

PROFIT SEEKS PURPOSE

By Harland Meriam

Chapter 1

WHEN MOTION ISN'T MEANING

The Victory That Should've Filled Him—But Left Him Empty

"There is no greater emptiness than success without fulfillment."

— Tony Robbins

MISSING SOMETHING

Victory wasn't supposed to feel like this.

Beneath the glow of a single lamp on Caleb's desk sat the unopened folder labeled "*Echelon 417*."

Two hundred forty apartments. Caleb's biggest purchase ever—the property he'd watched and waited for for years. He imagined what it would feel like to own something like this—big, beautiful, positioned near Sanford, Florida, on State Road 417, the 417 loop around Orlando. The property other investors would point to and say, "That guy's got it made."

The Caleb Anderson Properties team was already on site at the property, moving confidently through the takeover plans. After months of preparation, they were probably celebrating as they took ownership.

But Caleb wasn't celebrating.

He sat alone in his dark home office, listening to the quiet tick of the clock edging toward dawn. A thin ache spread through him—an ache he didn't have language for.

Caleb reached for his notebook, flipped to a blank page, and wrote two words:

What now?

He underlined them twice. The pen left a small groove in the paper.

The coffee on his desk had gone cold, but he sipped it anyway.

Bitter. Ugh... Fitting.

Caleb loved the chase—the problems to solve, the freedom to build something from nothing. He'd poured everything into his work—his time, his energy, his identity. He'd built a strong

team, 1,400 apartments, a six-figure income, an oceanfront home in New Smyrna Beach, Florida, and a family he adored.

On paper, his life looked perfect.

But the darkness in the room told another story.

Ping.

His phone lit up.

A text from Nathan—a former pastor turned multifamily investor—steady and grounded, a good friend.

Nathan wrote: *Good talking yesterday at Khleif's conference. Let's connect this morning. I have something for you—something important.*

Caleb remembered his first Rod Khleif event seven years earlier—the day his entrepreneurial spark had ignited.

But he couldn't find the fire this morning.

He wrote one more line beneath the first:

There's got to be more.

BACK WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Without waking his wife, Sarah, and his daughter, Sophia, Caleb showered, dressed, and returned to the kitchen, where he filled his travel mug with a fresh stream of coffee.

Then he stepped into the dawn.

The sky over New Smyrna Beach glowed faint pink as he climbed into his truck.

He drove west on State Route 44 in silence—no jazz, no news, just road.

Thoughts rose uninvited:

- Sarah's voice—*"Sophia kept asking if you'd look up from your work... she finally stopped waiting."*

- The emptiness after closing the biggest deal of his life.

- And Nathan's question from months earlier—*"Why do you do what you do?"*

Seven years ago, after the first Rod Khleif conference, Caleb bought an apartment complex—eight tired units off US-1 in Daytona. Everything had grown from there—the properties, the income, the reputation.

But not the why.

With each passing mile on the highway, something tightened inside him.

Billboards flashed by—lawyers with polished grins, sales pitches promising more than they'd deliver.

Caleb eased into the express lane, wanting distance from it all.

By the time he arrived at the Orange County Convention Center, south of downtown Orlando, the sun was up, and so was the noise.

Inside, ambition buzzed—laughter, name tags, quick handshakes, people hustling for the next deal. Caleb had moved through rooms like this so many times. The excitement used to energize him. Today, it barely touched him.

He spotted Nathan, and they shook hands.

Wasting no time, Nathan said, "Caleb, I want you to join the mastermind I lead."

Caleb blinked.

What? A mastermind? No way!

The word "mastermind" brought back memories of slick, hype-driven retreats. Caleb had done those before. He didn't need more noise.

Caleb replied to the invitation, "Thanks, Nathan, but I'm jammed."

Before Nathan could speak again, the ballroom doors opened. The crowd surged forward, pulling them inside. Caleb and Nathan found seats near an aisle.

A deep voice boomed through the sound system.

"Ladies and gentlemen... please welcome your leader in multifamily investing, Rod Khleif."

Khleif took the stage, smiling widely, radiating energy.

But he didn't start with profits.

He started with people. Stories of tenants. On the huge screens flashed pictures of kids with new backpacks, families playing games on the lawn, and community picnics with balloons and hot dogs, staff engaging with residents.

Not cap rates. Not debt-coverage ratios. Lives touched.

Caleb sat up.

In seven years of owning apartments, he had never once considered doing these things at his properties.

Khleif transitioned into his own story—the crash of 2008, bankruptcy, the pain that forced him to rethink everything, rebuilding. His business was born of scars, not slogans.

Something in Caleb softened.

When the lights came up, Nathan nudged him. "Lunch plans?"

Caleb nodded. "What do you have in mind?"

"The sandwich shop next door," Nathan said.

SANDWICHES AND A SECOND LOOK

They stepped out of the convention center into the bright Florida sun. Caleb drew a long breath. The edge he'd carried since dawn wasn't gone—but it wasn't cutting as sharply.

Oak pollen dusted the patio of the sandwich shop next door. Caleb and Nathan found a metal table and chairs beneath a sprawling live oak.

As they sat, Nathan noticed someone scanning the area.

Liz Hernandez appeared—sharp-eyed, confident, founder of a significant property management firm. The people in the Orlando market listened when Liz spoke—not because she was loud, but because she was almost always right.

"Liz!" Nathan called, inviting her over.

She pulled up a chair. A brief, awkward silence followed.

The server arrived, took their orders, and left three sweating glasses of ice water behind.

Caleb broke the silence. "Look, I've done the mastermind thing. It's just expensive networking."

Nathan unfolded his napkin slowly. He glanced at Liz.

She picked up where he couldn't.

"This one's different," Liz said. "No celebrities. No hype. Just six of us. Tuesdays, 6 a.m. on Zoom. We meet because none of us can figure out this work-life thing alone."

She took a sip of water. "And we start with prayer."

The word landed like ice.

"Prayer?" Caleb barked. "Seriously?"

"Problem?" Liz asked gently.

The veins in Caleb's neck bulged. "Yeah, it's a problem. I'm not religious. Nathan knows. I walked away years ago. I'm not looking to join a prayer group. No offense. It's just not for me."

Liz didn't flinch. She continued, "Three years ago, if someone had invited me to a group that prayed, I... I would've run the other way."

She picked up her water glass, took another sip, and continued, "I was burning out. My home life was crumbling. I thought success meant controlling everything."

Caleb folded his arms. "So... prayer fixed your life?" he asked. His tone was sarcastic, sharper than he had intended.

"No," Liz said calmly. "But I finally quit pretending I was headed in the right direction."

She leaned forward. "I was making a lot of money. Still am. But this group helped me see there was more to success than the grind. It reminded me that asking for help isn't a weakness—it's a strength."

Caleb stared at her, unconvinced. "And the God part?"

Faith had been part of Caleb's early life, but during college, ambition grew louder, life got in the way, and church slipped into the background. And then there was that minister at his father's funeral stumbling over his dad's name. *That did it.*

His jaw tightened.

Liz noticed the way Caleb's face looked, hesitated, then spoke. "When I joined, I was uncomfortable with all of it—God, prayer, faith. But what I found in Nathan's group wasn't pressure or rules. It was... freedom. Slowly, I started seeing purpose again. A deeper one."

Caleb's gaze dropped to his sandwich, then looked up at Liz. "And this group did that?"

"It gave me a place to ask the questions I was too afraid to ask alone," Liz said. "And to hear questions I didn't even know I needed to ask. It helped me become who I wanted to be... not who I thought I should be."

Nathan nodded and added, "We toss our business and personal mess onto the table every week. There's nowhere else in my life I can do that. What keeps me showing up is... trust—knowing someone's got my back."

Back inside the ballroom after the lunch break, Rod Khleif launched into charts, graphs, and the best practices for apartment investing. Numbers filled the screens. People scribbled notes.

Caleb wrote a few lines in his notebook, too, though it was Liz's words that kept talking to him.

He wasn't sure whether he was more repelled or drawn to the mastermind.

As the conference ended, Nathan turned to him. "I've got to run," he said, pressing a folded note into Caleb's hand.

QUESTIONS AT THE SINK

When Caleb reached his truck in the parking garage, he sat for a long moment, hands still on the wheel, thinking about Liz's honesty.

Then he called Sarah.

She picked up on the third ring. "Hey. How was the conference?"

"Fine," he said. "Google Maps says I'll be home about 6:45."

"Tell Sophia I'm sorry I missed kicking the ball with her. We'll make plans this weekend."

A pause.

"Caleb... what's going on?" Sarah asked.

"Nothing. I love you. We can talk after supper."

He hung up before she could ask anything else.

Caleb pulled into the driveway at 6:50—only five minutes late. He hoped it might count for something.

At dinner, he sat at the table and even laughed at Sophia's jokes. Conversation hummed around him, warm and familiar, but his eyes kept drifting to the window as if something outside could explain what was happening inside him.

Afterward, Sophia headed upstairs for her bath. Caleb and Sarah slipped into their evening routine—Sarah at the sink, Caleb with a dish towel.

But that night, routine wasn't cutting it.

He dried the same plate three times. His shoulders hunched, as though the plate was heavier than it was.

Sarah set down the sponge. "What's going on?"

Caleb hesitated. "Nathan asked me to join a mastermind group."

She waited.

"I'm stretched too thin," he offered as his excuse.

Sarah took a deep breath and then said, "Caleb... can I ask you something?"

She gathered her thoughts.

"You've been pushing so hard. And honestly...I don't know if you're happy. I'm not sure any of us are happy. You were at dinner tonight, but you weren't *with* us. I'm afraid we're drifting."

He blinked, not really hearing what she said. "I don't get it, Sarah. This Echelon 417 closing should feel...bigger, like a win. But it doesn't. It just...sits there."

He shook his head. "Something's off."

"So are we, Caleb," Sarah said softly, yet firmly. "Something is off between us. Sophia and I need one evening where you actually see us. Really see us."

"I see you," Caleb snapped—too fast, too defensive. His eyes fell immediately.

Sarah's voice trembled. "You don't get it, do you? Your daughter and I need you."

Color rose in her cheeks.

Caleb opened his mouth, but nothing came.

"I'm worried about you... about us. Work takes up so much of your time. If every deal vanished tomorrow... what would be left of you?"

The question startled him.

Before he could answer, footsteps pounded down the stairs.

Sophia burst in, hair damp, books clutched to her chest.

"Story time!" she announced.

Caleb seized the interruption like a life raft. "I think it's my night," he blurted. He ruffled her wet hair and gathered the books from her arms.

As he and Sophia headed upstairs, Caleb felt Sarah's eyes on him—seeing him, hoping he would finally see something too.

CIRCLING THE REAL QUESTION

After reading stories and making weekend plans, Caleb lingered beside Sophia's bed until her breathing slowed into sleep.

Downstairs, his office greeted him with the familiar scent of leather and paper.

The Echelon 417 folder still sat on his desk where he'd left it—unopened, waiting.

He paced the room.

Sarah's question echoed: *What would be left of you?*

Moonlight splashed across the bookshelves, catching a photo of Sarah and Sophia on the beach—Sarah squinting into the sun, Sophia's braids flying in the wind. A life he loved. A life he wasn't fully living.

Behind him, a voice broke the silence. Sarah stepped into the room.

"Walking in circles again, aren't you?"

He jumped slightly. "Uh. Just thinking."

"It's not thinking—it's circling. Like a lion pacing the same ground."

She stepped farther into the room. "Is it Echelon 417?" she asked, nodding toward the folder. "Or something else?"

Caleb hesitated. Then honesty slipped out. "Something else. Nathan's group. They... pray."

Sarah raised an eyebrow and offered a small smile. "So... business with a soul?"

"Religion turns me off. You and Nathan know that. And I'm busy. I don't have time for anything else—especially something with *that* in it."

Sarah crossed her arms gently. "Maybe this isn't about time, Caleb. Maybe it's about something bigger."

She moved closer. "You build so well. But something's weighing on you. You come home, but sometimes you're not *here*. I miss you, the you who you used to be, the you who used to laugh, who used to share."

Sarah rested her hand on his arm.

She drew a slow breath, her voice almost a whisper.

"If this group might help... try it."

"And could you be here with us, too? I really miss you. Not the provider. Not the fixer. *You*."

Her words landed—quiet, heavy, true.

She lingered in the doorway for a moment, looking back at him, then slipped away upstairs.

Caleb sank into his reading chair.

Something has to change. It can't keep going like this.

He knew it.

But...

He reached into his pocket and pulled out Nathan's folded note:

It read: Tuesday, 6:00 a.m. Zoom link upon confirmation.

He stared at Nathan's handwriting. Reread it. Sat with it.

A small voice came from the doorway: "Dad?"

Sophia stood there in mint-green pajamas patterned with Disney characters.

"You're crying."

He opened his arms. Sophia climbed onto his lap, her hair smelling of strawberry shampoo.

"I just don't want to miss what matters," he whispered.

Sophia pressed her hand against his cheek.

"Like when I play all the right piano notes but forget to hear the music?"

He let out a surprised breath—almost a laugh.

"How'd you get so wise?"

"Mom says I get it from you."

He carried her upstairs, tucked her in, and kissed her forehead.

Back in his office, he opened his phone and typed:

Thanks for the invite, Nathan, but I'm maxed out.

Before sending it, he paused, heard Sarah's voice again, felt Sophia's hand on his cheek, and noticed the tightness in his chest.

He deleted the first sentence and typed one word instead.

Yes.

He sent his text this time. Decision made.

The "faith" part still unsettled him—felt like foreign soil. But Liz and Nathan had painted a picture of something he wasn't ready to ignore.

Upstairs, Sarah was probably reading. Sophia dreaming, her favorite bear beside her.

All the right notes, he thought. But *no music*.

When had that become his life?

Everything was technically correct—yet silent where it mattered most.

His eyes returned to the Echelon 417 folder.

Earlier, the question had been: *What now?*

A better one surfaced:

Who now?

Caleb turned off the light in his office and climbed the stairs in the dark.

He thought he was agreeing to a meeting.

He didn't realize he had just turned a key that would open doors he didn't yet know existed.