieter than the first ones. The words spoke of surrender. Of trust. Of the Lord holding what people could not.

Naomi sang under her breath. Firelight warmed her face. She watched Caleb's hands on the strings. She watched the set of his shoulders ease as the song went on, as music gave him a language he trusted.

Pastor Whitaker stood behind the circle, hands in his pockets, head slightly bowed. He looked like a man praying without anyone needing to see it.

The song ended. The fire popped. For a moment no one spoke.

Then a teenage boy stood up near the edge. Naomi recognized him from town. He rarely attended church. He stared at the ground, shoulders hunched.

"I need prayer," he said, voice rough.

Silence held. Then Pastor Whitaker moved forward without hurry.

"Come," Pastor Whitaker said.

The boy walked to him as he walked through deep water.

Others followed. A girl stood and stepped forward. Then another. The firelight caught tears on cheeks. Someone started praying in a low voice. Someone else put an arm around a friend's shoulders.

Naomi sat still, heart pounding, overwhelmed by its quiet power.

Caleb set his guitar down carefully and stood. He moved to the side, giving space. Yet he stayed close enough to help.

Naomi watched him, and something inside her eased. He belonged here in this moment. He did not have to be perfect to be present. The Lord used willing hands and honest hearts.

As the prayer line thinned, the group slowly returned to their seats. The fire burned lower now. The wood collapsed in on itself and sent up a burst of sparks.

Pastor Whitaker lifted his voice again, gentle. “We will end soon,” he said. “Get home. Rest. Tomorrow night is the last full service before Saturday.”

A few teens groaned. A few adults chuckled.

Pastor Whitaker smiled. “The Lord is doing good work,” he said. “Do not rush it. Do not chase a feeling. Walk it out.”

Naomi felt the words land in her ribs.

People started to stand. Chairs scraped. Couples gathered their children. Teens grabbed leftover snacks and stuffed them into pockets.

Naomi helped Hannah fold a table. They worked in silence for a moment, then Hannah spoke softly.

“You seem lighter,” Hannah said.

Naomi paused, hands on the edge of the table. “I told the truth last night,” she said.

Hannah nodded. “Truth does that,” she said. “It does not solve everything. Yet it stops the bleeding.”

Naomi blinked hard. Hannah did not use metaphors often. Yet her words hit true.

Naomi swallowed. “I walked with Caleb,” she said, quiet.

Hannah’s eyes stayed calm. “Was it good?” she asked.

Naomi nodded. “Yes,” she said. “It was hard.”

Hannah gave a small smile. “Hard things often mean the Lord is near,” she said.

Naomi looked at the ground. “I do not want to get ahead of him,” she admitted.

Hannah’s hand touched Naomi’s forearm for a second. “Then do not,” she said. “Let the Lord set the pace.”

Naomi nodded.

They carried the folded table to the side. Eli Brooks stacked chairs nearby, moving with easy strength. He nodded at Naomi. “Evening,” he said.

“Evening, Eli,” Naomi answered.

Eli looked toward the fire pit. “Good night,” he said.

Naomi nodded. “Yes.”

Caleb walked up then, guitar case in hand. “Hannah,” he said.

Hannah smiled at him. “You did good,” she said.

Caleb looked like he did not know what to do with praise. “Thank you,” he said.

Hannah glanced between him and Naomi again, then stepped back. “I will see you both tomorrow,” she said. “Naomi, Mrs. Alder wants you to call her.”

“I will,” Naomi said.

Hannah walked toward the church building.

Caleb shifted his weight. “Are you heading home?” he asked Naomi.

“Yes,” Naomi said. She glanced toward the parking lot, where her car sat under a light. “My father is still here. He will ride with me.”

Caleb nodded. “Okay,” he said.

Silence stretched.

Naomi wanted to say more. She did not know what. She did not want to cling. She did not want to pretend she felt nothing.

Caleb spoke first. “Thank you for staying close,” he said.

Naomi’s heart tightened. “You asked,” she said.

Caleb’s gaze held hers. “I meant it,” he said.

Naomi nodded. “I did too.”

Mr. Reyes called out from the wood pile. “Naomi.”

“I am coming,” she called back.

She looked at Caleb again. “Goodnight,” she said.

Caleb’s eyes softened. “Goodnight,” he said.

Naomi walked to her father. He carried a last bundle of unused wood toward the shed. Naomi took one end to help. The wood scraped her palm. The weight felt honest.

They loaded it into the shed, then walked toward Naomi's car.

Her father opened the passenger door and sat with a sigh. He smelled like smoke and sweat and work. Naomi started the engine and turned on the air. It blew warm at first, then cooler.

They drove out of the lot. The church steeple rose pale against the night sky. The tent lights glowed beside it, soft as lanterns.

Her father stared out the windshield. "Good night," he said after a moment.

Naomi glanced at him. "Yes," she said.

He nodded once. "The young man, Caleb," he said, voice neutral.

Naomi's fingers tightened on the wheel. "Yes?"

Mr. Reyes kept his eyes forward. "He led well," he said.

Naomi swallowed. "He did."

Her father nodded again, as if he had said what he meant to say. He did not press. He did not tease. He did not warn. He only let the observation stand.

Naomi drove through the quiet streets of Maple Ridge with the windows up and the air blowing cool. She watched porch lights pass. She watched shadows of trees slide over the road. The town slept, yet something in it stayed awake, as prayer continued under the surface.

When she pulled into her driveway, her mother's kitchen light still shone. Naomi turned off the engine and sat for a moment with her hands on the wheel.

She thought of firelight on Caleb's face. She thought of his voice reading Joel. She thought of his request. Stay close.

Naomi whispered again, “Lord, step by step.”

Then she got out of the car and went inside, carrying the warmth of the revival fire in her chest, and the quiet hope she did not want to name too soon.

Chapter 12

What God Begins Quietly

Morning came in soft heat.

Naomi Reyes stood at the kitchen sink and watched sunlight creep across the window frame. The glass held a faint film from last night's humidity. Outside, the grass looked darker where the rain had soaked it. The air smelled clean for summer, but it already carried the day.

Her mother moved behind her with quiet steps. A pan warmed on the stove. Oil hissed when it hit the heat.

Naomi kept her hands under running water longer than she needed. She listened to the steady sound. It calmed something in her chest.

Mrs. Reyes set a plate on the table. Eggs, tortillas, a small bowl of cut fruit. She pulled out a chair and sat.

"Did you sleep?" her mother asked.

Naomi dried her hands on a towel. "Some."

Her mother watched her face. She did not pry. She had learned how to hold questions without turning them into weight.

Naomi sat and picked up a fork. The metal felt cool. She ate a piece of fruit first. Sweet. Firm. It tasted as the season did, like a day meant for work and decisions.

Mrs. Reyes said, "Your father already left for the shop."

Naomi nodded. Her father worked early in summer. He said the heat made the afternoon heavy. He liked to have the hard part done before lunch.

Her mother added, “He said he wanted to check the church field later.”

Naomi looked up. “Why?”

Her mother shrugged. “He likes to see things before people arrive. He said he wants to help if something needs fixing.”

Naomi pictured her father walking the edge of the tent stakes, checking ropes with his hands. He had a quiet way of guarding what mattered.

Naomi swallowed. “I will go help at the church after breakfast.”

Her mother’s eyes stayed on her. “With the children?”

“Yes.” Naomi ate another bite. “Mrs. Alder asked if I would help run the little table by the side. Coloring pages. Water cups. They get restless.”

Mrs. Reyes smiled once. “You always did well with children.”

Naomi let the words settle. She thought of the classroom she wanted. A clean board. A row of faces. The steady work of building day after day.

Her mother said, “Your summer is almost half gone.”

Naomi kept her fork on the plate. “I know.”

A quiet stretched between them. The ceiling fan clicked at each turn.

Mrs. Reyes reached for her coffee and spoke again, gently. “What are you thinking about, mija?”

Naomi’s eyes stung. The word mija always made her feel both young and known.

“I do not know,” Naomi said. The truth hurt. “Everything. School. The fall. The future. Revival. I should feel sure.”

Her mother nodded as if Naomi had said something simple. “You do not have to feel sure to obey.”

Naomi stared at her plate. “What if I obey the wrong thing?”

Her mother set her mug down. “The Lord does not play games with His children.”

Naomi’s eyes stung. She blinked it back. “I want to do what He wants.”

Mrs. Reyes reached across the table and laid her hand over Naomi’s. Her palm was warm and slightly rough from work. “Then keep asking. Keep showing up.”

Naomi held her mother’s hand for a moment. She felt the steadiness in it. Faith with flour on it. Faith with laundry soap on it. Faith that did not need loud words.

Mrs. Reyes added, “The Lord begins things in quiet places.”

Naomi looked at her. “Like what?”

Her mother’s eyes softened. “Like a heart turning. Like a seed pushing in dirt where no one claps.”

Naomi let out a slow breath. She nodded once.

She finished breakfast. She washed her plate. She moved through the small routines and tried to let them anchor her.

Before she left, she stood by the door and looked back into the house. Her mother wiped the counter. Her hair sat in a loose twist. The kitchen held the smell of coffee and warm tortillas.

Naomi said, “I will be home later.”

Mrs. Reyes glanced up. “Drive safe.”

Naomi stepped outside.

Heat met her like a hand. The sun sat higher already, bright on the road. Cicadas buzzed in the trees by the fence. Naomi walked to her car and paused before opening the door. She watched a neighbor’s dog move slowly in the shade. She heard a distant mower. Maple Ridge did not rush, but it did not stop.

She drove toward the church.

Main Street looked the same in the light of morning. The bakery sign hung in the window. The hardware store door stood open. A bell above it gave a faint ring as someone stepped inside.

Naomi passed the café. A few trucks sat in the lot. Men in work shirts leaned on hoods and talked in low voices. She caught a smell of bacon and coffee through the open door when she rolled by.

She turned onto the church road.

The steeple rose white against blue sky. It caught the sun and held it. Naomi always noticed it, even after years of seeing it. It steadied her. It also pressed on her, like a question.

Beside the church, the revival tent stood with its ropes taut. String lights hung in neat lines. In daylight they looked simple, almost plain, but Naomi knew what they did at dusk. They turned the field into a place where people listened.

She parked and walked toward the fellowship hall.

Inside, the air felt cooler. The hallway smelled of lemon cleaner and old wood. Voices carried from the kitchen.

Mrs. Alder stood at the counter with a clipboard. She wore a pale blouse and a long skirt. Her gray hair sat neat. Her eyes lifted when Naomi entered.

“Naomi,” Mrs. Alder said. “Thank you for coming early.”

Naomi stepped closer. “What do you need?”

Mrs. Alder handed her a list. “Water coolers need filling. Crayons need sorting. Someone needs to check the small fans, the paper ones. Children lose them. Adults do too.”

Naomi took the list. “I will start.”

Mrs. Alder nodded once. “I will set up the sign-in table.”

Naomi moved through the tasks. She filled coolers in the kitchen sink. The water splashed cold on her wrist. She carried the heavy jugs with both hands and set them on the folding table by the tent entrance.

She found the box of paper fans in the storage closet. She counted them. She stacked them neatly.

She sorted crayons into small baskets. Some were broken. She set the broken ones aside and made a quiet plan to bring a small bag of new ones from the store later.

The work kept her hands busy. It did not quiet her mind.

Caleb Monroe had asked her to stay close. He had said it in plain words, as if it cost him something, and he did it anyway.

Naomi did not know what to do with the way her heart had answered yes before her mind arranged it.

She walked out into the field with a basket of crayons.

The tent canvas glowed bright in the sun. A breeze moved it. The ropes hummed faintly.

A few men stood near the stage inside, checking cables. Naomi recognized Logan by his posture. Always bent toward the sound board, always focused.

She set the crayons on the children's table near the side opening of the tent. The table sat under the shade of the canvas edge. It smelled of plastic and sun-warmed metal legs.

Naomi turned and saw Caleb.

He stood near the stage steps with a guitar case at his feet. He wore a plain T-shirt and jeans. His hair looked damp, as if he had showered not long ago. He held a paper cup of coffee. He spoke to Logan, then looked toward the side of the tent.

His gaze found Naomi.

He did not smile wide. He did not wave like a boy. His face softened, and his shoulders eased as if he had been holding them tight.

Naomi's breath caught. She steadied herself and walked toward him.

Logan glanced at her and gave a short nod. He stepped away, as if he knew to leave room.

Caleb waited.

Naomi stopped a few feet from him. "Good morning."

"Good morning," Caleb said. His voice stayed low. "You came early."

Naomi looked at the cords on the ground and then back up. "Mrs. Alder asked."

Caleb nodded. He shifted his coffee cup from one hand to the other. “Thank you for helping.”

Naomi heard more in his words than the task. She did not name it. She held it.

“How are you?” she asked.

Caleb’s mouth pressed into a line for a moment. “I am awake.”

Naomi let out a small breath that almost turned into a laugh. She stopped it before it became one. She did not want to feel light when her heart felt tender.

Caleb watched her, attentive. “How are you?”

Naomi looked toward the field beyond the tent opening. The grass shone. A few cars rolled past on the road. “I feel like I prayed last night and woke up with more questions.”

Caleb’s eyes stayed on her face. “Yes.”

Naomi looked back. “Yes?”

He nodded once. “Yes. Same.”

Naomi held his gaze. A quiet formed between them. It did not feel awkward. It felt like a pause in the music, when the room listens.

Caleb said, “I read a little this morning.”

Naomi did not move. “What did you read?”

He glanced at the window. “Psalm one nineteen. Not all of it.” A faint self-consciousness crossed his face. “I landed in the part about how a young man keeps his way pure.”

Naomi’s heart gave a hard beat. Psalm 119:9. She had memorized it in youth group. She had not thought of it in months.

Caleb continued, careful. “It said, by guarding it according to Your word.”

Naomi nodded slowly. “Yes.”

Caleb looked down at his coffee cup. “I do not know why it hit me. I think I have been guarding my plans more than I have been guarding my heart.”

Naomi felt the words in her own chest.

She said, “What does guarding your heart look like for you?”

Caleb’s eyes lifted. “I think it looks like telling the Lord the truth.” He paused. “And telling other people the truth, when it is time.”

Naomi swallowed. She thought of all the things she did not say because she feared she would sound foolish. She thought of her prayers, small and quick, like she did not want to bother God with the mess of her thoughts.

Caleb added, “I have spent years making sure I do not need anyone. I thought it made me focused.”

Naomi watched him. She saw the effort behind his calm.

He said, “I think it made me lonely.”

Naomi’s eyes stung again. She blinked and held her face steady.

She said, “Lonely is not a sin.”

Caleb’s mouth softened. “No. But it can become a hiding place.”

Naomi nodded. “Yes.”

A child’s voice called from outside the tent. A mother answered. The sounds drifted in. Life moved.

Caleb looked toward the opening, then back at Naomi. “I will have rehearsal in a few minutes. But I wanted to say thank you. For last night.”

Naomi’s throat tightened. “You already did.”

He nodded. “I meant it.”

Naomi looked at the guitar case near his feet. “Are you nervous about tonight?”

Caleb’s brows drew together. “Tonight is the last night.”

Naomi heard the weight in it. The end always pressed harder than the beginning.

“I do not know if I am nervous,” Caleb said. “I think I am scared of going back to normal.”

Naomi’s voice came quiet. “Normal will come either way.”

Caleb looked at her as if he had not expected the honesty. Naomi held it. She did not want to pretend. Revival brought light. Light did not always feel gentle.

Caleb said, “Yes.” He took a breath. “But I do not want to forget what the Lord is doing.”

Naomi nodded. “Neither do I.”

Logan called out from the stage. “Caleb. Two minutes.”

Caleb lifted his hand to signal he heard.

He looked at Naomi again. “Will you pray for me later?”

Naomi’s heart warmed and tightened all at once. “Yes.”

Caleb hesitated. “Will you pray with me now?”

Naomi looked around. A few people walked in and out of the tent. No one stood close enough to hear. Still, the request felt intimate. It felt like a door opening.

Naomi nodded once. “Yes.”

Caleb set his coffee cup on a nearby folding chair. He stood facing her. He did not reach for her hand. He left space. He bowed his head.

Naomi bowed hers.

Caleb spoke in a low voice. “Lord, thank You for this morning. Thank You for Naomi. Thank You for the work You do when we sleep. Help me lead tonight with a clean heart. Help me obey You without fear. Give Naomi peace. Give her wisdom. Show us what You want, step by step. Amen.”

Naomi’s eyes filled. She blinked hard. She kept her voice steady. “Amen.”

They lifted their heads.

Caleb did not hold her gaze long. He picked up his coffee and his guitar case. “I will see you later.”

Naomi nodded. “Yes.”

He walked to the stage steps. His shoulders looked more set than before, as if the prayer had pulled him into place.

Naomi stood still for a moment.

She heard the faint sound of a guitar string being checked. She heard Logan’s voice counting. She heard the soft thump of someone moving a speaker.

She walked back toward the children’s table and began laying out coloring sheets.

As she worked, her mind kept returning to Caleb's words: guarding plans, guarding heart, telling the truth.

She had guarded herself too. She had made Maple Ridge her safe place, only to resent it for being small. She had held her dreams close but kept them dim, like she feared to look at them straight.

A car door shut outside. Voices came closer. A group of young girls entered the tent, laughing. Their ponytails swung. Their sandals slapped the grass.

Naomi smiled at them and handed them paper fans.

"Thank you," one girl said. "It is going to be hot tonight."

Naomi nodded. "Yes. Drink water."

The girls moved to the front rows and took seats. One of them waved at Naomi again, as if Naomi belonged in her life. Naomi felt the tug of community. It held her, even when she did not feel certain she wanted it.

Mrs. Alder walked over with the sign-in clipboard. "Naomi, would you mind taking the younger children to the prayer garden later? Some of them need space. We can do a short Bible story under the trees."

Naomi nodded. "Yes. I will."

Mrs. Alder's eyes held hers. "You look tired."

Naomi tried to smile. "I am all right."

Mrs. Alder did not press. She said, "Thank you for serving."

Naomi watched her walk away. She wondered how many quiet fears Mrs. Alder had carried when she was Naomi's age.

Work filled the afternoon in pieces. More chairs came in. The men adjusted the stage lights. Someone tested the fans. The air moved, but the heat stayed.

Naomi left the tent for a while and walked through the church building to gather supplies. The hallway felt still compared to the field. The walls held framed pictures from past revivals, past baptisms, past youth groups. Faces smiled from other summers. Some of them now sat in the adult rows, older and steadier. Some had moved away.

She stopped by a picture of Hannah Whitaker from years ago, standing beside Eli Brooks on a Sunday morning. Naomi remembered that season. Maple Ridge had talked about it for months. Not in gossip. In wonder. People had seen something rebuilt.

Naomi traced the edge of the frame with her eyes, then kept walking.

In the supply closet she found a stack of children's Bibles and a box of small snacks. She lifted the box and felt its weight. She carried it down the hall and out the side door toward the prayer garden.

The prayer garden sat beside the church, a small fenced space with benches and a few young trees. The ground held mulch and flat stones in a path. Wind chimes hung from a branch. They gave a soft sound when the breeze touched them.

Naomi set the box on a bench.

She sat for a moment on the other bench. Shade covered her shoulders. Leaves shifted above her, slow.

She folded her hands in her lap. She tried to pray. Words came, then stopped.

She did not want to give God pretty sentences. She wanted truth.

“Lord,” she whispered, “I do not want to pick a life out of fear.”

The words made her throat ache.

She stared at the stone path. Ants moved in a thin line beside a rock.

“I do not want to stay because it is safe,” she said. “I do not want to leave because it feels bigger.”

Silence.

She listened. A distant hammer sound came from the tent area. Someone laughed, a bird called from the tree line.

Naomi took a breath. “If You want me here, make me willing.” She paused. “If You want me elsewhere, make me brave.”

Her eyes stung again. She wiped one tear with the back of her hand, annoyed at how easily they came these days.

She sat up straighter. “Show me what matters. Show me who to serve. Show me how to love.”

The last word landed heavy. Love. She thought of Caleb’s face by the firelight. She thought of his request. Stay close.

Naomi closed her eyes. “I do not want to confuse feelings with calling.”

Her breath shuddered once. She steadied it.

A footstep sounded on the stone path. Naomi opened her eyes.

Pastor Whitaker walked into the garden through the small gate. He wore a short-sleeved button-down shirt and dark pants. His hair looked a little wind-touched. He held a folded paper in his hand.

He stopped when he saw Naomi. He did not startle. He did not fill the silence fast. He smiled in a way that felt like kindness with no agenda.

“Naomi,” he said. “I did not know anyone was in here.”

Naomi stood. “Pastor Whitaker. I was gathering supplies for the children.”

He nodded and looked at the box. “Good. Thank you.”

Naomi waited. She did not know if she should leave. The garden felt like a place for prayer, but also for being seen.

Pastor Whitaker stepped closer and looked at her face. “How are you holding up this week?”

Naomi gave the answer she always gave. “I am fine.”

Pastor Whitaker’s eyes stayed steady. “Are you?”

Naomi’s mouth tightened. She looked down at her hands. A smudge of dirt marked her thumb from the box.

“I do not know,” Naomi said.

Pastor Whitaker nodded as if that answer pleased him more than the first. “You do not have to know. You have to keep coming to the Lord with what you do know.”

Naomi swallowed. “I know I am afraid.”

Pastor Whitaker took a slow breath. “Of what?”

Naomi lifted her gaze. The truth sat close to her chest. She did not want to hand it over. But she had asked the Lord for truth. She could not refuse it when it came near.

“I am afraid of choosing wrong,” Naomi said. “I am afraid of wasting my life on the wrong thing.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. He looked toward the chimes as they moved with the breeze. “Fear makes a loud counselor.”

Naomi stared at him.

Pastor Whitaker looked back. “What is the Lord saying to you?”

Naomi let out a short breath. “I do not know. I keep praying, and I feel like I hear nothing.”

Pastor Whitaker’s voice stayed calm. “Silence does not mean absence.”

Naomi’s eyes burned again. “I want Him to tell me where to go. What to do. What my life is for.”

Pastor Whitaker’s expression softened. “He often tells people who to become first.”

Naomi did not speak.

Pastor Whitaker unfolded the paper in his hand. It held notes for tonight. Naomi saw a list of names and a few scriptures.

He tapped the page with one finger. “I am preaching from First Timothy.”

Naomi’s heart gave a small lift. “The verse about being an example?”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. “Yes. First Timothy four twelve.”

Naomi had heard it so many times as a teenager that she had stopped hearing it. She heard it again now, older, with bills and choices and a future that felt near.

Pastor Whitaker said, “Paul did not tell Timothy to wait until he felt certain. He told him to do the next faithful thing. In speech. In conduct. In love. In faith. In purity.”

Naomi’s throat tightened. “I want that.”

Pastor Whitaker’s eyes stayed kind. “Then do it today.”

Naomi stared at him. Simple. Hard.

He added, “You are in a season where the Lord is shaping you. The shaping feels slow.”

Naomi nodded. Slow felt like a test.

Pastor Whitaker glanced toward the field. “Caleb Monroe is back this summer.”

Naomi’s stomach tightened. “Yes.”

Pastor Whitaker looked at her face again. He did not smile like a tease. His tone stayed gentle. “He is leading well.”

Naomi nodded. “Yes.”

Pastor Whitaker said, “The Lord often uses other people to show us what He is doing in us. Iron sharpens iron.”

Naomi held still.

Pastor Whitaker did not press further. He let the words stand, as her father had. Naomi felt grateful. She also felt exposed.

Pastor Whitaker folded the paper again. “I came to pray for tonight.”

Naomi stepped back a half step. “I will let you.”

Pastor Whitaker shook his head. “Stay.” He looked at the bench. “Sit if you want.”

Naomi sat on the bench, hands in her lap. Pastor Whitaker sat on the bench opposite her.

He bowed his head. Naomi bowed hers.

He prayed in a low voice. “Lord, thank You for the young people You are drawing. Thank You for Naomi. Strengthen her. Give her wisdom. Guard her heart. Teach her to trust You without needing control. Let tonight bring fruit that lasts. Let it begin in quiet places. Amen.”

Naomi whispered, “Amen.”

Pastor Whitaker lifted his head. He looked at Naomi with calm certainty, the kind grown from years of watching God work.

He stood. “I will see you later.”

Naomi stood too. “Thank you.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded once and walked out through the gate.

Naomi sat again for a moment after he left.

The prayer garden felt like it held the prayer in the air. Naomi breathed it in like clean water.

She opened one of the children’s Bibles and flipped pages. Thin paper. Small print. A ribbon marker.

Her eyes landed on Ecclesiastes. She read a line she had underlined years ago and forgotten.

“Whoever watches the wind will not plant, and whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.”

Naomi stared at it.

She thought about her own habit of watching the wind, waiting for a perfect sign and waiting for a feeling that felt like certainty.

Her chest ached with a strange mix of relief and conviction.

She shut the Bible and pressed it against her stomach.

“Lord,” she whispered, “I will plant.”

She did not yet know what planting would look like. She only knew she had to stop waiting for a life without risk.

She stood and picked up the box.

She walked back toward the tent.

Late afternoon brought more people to the field. Cars filled the gravel lot. Teens arrived in groups, energy bright and restless. Adults came slower, carrying camp chairs and worn Bibles. Some greeted each other with hugs. Some nodded and kept moving, as if they carried burdens too heavy for talk.

Naomi helped a mother find a seat close to the side opening. A toddler clung to the mother’s leg. Naomi handed the toddler a coloring page and a crayon. The toddler stared at it suspiciously, then sat on the ground and began scribbling.

Naomi smiled. She moved down the row and offered paper fans to older women.

Mrs. Alder handled sign-ins with calm firmness. She directed volunteers with short words. She never raised her voice. People obeyed anyway.

As the sun lowered, the air inside the tent shifted. It stayed warm, but it turned less harsh. Light slanted through the canvas, making the dust in the air visible. It floated slowly.

Caleb stood near the stage with the worship team. Naomi saw him speak to Logan, then turn and look out over the chairs.

His eyes found Naomi again.

This time he held her gaze longer.

Naomi felt the pull in her chest. She did not turn away. She gave him a small nod.

Caleb's shoulders eased again, as if he drew strength from the simple signal.

Naomi did not understand how two people could share so little history in the present and still feel connected. She also did understand. Revival had a way of stripping away what did not matter and showing what did.

She turned back to the children's area and helped a boy open a water bottle.

As evening came closer, the field outside the tent filled with the smell of grass and warm dirt. String lights waited unlit. The sky held a pale gold line near the trees.

Naomi worked steadily. Her body felt tired, but her mind felt clearer than it had in days.

Clarity did not mean she had answers. It meant she had a direction.

Obey today.

Plant.

Guard her heart according to His Word.

Later, when the first chords rang out in rehearsal and voices began to rise, Naomi stepped to the side opening of the tent and looked out at the church steeple. It stood quiet, watching over everything.

She pressed her hand to the canvas edge and felt it pull against the rope.

Strong. Held.

Naomi whispered, “Lord, begin what You want.”

She turned back toward the chairs and the people gathering, ready to serve, ready to listen, ready to take the next step without demanding to see the whole road.

Chapter 13

Last Night of Revival

The last night of revival did not arrive with a trumpet sound. It came with small signs.

The grass by the field held a few brown patches where feet had pressed it flat all week. The ropes had dug shallow lines in the dirt. The tent looked the same as always, white canvas and sturdy poles, but the air around it carried an ending.

Naomi Reyes stepped out of the fellowship hall with a box of paper fans against her hip. The cardboard edge rubbed her forearm. The sun sat low, bright and tired, and the heat still clung to the ground.

She paused at the bottom step and looked toward the tent.

Men moved folding chairs in slow rows. Teen boys carried cases of bottled water in pairs, their shoulders tense for a second, then easing as they set the weight down. Mrs. Alder stood at the edge of the path with a clipboard. She spoke in short phrases. A man nodded and turned. A girl hurried off, ponytail swinging.

Naomi walked across the lawn, past the open church windows. Voices drifted out. Someone laughed. Someone else sang a line under their breath, as if their body had learned the week and did not want to let go.

Inside the tent, the air already felt different. Less sharp. Less restless. It still held warmth, but it carried more breeze. The side openings stood wider tonight, clipped back with metal hooks. A faint smell of damp earth rose from the ground under the canvas, left over from the storm two nights ago. It mixed with perfume, sweat, and the clean bite of hand sanitizer that had become a staple of the summer revival. Naomi’s sandals pressed into the softened dirt as she

stepped inside, her shadow falling long across the ground. The faint hum of voices rose and fell, blending with the occasional scrape of a chair leg or the thud of a cooler being set down. She paused near the back, her box of fans still balanced against her hip, and let the sights and sounds settle into her.

The tent was a place of transformation, but tonight it felt different, more fragile. The week had been full of fervent prayers, songs that lifted hearts, and moments that left tears streaking cheeks. Yet now, there was a quietness that seemed to ask whether the seeds planted in those fleeting moments would take root.

“Miss Naomi, need help with those?” Micah Carter’s voice broke through her thoughts. He was a wiry boy, maybe fifteen, with a grin that always seemed half-formed, as if he was not sure whether he was allowed to be happy. Naomi smiled and handed him the box.

“Thank you, Micah. Just set them by the water table.”

He nodded, his stride quick and purposeful. She watched him go, wondering how many lives had been touched this week, not just by the sermons but by the simple acts of service, the shared meals, the whispered prayers offered in the quiet corners of the tent.

The evening light grew softer, slanting in golden lines through the open sides of the tent. People started to arrive, their voices subdued but warm. Mrs. Alder bustled through with her clipboard, her lips pressed tight in concentration as she checked off last-minute details. A few children darted across the lawn, their laughter trailing behind them like ribbons.

Naomi found herself near the front, where Pastor Whitaker stood talking with Eli Brooks. Eli’s broad shoulders were relaxed, his hands stuffed into his pockets as he nodded thoughtfully. Pastor Whitaker’s voice carried a calm assurance, even in casual conversation. Naomi did not interrupt. She slipped past them and

placed herself near the first row of chairs, her heart restless in a way she could not define.

As the evening unfolded, the revival's last service began with the familiar strum of a guitar. The music swelled, voices rising together in harmony, filling the tent with a sound that felt both triumphant and tender. Naomi sang along, her voice blending with the others, though her mind wandered. She thought of the faces she'd seen this week, the broken, the hopeful, the searching. She wondered about their stories, about the chapters they'd go home to write when the revival ended.

When Pastor Whitaker stood to deliver the final message, the crowd quieted, the stillness settling deep. He spoke of endurance, of faith that grows in the unseen moments, of the God who remains when the tent is packed away, and the chairs are folded. His words were steady, like rain falling on thirsty ground.

As the service ended, Naomi lingered. People filed out slowly, their voices hushed, their steps thoughtful. She stayed behind, watching as the last chairs were stacked and the last fan was discarded. The tent seemed larger now, emptier, holding only the echoes of what had been.

Finally, she stepped outside, the night air cool against her skin. The stars had come out, scattered across the sky like promises waiting to be claimed. Naomi walked toward the fellowship hall, her sandals brushing the grass. The revival was over, but something lingered, not just in the air, but in her heart.

Hope. Quiet, steady, unshakable.

Chapter 14

Under the Summer Revival

Naomi Reyes stepped into the tent and let her eyes adjust.

The string lights ran in loose lines from pole to pole. They gave off a soft gold glow. It made the white canvas look warm, almost like it held its own light. The fans sat on stands along the edges. They pushed air in tired circles.

She carried the box of paper fans to the back row and set it down beside the stack she had started earlier. The cardboard thumped against the ground. She rubbed her forearm where the edge had pressed her.

People kept arriving. They came in pairs and small groups. Some nodded at Naomi. Some smiled like they felt shy about smiling. The last night carried a quiet weight. It did not press down. It held steady.

Naomi moved between the rows, straightening chairs. The metal legs scraped the dirt. The sound ran through the tent and faded. She kept her hands busy. Her mind did not stay quiet.

All week she had watched the same things happen. People stepped in tense and guarded. They sat with crossed arms. They looked at the stage like it held something to judge. Then songs rose, and prayers rose, and words softened. A few tears came. A few laughs came. A few hands lifted.

Naomi had seen God move before. She had grown up around it. Sunday after Sunday. Youth group nights. Summer camps. She believed in it. She loved it.

This week felt close. It felt near her skin.

It also made her afraid.

She did not know what it meant when the Lord stirred a person, and the person still had to choose what to do with it.

Naomi stood at the end of an aisle and looked toward the stage.

The worship team moved with calm purpose. A mic stand leaned crooked, and Logan straightened it. Someone checked a cable. A guitar sat on a stand, neck angled toward the ceiling. A keyboard player wiped her hands on her jeans and looked down at her keys like she wanted to remember the feel of home.

Caleb Monroe stood near the side of the stage with his guitar strapped on. He looked down as he adjusted the strap length. His head bent. His hair fell forward a little. He pushed it back with his wrist.

Naomi kept her eyes on him longer than she meant to.

He had been in Maple Ridge for weeks, and still he did not look like he belonged there. He looked like he had stepped out of a different life and into this field with the tent lights and the sound of crickets and the smell of grass.

He had laughed this week. He had served without complaining. He had prayed with people, his eyes shut tight like he privately needed the Lord.

He had also stood apart when he thought no one watched.

Naomi knew the look of someone holding an exit plan.

She understood it more than she wanted to.

A family slid into a row near the front. Mrs. Alder guided them with her clipboard. Her mouth moved in short sentences. She pointed at an empty spot. She did not waste a second.

Naomi turned away and went to the side table with the water cups. She picked up a sleeve and set it down. Her fingers shook a little from tiredness. She had slept, but she had not rested.

Pastor Whitaker walked in through the back flap of the tent. He moved slowly, like he carried peace with him. He stopped and spoke to a man near the entrance. He set a hand on the man's shoulder and leaned in. The man's face tightened, then loosened. He nodded.

Naomi watched for a moment, then looked away.

Her phone sat in her back pocket. She did not pull it out. She did not need to see the time. The last night would move no matter what the clock said.

A teen girl came to the water table. Naomi recognized her from the neighboring town. The girl smiled and reached for a cup.

"Thank you," the girl said.

Naomi nodded. "You are welcome."

The girl hesitated. Her smile faded into something softer. "I do not want it to end."

Naomi swallowed. "I know."

The girl took her cup and walked back to her group.

Naomi stood still. Her chest held a thin ache. She had said the truth. She did not know why it hit like a confession.

A chord rang out from the stage as someone tested a guitar. The sound bounced in the tent and came back slightly blurred. Caleb stepped to the mic stand and spoke to Logan. Logan nodded. Caleb turned his head, scanning the tent as he checked for something.

His eyes found Naomi.

He did not smile. He did not look away. His gaze held steady.

Naomi felt the heat rise into her face. She picked up a stack of cups and turned them in her hands as if she needed to align them.

She felt childish. She felt seen.

Caleb looked down at his guitar and stepped away from the mic. He moved to the side of the stage again.

Naomi breathed out. She did not know what she wanted him to do. She did not know what she wanted from him.

All week she had told herself it was a passing closeness. They worked together. They prayed in the same space. They shared the same long evenings and the same tired mornings. Revival did strange things to people. It stripped away distractions. It made the heart loud.

Naomi had thought her heart would quiet once she got used to him being around.

It did not.

The tent filled.

More chairs scraped. More whispers floated. A baby fussed, and a mother bounced him on her knee. Teen boys nudged each other, then fell still when Mrs. Alder walked past them.

Naomi took her place near the side, where she could see the aisle and the stage. She stayed ready to help if someone needed something.

She did not have to pretend to be calm. Serving gave her an excuse to stay busy.

The singing began with a simple song, a familiar one. Voices rose slowly at first. Then they grew stronger.

Caleb led with a steady tone. He did not show off. He kept the melody clean. He watched the room. He listened as if he wanted to match the people, not pull them somewhere they could not go.

Naomi sang along, soft at first. Then she let her voice rise.

The tent held it all. The sound. The warmth. The shifting air.

Outside, dusk deepened. The light changed. The crickets started up in a thicker chorus. Fireflies blinked near the tent openings, their small lights coming and going.

Naomi saw a teen boy in the second row wipe his face with his sleeve. He kept his head down. His shoulders shook once. A hand rested on his back. He stayed there, breaking in quiet.

Naomi felt tears sting her eyes. She blinked them away. She did not want to make the night about her feelings.

The songs moved into prayer.

Pastor Whitaker stepped up and took the mic. He opened his Bible with careful hands. He looked out over the crowd.

His voice carried calm strength. He did not shout. He did not force emotion. He spoke like he trusted the Lord to do what the Lord always did.

He read from Joel.

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh,” he said.

The words landed and sat there.

He spoke about sons and daughters. He spoke about young men seeing visions. He spoke about old men dreaming dreams.

He looked toward the youth section, then toward the older couples, then toward the middle rows where parents sat with tired eyes and hope they tried to hide.

Naomi held her breath.

Pastor Whitaker spoke about surrender. About small obedience. About staying faithful when feelings faded. About walking in the light the Lord gave today and trusting Him for the next step.

Naomi felt the words press against her ribs.

Next step.

Her life felt full of next steps.

A teaching placement. A decision about where to apply. A question about whether she stayed in Maple Ridge or left for a district with higher pay and more opportunities. A question about whether she wanted to live in a town where everyone knew her name and her past and her family.

She loved Maple Ridge. She loved her church. She loved how people showed up for each other.

She also feared she would wake up at forty and feel stuck.

Naomi bowed her head.

The prayer time opened.

People moved. Some came forward. Some knelt where they sat. Some stood in the aisles with hands open.

Naomi stayed near her place, watching for anyone who needed a tissue or water. She moved once to help an older man stand up. His knees shook. She steadied his elbow.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Naomi nodded. She did not speak. Her throat felt tight.

Caleb stepped down from the stage and walked into the crowd. He moved toward a group of teens near the side. He spoke with them, his body angled in, listening. One of the boys shook his head hard and wiped his face. Caleb put a hand on his shoulder and prayed.

Naomi watched the way Caleb prayed. He kept his eyes shut. His mouth moved in simple words. No performance. No long phrases. He spoke like he meant each sentence.

Naomi turned her gaze away, but her eyes pulled back again.

She did not know when she had started trusting him.

She did not know when he had become someone she looked for in a room.

The prayer time continued, and Pastor Whitaker sang a quiet line into the mic, guiding the room back toward stillness. The band played soft chords. A hush settled.

Naomi felt it, the ending.

She had learned the rhythm of revival, the way the last night carried a different kind of attention. People stayed longer. They said goodbyes as they mattered. They promised they would stay connected. Some would. Some would fade.

Naomi feared the fading.

She feared it in herself.

Pastor Whitaker closed with prayer. He thanked the Lord for what He had done. He asked for lasting fruit. He asked for hearts to stay tender. He asked for courage.

He ended with a quiet amen.

People echoed it, a soft chorus.

Then chairs scraped again. People stood. They spoke in low voices. Some hugged, careful and brief. Some wiped tears and laughed at themselves. Teen girls took photos with their friends near the stage.

Naomi moved to the water table and began gathering cups and throwing them away. Her hands stayed busy. Her heart did not.

Mrs. Alder came over, her clipboard tucked under her arm. Her hair looked slightly frizzed from the week's humidity. Her eyes held a bright tiredness.

"Naomi," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Alder glanced over the tent. "Thank you for serving. You stayed steady all week."

Naomi felt her face warm. "It was a joy."

Mrs. Alder nodded. "Go home after this. You have done enough."

Naomi gave a small smile. "I will."

Mrs. Alder walked off to direct a few men in stacking chairs.

Naomi threw away another handful of cups.

A shadow fell across the table.

She looked up.

Caleb stood there.

He held his guitar by the neck now, strap off his shoulder. His shirt clung a little at his back from the heat. A damp line darkened the fabric near his collar.

His eyes met hers.

Naomi froze with a cup in her hand.

“Naomi,” he said.

“Caleb.” Her voice came out thin.

He glanced toward the aisle, then back at her. “Do you have a minute?”

Naomi’s pulse quickened. “Yes.”

He nodded toward the side opening of the tent. “Outside.”

Naomi looked at the table. She looked at the half-full trash bag. She looked toward Mrs. Alder. Mrs. Alder stood near the front, busy with the chair crews.

Naomi set the cup down. “Okay.”

She followed Caleb along the edge of the tent where the canvas lifted for airflow. The ground outside sloped slightly down toward the field. The air felt cooler out here, though it still held the day’s heat. The smell of grass rose stronger without the press of bodies.

The church sat nearby, windows open. Light spilled from them. Voices drifted from inside. People moved in and out with stacks of chairs and paper fans.

Caleb walked a few steps away from the opening. He stopped near a tent rope staked into the dirt. The rope pulled tight, humming faintly as the breeze hit it.

Fireflies blinked near the grass. A dog barked far off.

Caleb faced Naomi.

He stood still for a moment. He looked like he had words lined up inside him and none of them wanted to come out first.

Naomi waited. Her hands hung at her sides. She wished she had kept one paper fan. The air moved, but her skin still felt warm.

Caleb cleared his throat. “I have to talk to you.”

Naomi nodded once. “Okay.”

He looked away for a second, toward the church steeple. It rose pale against the darkening sky. The steeple always looked the same. It made Maple Ridge feel anchored.

Caleb looked back. “I leave soon.”

Naomi’s chest tightened. She already knew, but hearing him say it turned it into a bruise.

“I know,” she said.

He shifted his weight. His fingers tightened around the guitar neck. “I told myself I would come here and help with revival. I told myself I would do the right thing for once, do something for the church, then go back to my life.”

Naomi did not speak. She listened.

Caleb’s jaw flexed. “I did not expect this week to hit me the way it did.”

Naomi swallowed. “It did for many people.”

He gave a small nod. “Yes.”

He looked down at the grass near his shoes. He took in a slow breath.

“When Pastor Whitaker read Joel tonight,” he said, “I thought about the future in a way I have tried to avoid.”

Naomi’s heart beat harder. She did not know where he meant to go. She felt both hope and dread, tangled.

Caleb lifted his eyes. “I keep telling myself the future belongs somewhere else. Somewhere bigger. Somewhere where I can hide better.”

Naomi’s breath caught. The words felt too close to her own thoughts.

Caleb’s voice stayed steady, but his face did not. His eyes held something raw.

“I feel the Lord calling me,” he said. “I do not even like saying it because it sounds like a thing people say when they want to feel important. But I do feel it.”

Naomi’s mouth went dry. “Calling you to what?”

Caleb shook his head once. “I do not know all of it. I know I am supposed to lead. I know I am supposed to serve. I know I am supposed to stop treating faith like something I do in summer and then put away when my classes start.”

Naomi nodded, slow. “That is honest.”

Caleb’s gaze held hers. “It scares me.”

Naomi’s throat tightened. “Yes.”

Caleb let out a breath. “I have been asking the Lord for clarity. I thought I would get it in a clean answer. Like a list. Like a plan.”

Naomi watched him. The string lights inside the tent cast a dim glow out here. It softened the angles of his face. It made his eyes look darker.

Caleb spoke again. “This week I have thought about you more than I should.”

Naomi’s heart jumped hard. She felt it in her ears.

Caleb lifted a hand and rubbed the back of his neck, then dropped it. “I am not trying to say something careless.”

Naomi forced her voice to stay calm. “Then say what you mean.”

Caleb’s eyes stayed on her. He did not flinch.

“I mean I care about you,” he said. “I mean I have tried to keep it in a neat box and I cannot.”

Naomi’s hands curled into loose fists. She felt heat rush up her neck. “Caleb.”

He stepped half a pace closer, then stopped as if he did not want to crowd her.

“I watched you serve all week,” he said. “I watched you pray with girls who needed someone to stay. I watched you notice the people no one else noticed. I watched you stay when you were tired. I watched you look like you belonged to this place, as you carried it in you.”

Naomi’s eyes stung. She blinked hard. “I do not always feel like I belong.”

Caleb’s face softened. “I know.”

Naomi shook her head, small. “No. You do not. You have not been here. You do not know what it feels like to grow up in a town and feel grateful and trapped at the same time.”

Caleb did not argue. He nodded once. “You are right. I do not know it the way you do.”

Naomi looked past him to the dark field. The grass moved in the breeze. The tent canvas rustled. People’s laughter rose and fell behind them.

She forced herself to look back at him. “Why are you telling me this now?”

Caleb’s fingers tightened again around his guitar. “Because I do not want to leave without saying the truth. I do not want to treat you like a feeling I had during revival.”

Naomi’s breath shook.

Caleb continued. “I do not know what the future holds. I do not know where I will land after university. I do not know if the Lord will lead me back here or somewhere else. But I know I want to know you. I want to seek the Lord with you. I want to take you seriously.”

Naomi pressed her lips together. Tears spilled anyway. They slid down her cheeks before she could stop them.

Caleb’s eyes widened. He reached a hand toward her, then stopped mid-air like he asked permission without words.

Naomi nodded once.

Caleb stepped close enough to wipe one tear with his thumb near her cheekbone. His touch stayed light. He pulled his hand back right away, as if he did not trust himself to do more.

Naomi breathed in. Her voice came out low. “You are leaving.”

“Yes.”

“You have a whole life somewhere else.”

“I have a whole life I thought belonged somewhere else,” he said.

Naomi gave a shaky laugh that held no humor. “That sounds like a sermon line.”

Caleb’s mouth curved slightly, then fell serious again. “I know. I am sorry.”

Naomi wiped her cheeks with the heel of her hand. “I do not want to be foolish.”

Caleb nodded. “Neither do I.”

Naomi looked down at the ground. She watched a firefly blink near her shoe. It lifted and drifted away.

She spoke without lifting her head. “This week has felt like standing in bright light. It has shown me things I do not want to see.”

Caleb waited.

Naomi swallowed. “I have been afraid of choosing wrong. Afraid of staying and missing what I was meant to do. Afraid of leaving and losing the people I love.”

Caleb’s voice stayed quiet. “Yes.”

Naomi lifted her eyes. “Then you showed up. And I did not ask for it. I did not plan for it.”

Caleb’s gaze held hers. He looked like he breathed through the ache.

Naomi’s chest rose and fell. “I care about you too.”

Caleb's shoulders eased a fraction, like he had held tension in them all week.

Naomi kept going, because she had started and she knew she needed to finish. "I tried to tell myself it was the week. The music. The lights. The way everyone feels tender. But it did not feel like a passing thing."

Caleb nodded once, slow. "No."

Naomi wiped her face again. "I do not know what to do with it."

Caleb's voice grew steadier. "We do not have to force it into a plan tonight."

Naomi frowned. "Then why say it tonight?"

Caleb glanced toward the tent opening. People moved inside, still talking, still cleaning. The week did not end in one moment. It ended in small motions.

He looked back. "Because I am done hiding. With God. With people. With you."

Naomi's throat tightened again. She hated how much she wanted to believe him.

Caleb spoke softer. "Naomi, I do not want to play with your heart."

Naomi shook her head. "Do not say it like I have no choice in this."

Caleb blinked. "You are right."

Naomi breathed out. "If this becomes something, it will cost something."

Caleb nodded. "Yes."

Naomi watched his face. She looked for the smooth confidence some men used to get what they wanted. She did not see it. She saw fear. She saw sincerity.

She also saw youth. Not immaturity. Youth. The kind that meant life still stood wide open, and choices still carried sharp edges.

Naomi spoke slowly. “What do you want, Caleb?”

Caleb held her gaze. “I want to pursue you in a way that honors the Lord.”

Naomi’s breath caught again, but this time it held a different feeling. Relief. A clean steadiness in the words.

Caleb continued. “I want to talk. I want to pray. I want to learn you. I want to be honest with my family and with Pastor Whitaker. I want to ask your parents for permission to court you, if that is what you want.”

Naomi stared at him.

The word “court” felt old-fashioned, but its meaning felt safe. It felt like a fence around something tender.

Naomi’s eyes filled again. She gave a small nod. “I do want that.”

Caleb’s face softened into a look Naomi would remember for a long time. His eyes shone. His mouth trembled once like he held back his own tears.

He let out a slow breath. “Thank you.”

Naomi’s voice shook. “Do not thank me yet. This will hurt.”

Caleb nodded. “Yes.”

Naomi looked toward the steeple again. The sky behind it had gone deep blue. The first stars began to show. The church sat quiet and sturdy, like it had watched young hearts turn back to God for generations.

Naomi looked back at Caleb. “If you leave and you forget this, it will break me.”

Caleb’s jaw tightened. “I will not forget.”

Naomi flinched at the certainty in his voice, then remembered the rules he had given himself about words. He had said he did not like sounding important. He did not like empty phrases.

She asked, “What makes you so sure?”

Caleb’s eyes did not move. “Because I have tried to forget things God has put in front of me before. I have tried to drown them in noise and plans. It did not work. It only made me restless.”

Naomi let the words settle.

Caleb lowered his gaze for a moment, then lifted it again. “Naomi, I want to pray with you right now.”

Naomi nodded. “Okay.”

They stood near the tent rope, the ground still warm under their shoes.

Caleb shifted his guitar to his other hand so he could hold Naomi’s hand. He did it with care, asking again without words.

Naomi placed her hand in his. His palm felt warm. His fingers closed around hers, firm but gentle.

Caleb bowed his head. Naomi did the same.

His voice came out quiet. “Lord, thank You for this week. Thank You for what You have done in this tent and in this town. Thank You for drawing hearts back to You.”

Naomi squeezed his hand once.

Caleb continued. “Lord, I do not want to lead with my pride. I do not want to lead with fear. I want to obey You. I want to honor You with my future and my choices. Please make my path clear.”

Naomi’s eyes burned again. She kept them shut.

Caleb’s voice thickened slightly. “Lord, thank You for Naomi. Thank You for her faith and her steady service. If this desire in my heart comes from You, please grow it the right way. Give us wisdom. Give us purity. Give us patience. Protect her heart. Protect mine.”

Naomi’s chest tightened.

Caleb finished with simple words. “Help me be a man of integrity. Help us listen to You more than we listen to our own feelings. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

Naomi whispered, “Amen.”

They lifted their heads.

For a moment, they stood and held hands, the sounds of the tent behind them and the open field beside them. The last night of revival did not end with silence. It ended with people still moving, still talking, still holding on.

Naomi pulled her hand back, slow. She did not want to. She did anyway. She needed to keep something in place. She needed to remember where lines belonged.

Caleb respected it. He did not reach again.

Naomi wiped her face. “I need to finish helping inside.”

Caleb nodded. “I will help too.”

Naomi studied him. “You already did enough.”

Caleb’s eyes stayed steady. “I want to serve. I do not want to leave you with the work.”

Naomi gave a small nod. “Okay.”

They walked back toward the opening side by side. Their shoulders did not touch.

Inside, the tent had thinned out. A few families lingered. Teen groups gathered near the front for one more prayer. Chairs stacked along the edges. The air felt cooler now that bodies had left. The fans moved air without pushing against heat.

Naomi went to the water table again. Caleb moved to gather discarded paper fans from the ground. He bent and picked them up one by one, stacking them against his palm.

Mrs. Alder walked up again and eyed them both.

Her gaze flicked from Naomi to Caleb. It lingered a beat longer than polite. Her mouth held a knowing line, not unkind.

Naomi felt heat rise to her face again.

Mrs. Alder spoke to Naomi. “You look tired.”

Naomi nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Alder glanced at Caleb. “You too.”

Caleb gave a respectful nod. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Alder's eyes softened. "Go home soon. All of you. Let the men handle the heavy stacks."

Caleb lifted a chair with ease as if to prove he counted as one of the men. "I will finish these and then go."

Mrs. Alder nodded and moved on.

Naomi gathered the last of the cups and tied off the trash bag. The plastic stretched and snapped into a tight knot. She lifted it and carried it to the bin near the back flap.

Caleb met her there with a stack of fans. He dropped them into a box and looked at her.

He spoke in a low voice. "Will you talk with your parents?"

Naomi nodded. "Yes. Tomorrow."

Caleb nodded once. "I will talk with my uncle. Then Pastor Whitaker."

Naomi felt a tremor of relief. "Thank you."

Caleb hesitated. "Will you let me call you when I go back?"

Naomi's heart pulled tight again. "Yes."

Caleb's eyes held hers. "I will not let it fade into silence."

Naomi swallowed. "I will hold you to that."

Caleb gave a small smile. It looked like a promise he felt in his bones. "You should."

A group of teens ran past them toward the church, laughing. One of them called Naomi's name.

“Naomi,” the girl shouted. “We are taking one more picture. Come on.”

Naomi glanced at Caleb, then back at the girl. “Okay. I am coming.”

The girl ran on.

Naomi faced Caleb again. She kept her voice low. “I need to go.”

Caleb nodded. “Go.”

Naomi turned, then stopped. She looked back.

Caleb stood still with his guitar in one hand, watching her like he did not want to waste a second of the moment.

Naomi spoke before she lost courage. “Caleb.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you for saying it,” she said.

Caleb’s throat moved as he swallowed. “Thank you for hearing it.”

Naomi walked toward the church doors with her heart beating hard and her face still damp. The night air met her skin. The tent lights glowed behind her. The steeple rose above, steady and pale against the dark.

She stepped into the church with the sound of voices around her, and she carried the simple truth in her chest like a new weight.

It did not crush her.

It grounded her.

Chapter 15

What Carries Forward

The next morning came with heat already settled in. Sunlight slid through the kitchen window at the Reyes house and lay in bright squares on the table. Naomi stood at the sink with a glass in her hand. Water ran over it and flashed white where it caught the light.

Her mother moved behind her, quiet in slippers. She set a plate of toast on the table and poured coffee into two mugs. The smell filled the room. It felt like safety. It also felt like the edge of something.

Naomi dried her hands. She turned and leaned her hip against the counter.

Her mother watched her over the rim of her mug. She did not rush. She never did when it mattered.

“Your eyes look tired,” her mother said.

Naomi nodded. “I did not sleep much.”

Her mother sat. The chair legs made a soft scrape on the floor. “Because of the revival,” she said.

“Yes,” Naomi said. She took a breath. “And because of Caleb.”

Her mother held still for a moment. She set her mug down. “Tell me,” she said.

Naomi walked to the table and sat across from her. The wood felt smooth under her fingertips. She traced the edge without meaning to.

“He talked to me,” Naomi said. “He told me he wants to stay connected after he goes back.”

Her mother watched her face. “Connected how?” she asked, gentle but steady.

Naomi swallowed. “He cares about me,” she said. “I care about him.”

Her mother nodded once. She did not smile. She did not frown. She held Naomi in her eyes like she wanted to see every piece. “Has he spoken with your father?” she asked.

“No,” Naomi said. “He said he will. He said he will talk with his uncle, then Pastor Whitaker.”

Her mother reached for her mug again. She took a small sip. The coffee steam curled and disappeared. “And what do you want?” she asked.

Naomi pressed her lips together. The question felt simple. It also felt like it reached all the way down into her. “I want to do this right,” she said. “I want to be honest. I do not want to run ahead of God.”

Her mother’s eyes softened. “You have always wanted to do it right,” she said. “Sometimes you have carried the weight as if God asked you to carry it alone.”

Naomi looked down at her hands. Her fingers held each other tight. “I do not want to choose wrong,” she said.

Her mother stood and walked around the table. She stopped behind Naomi and rested a hand on her shoulder. The touch felt warm and firm. “You will make choices,” she said. “You will pray. You will listen. You will take steps. God will lead you as you walk, not while you sit still and wait for a sign to hit you in the head.”

Naomi let out a breath she did not know she had been holding. “Papi will not like this,” she said.

Her mother's hand squeezed once. "Your father will ask questions," she said. "He will watch. He will protect you. He will also remember who he was at twenty."

Naomi turned her head. "He will?" she asked.

Her mother gave a small smile. "He will," she said.

Footsteps came down the hall. Her father appeared in the doorway. His hair still stood up in one spot. His face looked tired too. Revival week did not only take from teenagers.

He stopped when he saw both of them at the table. He looked from Naomi to her mother, then back. "What is this?" he asked.

Naomi's stomach tightened. She stood. "It is me being honest," she said.

Her father walked in and sat at the table across from her. He rested his forearms on the wood. He did not pick up coffee. He looked at Naomi as if he did not want to miss anything she might say.

Naomi kept her voice level. "Caleb Monroe talked to me last night," she said. "He said he cares about me. He asked if he could call me when he goes back to school."

Her father's eyes narrowed a little. He did not look angry. He looked careful. "And what did you say?" he asked.

"I said yes," Naomi said. "Because I care about him too."

Her father held her gaze. Silence stretched, a bird called outside. A car passed on the road, tires hushing on pavement.

Finally he nodded once. "I have seen him all week," her father said. "I have watched him watch you. I have watched him serve. I have watched him talk to Pastor Whitaker with respect. I have watched

him with the youth, too. He did not perform for them. He listened to them."

Naomi's throat felt thick. She did not trust herself to speak.

Her father's voice softened. "You are my daughter," he said. "I will ask him what he wants. I will ask him what his plan is. I will ask him what he believes God is doing in his life."

Naomi nodded. "He said he will come talk to you," she said.

Her father glanced at her mother. "Today?" he asked.

Her mother set a hand on the back of his chair. "He said he will talk with his uncle and Pastor Whitaker first," she said.

Her father's mouth pressed into a line. He did not argue. He nodded again. "Good," he said. "He will do it in order."

Naomi felt relief move through her like cool water. It did not solve everything. It gave her a place to stand.

Her father rose. He walked around the table and pulled Naomi into a hug. It surprised her. He did not do that often anymore. He held her tight for two seconds, then let go. "You do not have to be afraid of your father," he said.

Naomi blinked hard. "I do not want to disappoint you," she said.

He lifted a hand and touched her cheek with his thumb, quick and rough, as if he did not want to show tenderness. "You honor God," he said. "You honor your family. You have done that all your life. A young man who honors God will not ruin that."

Naomi nodded. "Yes, sir," she whispered.

He pointed toward the door with his chin. "Eat," he said. "Then go help take the tent down. Your arms have work."

Naomi gave a small smile. “Yes, sir,” she said again.

By midmorning the field beside Maple Ridge Community Church shimmered with heat. The grass held crushed patches where chairs had sat, and feet had pressed all week. The tent stood as it always had, white canvas and rope lines, poles like ribs. It looked steady. It also looked ready to let go.

Men and women moved under it with purpose. Hands reached up to loosen knots. People spoke in numbers again, slow and steady. Someone laughed when a rope slipped and snapped against a palm. A little boy ran in circles and got scolded with a gentle voice.

Naomi carried a stack of folded cloth banners to the trailer near the edge of the field. The cloth smelled like dust and warm air. Sweat dampened the back of her shirt. She pushed a strand of hair off her forehead with the back of her wrist.

Caleb stood near the stage area with Logan and two older men. They held a pole steady while someone loosened a tie near the top. Caleb wore a faded T-shirt and work gloves. His forearms flexed as he braced. He looked focused. He looked calm.

Naomi’s chest tightened at the sight. Last night had felt like a door opening. This morning felt like walking through it and seeing how much hallway stretched ahead.

Caleb glanced her way. His eyes met hers. He did not smile wide. He gave a small look, like a check-in. Like he wanted her to know he still stood with what he said.

Naomi nodded once. She shifted the weight of the cloth and kept walking. Her mouth felt dry. Her heart felt steady.

Mrs. Alder stood near the church doors with a clipboard. She wore a sunhat and a light long-sleeved shirt. She spoke with an older man

from the firehouse and pointed toward the trailer. She caught Naomi's eye and lifted her chin in approval.

Naomi set the cloth in the trailer and climbed down. The metal rung felt hot under her shoe. She stepped onto the grass and turned back toward the tent.

Pastor Whitaker stood near the edge of the field with a small group. He wore jeans and a short-sleeved button-down shirt. He held a water bottle in one hand. He did not direct like a boss. He watched like a shepherd.

Caleb walked toward him with his uncle. His uncle talked as they crossed the grass. Caleb listened. His shoulders stayed squared. He looked like a young man who chose to act grown.

Naomi slowed. She did not hover. She did not run. She walked toward the church steps and picked up a bundle of bungee cords from a box.

Hannah Whitaker came out of the fellowship hall with a case of bottled water. She wore her hair in a loose braid. She looked a few years older than Naomi. She also looked like someone who carried responsibility with ease.

She set the case down and wiped her hands on her jeans. "Naomi," she said.

Naomi turned. "Miss Hannah," she said.

Hannah smiled. "No, Miss," she said. "Not anymore. You are grown."

Naomi felt a small flush. "Yes, ma'am," she said, then corrected herself. "Yes. Hannah."

Hannah picked up two bottles and held one out. Naomi took it. The plastic felt cool. She twisted the cap and drank. The water tasted like nothing and everything.

Hannah watched the tent for a moment. “It went well,” she said.

Naomi nodded. “It did,” she said.

Hannah glanced at Naomi’s face. “It went deep for you,” she said.

Naomi hesitated. She did not want to gossip about her own heart. She also did not want to hide from someone who had watched her grow up. “Yes,” she said. “God did something.”

Hannah’s eyes softened. “He does,” she said. “Sometimes He does it loud under a tent. Sometimes He does it quiet in a kitchen. Either way it is His work.”

Naomi nodded again. She watched as a group of men lifted a stack of folding chairs and carried them toward the trailer. The metal legs clanked. The sound echoed off the canvas.

Hannah leaned closer, her voice low. “I saw Caleb look at you all week,” she said. “Eli noticed too.”

Naomi’s stomach flipped. “Eli Brooks,” she said.

Hannah smiled. “Yes,” she said. “He said Caleb has a steady spirit. He said it is rare in someone so young.”

Naomi looked toward the tent. Caleb now stood with Pastor Whitaker. His uncle stood close too. Pastor Whitaker spoke. Caleb listened. He nodded once. He looked serious.

Naomi’s hands tightened on the water bottle. “He told me he will talk to Pastor Whitaker,” she said.

Hannah nodded. “He already is,” she said. “Pastor Whitaker does not waste time.”

Naomi let out a breath. She did not realize she had been holding it.

Hannah touched Naomi’s arm. “Stay steady,” she said. “Do not borrow trouble from next month. Do not borrow trouble from next year.”

Naomi swallowed. “I do that,” she admitted.

Hannah’s mouth curved a little. “Most of us do,” she said. “But God does not ask anyone to see the whole road. He asks for the next step.”

Naomi looked at Hannah. “How did you learn that?” she asked.

Hannah’s eyes flickered toward the church. Toward the open doors. “By trying to hold the whole road,” she said. “And learning it did not belong to me.”

Naomi nodded. She understood more than Hannah said.

A shout went up near the center of the tent. “On three,” a man called. “One. Two. Three.”

A pole shifted. Canvas sagged in a controlled fall. Hands guided it down. Rope slid through palms with a quick, frictional sound.

Hannah stepped back. “We should help,” she said.

Naomi nodded and followed her.

They moved to the edge of the tent and took hold of a section of canvas as it came down. It felt rough and warm. They folded it in wide sections, pressing it flat as they went.

Sweat ran down Naomi's spine. Her arms ached. She kept folding. She kept pressing. The work felt like a prayer in motion.

Caleb came close with Logan, both carrying a bundle of rope. Caleb set it down and started coiling. His fingers moved fast. His jaw tightened with focus.

Naomi folded another section. She kept her eyes on her hands. Her heart beat hard anyway. She wanted to look at him. She also wanted to finish the job without turning it into a moment.

Caleb spoke without looking up. "Naomi."

She froze for half a second. Then she kept folding. "Yes," she said.

"I spoke to my uncle," he said.

Naomi's mouth went dry. "Okay," she said.

Caleb's hands kept moving. "I spoke to Pastor Whitaker," he said.

Naomi's fingers pressed the canvas edge. "Okay," she said again.

Caleb lifted his eyes then. They met hers. His face looked open. He did not look like he wanted to impress her. He looked like he wanted to be true.

"I will speak to your father today," he said.

Naomi nodded. "He is ready," she said.

Caleb's throat moved. "I respect him," he said. "I do not want to make this hard for your family."

Naomi held his gaze for a brief second. "Thank you," she said.

Caleb nodded once. He went back to coiling rope. The moment ended, small and clean. It left a mark anyway.

The tent came down in pieces. The high white roof turned into long folded strips of canvas. The poles stacked like lumber. The ropes coiled and boxed. The stage broke down into panels carried by men with careful steps.

By noon the field looked bare. It held lines in the grass and scuffed dirt where stakes had sunk in. It held the faint smell of sweat, dust, and trampled clover. The church stood unchanged, steeple bright against a blue sky.

Naomi stood near the edge of the field and drank more water. Her shoulders burned. Her hands felt raw. She felt satisfied.

Caleb walked across the grass toward the church. He had changed shirts. His hair looked damp. He carried his guitar case in one hand. He stopped near Pastor Whitaker, who stood by the prayer garden gate.

Pastor Whitaker spoke to him quietly. Caleb listened. He nodded. He looked toward the cemetery for a second. Then he looked back.

Pastor Whitaker put a hand on Caleb's shoulder, brief and firm. Then he let him go.

Caleb turned and walked toward the parking area, where Naomi's father stood with two other men near a truck. Naomi's father held a folded tarp in his hands. He looked tired. He looked like a man who had given his week to God and did not resent it.

Naomi stayed where she was. She did not want to hover near the conversation. She also did not want to hide.

She walked toward the prayer garden and sat on the low stone border near the lavender. The plants looked dusty from summer heat. They still held a faint scent when her knee brushed them.

From where she sat, she could see Caleb reach Naomi's father. Caleb stopped at a respectful distance. He stood straight. He did not stuff his hands into his pockets. He spoke. Naomi could not hear words. She saw tone in posture.

Naomi's father looked at him, then nodded once. He said something. Caleb listened. Caleb nodded. Then Caleb spoke again, longer. Naomi's father's mouth tightened, then eased. He glanced toward Naomi, quick. Naomi looked down at her hands. She did not want her father to feel watched.

A few minutes passed. Then Naomi's father reached out and shook Caleb's hand. He held it for a moment longer than a polite shake. Caleb's shoulders dropped a fraction. He looked like he had been holding tension in his spine and finally set it down.

Naomi's chest eased. She let out a slow breath.

Hannah walked into the prayer garden with empty water bottles in a bag. She paused when she saw Naomi sitting. She sat beside her, careful of her sore knees.

"You saw," Hannah said.

Naomi nodded. "Yes," she said.

Hannah watched the field. "It is a good thing," she said. "It is a serious thing."

Naomi blinked, throat tight. "Yes," she said.

Hannah leaned back on her hands. "Do you remember when revival used to feel like it belonged to the older folks?" she asked.

Naomi gave a small smile. "Yes," she said. "I remember being little and falling asleep on the metal chair."

Hannah nodded. "Now look," she said.

Naomi watched teens gather near the church steps, helping carry the last boxes inside. They moved with energy even after hard work. They looked sunburned and happy. They looked like they had been part of something bigger than a week.

Naomi's eyes stung. "It feels like God did what people prayed for," she said.

Hannah's voice went soft. "He did," she said. "He is still doing it."

Naomi swallowed. "I feel scared to hope," she admitted.

Hannah turned her head. "Because of Caleb," she said.

Naomi nodded. "Because of what comes after," she said.

Hannah's gaze held hers. "Hope does not mean you control what happens," she said. "Hope means you trust God with what happens."

Naomi's throat tightened more. She looked away toward the church. "I want to trust Him," she said.

Hannah's hand touched Naomi's forearm. "You do," she said. "You are learning what it feels like when trust costs something."

Naomi nodded. She wiped at the corner of her eye with the heel of her palm, quick. Sweat and tears mixed. She did not care.

Caleb and Naomi's father now stood closer to the truck. Naomi's father spoke with his hands, a small motion. Caleb listened with attention. Then Naomi's father clapped Caleb's shoulder once. It looked like permission. It also looked like a warning. Naomi knew her father. He gave a young man room to step forward. He kept his eyes open.

Caleb turned away and walked toward the church steps. Naomi's father watched him go, then turned back to his friends and lifted the tarp again, as if the conversation had ended and work remained.

Caleb crossed the grass toward the prayer garden. His pace stayed steady. His face looked set in a calm line.

Naomi stood before he reached her. Hannah rose too, bag in hand. Hannah gave Naomi a look that held both support and distance. Then she walked out of the garden without a word.

Caleb stopped in front of Naomi. The lavender scent sat between them. Bees moved slowly in the heat.

Caleb's voice came low. "He gave me permission to call you," he said.

Naomi nodded. Her throat felt tight. "He did," she said.

Caleb watched her for a moment. "He told me to honor you," he said.

Naomi gave a small laugh that sounded close to a sob. "He tells everyone that," she said.

Caleb's mouth moved in a faint smile. "He told me to honor God first," he said. "He asked me what I believe God is asking of me."

Naomi's chest tightened again. "What did you tell him?" she asked.

Caleb looked down for a second. Then he looked back at her. "I told him I do not have all my answers," he said. "But I know I do not want to live my life chasing what looks impressive while I ignore what God is doing in front of me."

Naomi's eyes stung again. "What is God doing in front of you?" she asked.

Caleb's face softened. "He is waking people up," he said. "He is waking me up too."

Naomi nodded. She looked toward the field. The tent had stood there all week. Now it was gone. The space looked strange without it. Like a room with furniture moved out.

Caleb followed her gaze. “It feels empty,” he said.

Naomi’s voice came quiet. “It does,” she said. “But I feel full.”

Caleb turned back to her. He hesitated. “I do not want to make promises I cannot keep,” he said.

Naomi held his eyes. “Then do not,” she said.

Caleb nodded. “I will call you,” he said. “I will pray for you. I will keep talking to Pastor Whitaker. I will ask God to guide me. I will not pretend I have it settled.”

Naomi’s heart beat hard. His words did not sound like a speech. They sounded like a plan he meant to live.

Naomi took a slow breath. “I will do the same,” she said. “I will not wait for fear to decide for me.”

Caleb’s eyes lowered to her hands, then back to her face. “Your father asked me a question,” he said.

Naomi’s eyebrows lifted. “What?” she asked.

Caleb’s mouth tightened. “He asked me if I see you as part of my calling,” he said.

Naomi’s stomach flipped. Heat rose to her cheeks. “And,” she whispered.

Caleb held her gaze. “I told him I do not know what my calling looks like yet,” he said. “But I know I do not want to chase a life where faith stays on the side.”

Naomi nodded slowly. She waited.

Caleb's voice came softer. "I told him when I sang this week, I felt something settle in me," he said. "I felt God tell me to pay attention. I told him when I prayed behind the tent, I heard Scripture come back to me."

Naomi swallowed. "Which Scripture?" she asked.

Caleb looked toward the church, then back. "Joel," he said. "I heard it in my mind. 'I will pour out my Spirit on all people.'"

A chill moved down her arms. She had heard Pastor Whitaker read it on the second night. She remembered the hush after. She remembered the way the youth had leaned in.

Caleb continued, voice low. "I told him I do not want to miss what God pours out because I am busy planning my own life," he said.

Naomi's eyes filled. She blinked and held it in. "I have been scared of staying," she said. "I have been scared it means I never go anywhere."

Caleb nodded. "I have been scared of staying because I thought it meant I failed," he said.

Naomi looked at him. The honesty hit her like a quiet bell.

Caleb took a breath. "Pastor Whitaker told me something," he said.

Naomi waited.

"He said 'Let no one despise you for your youth,'" Caleb said, his voice gentle. "He said Paul wrote it to Timothy. He said being young does not mean being careless. He said God calls young hearts too. He said to set an example in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity."

Naomi's throat tightened. "1 Timothy," she said.

Caleb nodded. “Yes,” he said. “He told me to live as I mean it.”

Naomi stared at the dirt by her shoe. A small pebble sat there. She nudged it with her toe. It rolled and stopped. Her voice came quiet. “I want to live as I mean it,” she said.

Caleb’s face softened more. “Then we will,” he said.

Naomi lifted her eyes. “Together?” she asked.

Caleb hesitated. He did not rush the word. He chose it. “Together,” he said.

Naomi nodded. She did not move closer. She did not need to. The air between them felt full enough.

A screen door creaked at the fellowship hall. Someone called for help moving tables. Caleb glanced that way.

“I should go,” he said.

Naomi nodded. “Go,” she said.

Caleb shifted his guitar case in his hand. “I will call you tonight,” he said. “After dinner. If your parents do not mind.”

Naomi gave a small smile. “They will mind,” she said, then corrected herself in a softer voice. “They will not mind. Not if it is decent.”

Caleb’s mouth curved. “It will be decent,” he said.

Naomi’s smile stayed. “Okay,” she said.

Caleb looked like he wanted to say more. He did not. He nodded once, then walked toward the fellowship hall at a steady pace.

Naomi watched him go. The sun flashed on the guitar case hardware. He disappeared inside.

Naomi sat back down on the stone border for a moment. The lavender brushed her calf. The church stood bright and still. The field lay bare.

The week had ended. The work continued.

That afternoon, Maple Ridge moved into its quiet rhythm again. People went home and showered. Farmers returned to fields. Kids rode bikes down Main Street with red faces and wet hair. The bakery opened late and sold revival leftovers: cookies shaped like little tents with white icing.

Naomi helped her mother fold laundry. The towels smelled like clean soap and sun. Her father fixed a loose hinge on the back door without being asked. He moved with a calm energy, as if he wanted to anchor the house after a week of late nights.

When evening came, Naomi sat on the back porch steps with her phone in her hand. The sky held the slow fade of summer dusk. Crickets started in the grass. A dog barked far down the road.

Her father sat in a chair nearby with a glass of iced tea. He did not speak much. He watched the road as if he could see the shape of Naomi's future in the distance.

Her mother stood in the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on a towel, listening without looking like she listened.

Naomi's phone buzzed. Caleb's name lit the screen.

Naomi's heart kicked hard. She looked at her parents. "It buzzed," she said softly, holding the phone up for her father to see. He glanced at the screen, his expression steady but kind, and gave a small nod. "Answer it," he said. Her mother smiled faintly from the doorway, then stepped back inside, giving Naomi space.

Naomi swiped the screen, her voice tentative but warm. "Hello?"

Caleb's voice came through, steady like the summer dusk. "Hey, Naomi. I hope this is okay."

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "It is okay," she said. "I am glad you called."

There was a pause, not awkward, but thoughtful. Caleb's voice softened. "I wanted to say thank you. For today. For… everything this week."

Naomi glanced at her father, who had turned his attention back to the road, giving her privacy without leaving. "You do not have to thank me," she said. "It was all of us together. And it was not just us; it was God moving."

Caleb's voice carried a quiet smile. "I know. But still, thank you. You have been… steady. Like an anchor this week."

Naomi's throat tightened, and for a moment, she could not respond. The words settled into her heart, heavy and bright all at once.

"You have been steady too," she said finally. "Even when you were figuring things out."

Caleb chuckled softly. "I am still figuring things out," he admitted.

Naomi smiled. "Me too," she said.

The crickets grew louder in the grass, filling the silent spaces between their words. Caleb spoke again, his tone thoughtful. "I told Pastor Whitaker I feel like God's doing something in me. Like He is asking me to stop running from the quiet places."

Naomi nodded, though he could not see it. "The quiet places are where He speaks the loudest, I think," she said.

Caleb was silent for a moment. Then his voice came gently. "I want to keep hearing Him. And… I want to keep talking to you."

Naomi's heart swelled. She glanced at her father again, feeling his quiet presence like a steadying hand. "I'd like that," she said softly.

Caleb's voice held a hint of hope, like sunrise breaking. "Okay. Then I will call again. Soon."

"Okay," Naomi said.

The call ended, and Naomi lowered the phone slowly, her heart full of something she could not quite name. She looked at her father, who turned his gaze from the road to her.

"Good conversation?" he asked, his tone light but knowing.

Naomi nodded, her voice quiet. "It was."

Her father smiled, lifting his glass of iced tea. "Good," he said.

The evening deepened, the stars beginning to show. Naomi sat on the steps a little longer, the quiet rhythm of Maple Ridge wrapping around her like a soft hymn. Somewhere down the road, Caleb's voice lingered in her mind, steady and sure.

And in the stillness, Naomi felt the weight of hope, no longer something to fear, but something to trust. Something to carry forward.

Also in the Maple Ridge Redemption Series

Book 1: Beneath These Weathered Beams

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 1

Hannah Whitaker is determined to save the Maple Ridge Community Church, the cornerstone of her family's legacy, as its very foundations threaten to give way. When Eli Brooks, a gifted architect with a past he cannot outrun, returns to town, their shared mission ignites a connection neither expected. As old wounds resurface and daunting repairs loom, can they find the courage to rebuild both the church and their guarded hearts, or will the weight of history prove too great to bear?

Book 2: The Carpenter's Return

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 2

Caleb Carter returns to Maple Ridge, burdened by the past he thought he left behind, only to find Anna Blake, the widowed florist, guarding her heart amidst blooms and memories. As Caleb’s determination collides with Anna’s guarded spirit, their shared history and unresolved pain threaten to keep them apart. Can Caleb and Anna overcome the shadows of their past and find the courage to embrace a love that has quietly endured, or will they let fear dictate their futures?

Book 3: The Song in the Steeple

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 3

In the heart of Maple Ridge, Caleb Mercer returns, haunted by his past and seeking redemption through the music that once set his spirit free. Lydia Bennett, the town's beloved schoolteacher, finds herself amidst a sea of exhaustion, her once vibrant voice now a whisper. As their paths converge in the sanctuary's choir loft, can they find harmony in their brokenness, or will the shadows of regret and fatigue drown out the song of hope that beckons them forward?

Book 4: The Measure of Mercy

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 4

Rebecca Hale has tirelessly rebuilt Maple Ridge's church, but the arrival of Nathan Cole, the banker whose decisions nearly doomed it, brings tension she can't ignore. As they work side by side, Nathan's precise calculations clash with Rebecca's heartfelt devotion, challenging her faith and reopening wounds she'd rather forget. Can Nathan prove he's more than the sum of his past mistakes, and will Rebecca find the strength to forgive, or are some divides too deep to bridge?

Book 5: When the Harvest Comes

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 5

Daniel Mercer’s dreams for his family farm are wilting under the relentless drought gripping Maple Ridge, leaving his faith as parched as the soil beneath his feet. When Rachel Moreno returns with scientific solutions and unresolved emotions, their clashing approaches threaten to deepen old wounds. As the community gathers for the annual harvest revival, will they find the courage to trust each other and rediscover hope in the most barren of seasons?

Book 6: A Light on Maple Street

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 6

Micah Turner has spent years quietly proving himself in Maple Ridge, a man defined by steady work and redemption rather than his troubled past. When Naomi Whitaker arrives, she sees beyond the whispers, drawn to the man Micah has become and stirring emotions he thought buried. As they navigate the tender complexities of new beginnings under the watchful eyes of the town, can they overcome their fears and embrace the hope of a future together?

Book 7: The Letters in the Attic

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 7

When Lydia Bennett discovers a cache of forgotten letters hidden in the attic of Maple Ridge’s church, she feels the weight of history echoing her own untold stories. Dr. Samuel Park, a history professor visiting to organize the archives, unearths more than just old documents; he encounters personal truths that

challenge his carefully controlled life. As the letters reveal tales of faith and redemption, will Lydia and Samuel find the courage to embrace their own legacies and the healing that awaits them?

Book 8: The Firehouse Promise

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 8

When volunteer firefighter Gabriel Reyes rescues Evan Miller from a twisted wreck one stormy night, he doesn't expect his life to collide so intensely with Dr. Alana Brooks, the new ER nurse who's made an art of emotional distance. As they navigate the unpredictable crises of Maple Ridge, Gabriel wrestles with the fear of failing those he swore to protect, while Alana grapples with her own reluctance to open her heart. Can they find a way to trust in each other when their pasts threaten to extinguish the fragile flame of hope?

Book 9: Steady as the River

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 9

Grace Park has dedicated her life to holding together the pieces of her world in Maple Ridge, but when the riverbank threatens the safety of the community church, she faces a challenge that reaches beyond the physical. Daniel Chen, a disciplined contractor with a reputation for solving visible problems, arrives to repair the crumbling wall, unaware that he may also mend Grace's guarded heart. As they work side by side, will Grace find the courage to trust not just in the repairs, but in the possibility of a life rebuilt with hope and quiet faith?

Book 10: The Builder's Oath

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 10

Nathan Mercer knows the weight of every beam and bolt, but when it comes to matters of faith, the ground beneath him feels unsteady. As Miriam Carter returns to Maple Ridge, weary from years overseas with stories of hope and hardship, she challenges Nathan's tightly held doubts. As they work side by side on a church project, will their shared labor build a bridge strong enough to span their differences, or will the ghosts of their pasts tear it down before it can stand?

Book 11: After the Storm

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 11

When a fierce storm ravages Maple Ridge, Rebecca Morgan faces the daunting task of rebuilding not only her community but also confronting the man who left her heart in ruins, Caleb Foster. As they navigate the wreckage, long-buried feelings and unresolved past decisions resurface, challenging their ability to forgive and move forward. Will the storm that tore through their town become the catalyst for healing, or will it remind them of what can never be repaired?

Book 12: The Winter Wedding

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 12

Thomas Hale has spent years in the quiet rhythms of Maple Ridge, content to let memories linger like the snow that blankets the town. But when Eleanor Brooks, with her gentle warmth and steadfast grace, steps into his world, he begins to feel the stirrings of a love he thought had faded with the past. Can they overcome the shadows of their losses and find a shared future in a winter that promises new beginnings?

Book 13: Where the Bells Ring

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 13

Claire Whitmore has devoted her life to preserving the cherished history of Maple Ridge Community Church, but when Andrew Morales arrives with plans for expansion, his vision threatens everything she holds dear. As they clash over blueprints and sacred spaces, neither can ignore the growing tension between tradition and progress, or the sparks between them. Can they find a way to honor the past while building a future together, or will their differences tear them apart?

Book 14: The Prayer Quilt

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 14

Eleanor Hayes, draped in years of quiet grief, finds solace in the vibrant threads of the prayer quilts she stitches for Maple Ridge's community. Walter Bennett, a steadfast figure in the town, carries his own silent sorrow, hidden beneath layers of everyday

service. When their paths intertwine over a new quilt project, will the warmth of their shared stitches mend the fractures of their hearts and offer them a second chance at love?

Book 15: The Road Back Home

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 15

When Jonathan Hale returns to Maple Ridge with nothing but faded dreams and regrets, he doesn't expect to find the same town he once fled still carrying memories of his past. Sarah Bennett, his childhood friend, has built a life in the town he abandoned, guarding her heart against old wounds and unspoken dreams. As their paths cross once more, can they find healing and hope in the heart of a community that remembers their every misstep, or will the shadows of what once was keep them apart forever?

Book 16: *Under the Summer Revival* ★

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 16

Caleb Monroe thought he had left the heartaches of Maple Ridge behind, but when the revival tents rise and Naomi Reyes stands at the heart of the preparations, he finds himself drawn back to the love he never truly forgot. Naomi, torn between her deep roots in the town and the dreams that call her beyond its borders, never expected Caleb's return to stir such emotions. As melodies of worship float across the summer evenings, can they overcome past regrets to find a future woven together by faith and newfound hope?

Book 17: The Pastor's Promise

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 17

Hannah Beth has dedicated her life to Maple Ridge Community Church, but with new leaders emerging and her own uncertainties growing, she wonders if her season of service is ending. Eli, her steadfast ministry partner, believes in her even when she doubts herself. As unexpected challenges test their faith and the church’s future, can they embrace the promise of redemption waiting just beyond the storm, or will fear and uncertainty keep them from a new beginning?

Book 18: The Steeple and the Stars

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 18

Benjamin Carter has always found comfort in the steady rhythms of Maple Ridge, but when a missions conference stirs a calling he thought he'd buried, his life suddenly feels fragile. Esther Kim thrives in quiet service and predictable days, yet Benjamin's newfound restlessness threatens the careful balance she's worked to protect. As unexpected feelings deepen and God's plans unfold, will they have the courage to follow His path, even if it leads them far from everything they've ever known?

Book 19: The House That Faith Built

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 19

Isaiah Navarro never expected that returning to Maple Ridge to restore a dilapidated house would mean confronting Hannah Whitaker, the woman whose heartache once mirrored his own. Years of separation have done little to heal the wounds of their shared past, and now, as they work side by side to provide refuge for a family in need, old feelings resurface amidst the sawdust and paint. Can they rebuild a future together, or will the shadows of the past prove too strong to overcome?

Book 20: The Wedding Beneath the Steeple

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 20

Hannah Whitaker has dedicated her life to preserving her father's legacy and the beloved Maple Ridge Community Church. But when Eli Brooks, the man who once broke her heart and trust, returns to help with a wedding that holds the town's hopes, old wounds and new emotions threaten to unravel the careful balance she's maintained. As memories clash with the present, will Hannah find the strength to forgive and embrace the possibility of a love rebuilt on faith and forgiveness?

About the Author

Katherine Knells is the author of the Maple Ridge Redemption series, a collection of clean Christian romance novels set in a small rural town where faith, community, and love intertwine across twenty interconnected stories.

Katherine writes about ordinary people navigating extraordinary seasons of grace — prodigals finding their way home, couples learning to trust again, and a town that discovers, time and again, that God is faithful in the quiet places.

When she is not writing, Katherine enjoys long walks, strong coffee, and the kind of conversations that last well past sunset. She believes every broken beam can be rebuilt, and every fractured heart can be restored.

She hopes that somewhere in the pages of Maple Ridge, you have found a little of your own story — and a reminder that redemption is never too late.