Stillwater

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

The train slowed to a soft, metallic sigh as it slid into the tiny station nestled between pine trees and rusted iron signs. Sage Harper stepped off with a single duffel bag and the quiet urgency of someone who didn’t want to be noticed.

The air in the river town was cooler than expected. Clean, earthy. It smelled like moss and woodsmoke and something else Sage couldn’t name. Maybe it was relief. Maybe it was possibility.

They had come to Stillwater looking for quiet—after years spent holding the broken pieces of other people’s lives together, only to watch them shatter anyway. In the city, everyone wanted fast healing. Quick solutions. Sage had grown weary of being asked for bandages when people really needed to bleed. To be held. To be seen.

Stillwater was supposed to be an escape. A reset. A place to just breathe.

The Airbnb was a converted guesthouse at the edge of the woods. No television. No clocks. Just a record player and a shelf of well-loved books. Sage unpacked slowly, placing a small quartz stone on the windowsill. They lit a stick of sandalwood incense, whispered a quiet thank-you to the space, and sat cross-legged on the floor until their heartbeat matched the rhythm of the trees.

Reading sample — continued

Outside, the river sang.

It didn’t take long to learn the town’s pulse. There was Lina’s bookshop, tucked between a candle shop and a herbal apothecary. There was the café with the handwritten menu and a barista who asked you how your soul was doing instead of how you liked your coffee.

And then there was the Circle.

Flyers appeared on cork boards and telephone poles: “The Circle – Come as you are. No fixing. Just feeling. Thursday at 7. Lina’s.”

Sage was intrigued.

They went that Thursday and found eight people sitting in a loose circle, cross-legged on rugs and cushions, sipping tea.

No introductions. No titles.

Just presence.

Lina, with her silver hair and rings on every finger, lit a candle and said softly, “The world is loud. Let this be the quiet. Speak if you need. Or don’t. We’ll hold the space.”

Sage didn’t speak that night. But they listened. A man spoke about losing his sister to cancer. A woman said her husband hadn’t touched her in months. Someone else just cried and said nothing.