

Chapter One

Some people are born with trouble. Others find it, or it finds them somewhere down the road. We all shake hands with hard times. We all stare adversity in the face sooner or later. But there's always hope. There's one Hope in the world for all of us.

—GLORIA CAMPBELL CLARK

Andy

Wednesday, April 12

EVEN WITH ONLY one good eye, Andy Clark had always noticed things others tended to miss.

Crouching like a baseball catcher, he picked up the thin, glossy rectangle of paper that had floated to the floor. Seventy-five cents off Hamburger Helper would be a shame to lose.

Ahead of him in line, a squat older woman, who had a gray ducktail curl at the base of her head, fastened her wallet and turned toward the exit as Andy stood.

“Ma’am.”

She looked over her left shoulder but didn’t turn around.

Andy extended his arm with the paper pinched between his thumb and pointer finger. “You dropped your coupon.”

The shake of the woman’s head was more of a shudder than a response. Without a word, she dropped her wallet into an oversized pocketbook that sat in the child seat of the buggy and folded her arms across the handle. Her shoulders rounded, she pushed the buggy toward the door with waddling steps.

Andy turned. Nobody stood behind him in the twelve-items-or-less line, so he tucked the coupon into his shirt pocket.

“I’m sorry. Don’t pay her any mind.” Joyce, the cashier, waved a large jar of applesauce across the scanner. “That one’s always a bit of a grump.”

“A regular, huh?” He’d seen the woman around, of course. There weren’t many unfamiliar people in Flatsboro.

Joyce nodded, deep lines on either side of her thin, pleasant face marking off a kind smile in parentheses. Her warmth contrasted with the customer’s demeanor.

“It’s okay. Really.” He gave a nod that he hoped was reassuring.

Some people, like Joyce, were accepting, welcoming even. Maybe the majority—no, definitely the majority in Flatsboro. But others, not so much. It was just the way of things, and since Jesus died for both kinds of people, he had to love them both too.

The cashier scanned the last can, punched a button on the register, and announced the total. Andy paid and returned the wallet to his back pocket.

“See you tomorrow, Andy.” Joyce handed him the receipt, then punctuated the space between them with a pointed finger. “Oh, wait. I’m off tomorrow. I guess I’ll see you Friday.”

“Alrighty then.” Andy gathered his purchases from the end of the checkout counter. “Enjoy your day off. I’ll see you Friday.” The ever-present folds that blanketed one corner of his mouth pulled against the smile he offered her in return.

With a weighty plastic bag in each hand, Andy stepped outside, where sunshine streamed from the sky. *Springtime*. Could there be anything better? He paused in the sun’s tender warmth, letting the rays penetrate down to his soul and speak the language of all good things, until the sound of automatic doors at his back prompted him to start walking again.

He could make the trip with his eyes closed if he wanted. Almost every day for twelve years, except on Sundays and when it was pouring rain, he’d had the same midmorning routine—walk the one-mile route to Spangler’s Grocery as soon as the nature program on PBS was over.

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There, he'd buy whatever he and Wendell needed for that day, then head back to unit 1A at Maple Ridge Apartment Homes in the center of town. Along the way, he took in every sight and sound of his hometown, some so familiar they felt as close as his own skin—children on the playground at the elementary school, the water tower looming over the town like a giant metal guardian, the two men who sat outside the gas station as if it were their job to keep that sun-faded wooden bench from running away.

Andy wove through a maze of parked cars in his diagonal path across the grocery store parking lot until he reached the curb and the wide grassy patch that led to the sidewalk. The scuffed-up toes of his tennis shoes parted blades of grass as he trudged across the lawn.

He paused. Situated on the border between earth and concrete, a small anthill teemed with life. The insects, each no bigger than a sesame seed, poured out of the ground in a swarm like lava from a miniature volcano, a cohesive force. He stood captivated. Brownish-black specks moved with singularity of purpose, insignificant alone but mighty together, guided by a knowledge gifted to them by their Maker.

A long, narrow shadow crossed the ants, and Andy raised his head. A young woman wearing workout clothes and a high ponytail approached from the sidewalk, pushing a child in a stroller.

He mumbled a greeting and turned his back to the pair. The child—a boy, he thought—was at least two, and children that age simply couldn't understand why Andy looked the way he did. Some grown-ups didn't understand either, but he never wanted to frighten the little ones. It broke his heart to make them cry.

As soon as the woman and child had passed, Andy stepped onto the sidewalk and headed toward home.

The street stretched ahead, ruler straight and lined by small, evenly spaced businesses and crape myrtles beginning to bud. Above him, a northern mockingbird dive-bombed an iridescent-winged crow, cutting a mostly gray streak through the blue sky. The aerialists entertained Andy from the gas station all the way down the street to the florist, much to the dismay of the crow, he supposed. The scene was a perfect example of why Andy chose to walk to the store every day. Just for the

sake of seeing God's creation and experiencing this town that he loved. The simple things brought him joy.

When Andy reached the wooden box affixed to a post in front of the beauty parlor, he stopped.

A patch of flowers—the bright yellow kind that always popped up around Easter time—surrounded the post, their stems curved under the weight of the blooms. Above the glass door of the red box were the words *Flatsboro Free Pantry*. Tiny feathers of white paint hugged the edges of the blocky letters where it had bled under the stencil.

With a satisfied grin, he opened the pantry door. The canned vegetables he'd left yesterday were already gone.

From the bag in his left hand, he drew out goods one by one and placed them on the top shelf, careful to face the labels to the front. Tomorrow he'd add boxed pasta. And canned peaches. It had been a couple of days since he'd stocked fruit.

The slightest hint of pride tingled in Andy's chest—just enough to make him feel good but not sinful. He always made sure to stock a nice variety of foods, not just what was on sale. And someone in the community needed those groceries. The empty space on the shelf proved it.

A light breeze moved alongside him as Andy continued down the main thoroughfare of town, the rumbling of engines creating the soundtrack for his walk. Moms in minivans and men in work trucks passed by. A beat-up blue hatchback heading toward him slowed, and the two teenage boys in the front seat pointed in his direction, their bodies convulsing with laughter. Andy shook his head and kept walking. Such a shame. Their parents must not have taught them any better. How could they know if nobody taught them?

When he stopped to cross at the intersection—the two-thirds mark on his walk—Andy turned his good eye toward traffic on his left and nodded in the direction of a patrol car sitting at the red light. Sunlight glinted off the windshield of the cruiser, obscuring the deputy's face, but a black-sleeved arm popped from the driver's window and waved as Andy crossed. He smiled. Ever since the young man had joined the department four years ago, Deputy Henry's rounds had been almost as predictable as Andy's own.

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Across the street, Andy neared the Shoppes on the Corner and chuckled, as he always did, at the large marquee out front. Only one tenant of the building, which was converted years ago from a general store, was a retail shop, and the irony of the space being occupied by a bridal boutique, a family counselor, and a divorce attorney wasn't lost on Andy.

A familiar figure—a man matching Andy's five-foot-ten-inch height with a similar medium-sized frame—crossed the rocking-chair porch, dropping envelopes in the black boxes to the right of each of the three doors. The mailman turned and smiled as he descended the steps at the center of the porch.

"Hey, friend." Paul's words reached across the parking lot from the bottom step.

"Hey, Paul."

"Say, buddy . . ." A familiar lilt tinged Paul's voice. He gestured toward Andy's bags as he came closer. "You know the offer still stands, right? The wagon's just sitting in my garage collecting dust." He rubbed his sparse goatee. "And Paulie's got his license now, so I doubt he's gonna need it again." Paul flashed a grin as he pulled a stack of envelopes from the bag on his hip.

Paul's son was already old enough to drive? That didn't seem possible. Where had the time gone? No doubt the child he'd seen in the stroller earlier would be jogging alongside his mother before she knew it. From his years of observation, that was how it worked. Children grew up in the blink of an eye.

"I appreciate it, but I'm good." Andy raised a bag to demonstrate. "Someone might need that wagon someday more than I do." At the rate time moved, Paul Junior's kids would use it soon.

Paul nodded, but Andy's answer wouldn't keep him from asking again next time. It was their thing. A constant. Familiar. Just like Andy's television program and his daily walk to the store. Just like Deputy Henry's patrol and the way Wendell asked every day whether there were any cookies as soon as Andy got home, even though he knew Andy bought cookies only on Fridays. The mailman's offer of a wagon to help carry groceries and Andy's polite rejection fit into Andy's day like his feet fit into his well-worn shoes.

Andy said goodbye to Paul as he left the sidewalk and started across the yard of the grand brick church set back from the street—the church where he and Wendell sat in the small balcony every Sunday, up where neither of them could be a distraction. The shortcut not only saved him a few steps but also saved him from walking uphill longer. Whoever had named Flatsboro, North Carolina, also had an appreciation for irony.

A thin shred of green plastic Easter grass hitched a ride on the tip of Andy's shoe, then disembarked as he reached the walkway in front of the church. He picked up the lone strand and dropped it into one of the bags to throw it away later.

The church lawn had been overrun last Saturday afternoon by kids carrying colorful woven baskets and plastic buckets loaded with eggs and candy they'd plucked out of the grass. He'd watched for a while from the back patio of his apartment before setting up his own egg hunt—a tradition he and his roommate shared each year.

Though Wendell was only four years younger than Andy, he squealed with delight every time he discovered one of the hardboiled eggs Andy had set out in their section of backyard. "They look like golf balls, Andy," Wendell always said, a wide grin taking up most of his face. He loved to watch golf on television, for reasons Andy didn't quite understand, so Andy always left the eggs undyed.

As he reached the long brick porch of the church, a slightly open front door caught his attention. No telling who might have left it that way or why, but for sure, nobody wanted a sanctuary full of flies for Wednesday evening Bible study. Or worse, mosquitoes.

Nobody went in or came out of the building, so after a moment, Andy scaled the three wide steps to close the door. He stopped short, near a tall white porch column, and trained his ear. *Crying*. Someone inside the church was crying. He glanced around, then stepped closer. The faint sound was unmistakable—the mournful lament of a broken-hearted soul.

Andy took another step forward and shifted the grocery bags to one hand. Then with his fingers curled around the smooth wood, he pulled the door back just enough to peek inside. The double doors from the lobby into the sanctuary were open too, giving him a view all the way to

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the wide platform that held the pulpit and choir chairs, and to the baptismal built into the wall beneath a large cross.

Each bulb atop the sanctuary's chandeliers was shadowy gray, but a soft glow poured through the opaque windows, enough to illuminate the desperate scene. Three rows from the front, on the left side in the center section, a blond-haired woman sat alone with her head leaning on the pew in front of her, her body shaking with sobs.

What should he do? He couldn't walk away without asking whether she needed help. But neither could he barge in and risk embarrassing the woman. Her crying was not an outpouring born of a spiritual experience. Hers were tears of anguish—the kind that, if they didn't come out, might drown a person from the inside.

Her sorrow became loud, guttural weeping as she raised her head, directing her grief toward the pulpit.

Between the options of approaching the woman or leaving, the needle on Andy's decision meter was stuck solidly in the middle, just as his feet seemed stuck to the porch.

Andy inched the door open farther. The longer he stood there, the more wrong it felt. Like he was a voyeur, though not a willful one. He checked his watch. Mrs. Garcia was nice enough to stay with Wendell once a day to give Andy a little break. Soon she'd start to wonder where he was, and if he made her miss a minute of her soap opera, she would not be happy. She watched it only in her own apartment.

His decision meter pulled sharply to one side. Andy couldn't leave without at least showing this person his concern. Sometimes all a person needed was to know someone cared. But should he call to her from where he stood, or should he approach first and then speak up?

The wail of a nearby siren shook Andy from his thoughts. By the sound of it, an emergency vehicle had pulled out of the fire station around the corner. Within seconds, the siren's decibels doubled.

A cascade of hair flew over the woman's shoulder as she spun and faced him. Her eyes went wide.

The surprise was mutual.

Della Rose McCaffrey. He squinted and held his breath. Flatsboro High School Homecoming Queen 2003 and the envy of every girl in

town back then. Sudden emotion thumped him in the chest. How long had it been since he'd seen Della Rose? Not since she'd become Mrs. Miller, at least. Last he'd heard, she and Wade lived over in the next county, in a big house on the golf course. What on earth was she doing here? Like this?

Reading the horrified expression on her tear-streaked face, Andy looked down and shouted over the emergency vehicle that had just turned from Chestnut onto Church Street. "I . . . I . . . um . . . are you okay, Della Rose?"

Andy chanced a look upward again. Della Rose's mouth moved, but if she said anything, it didn't reach his ears.

"I was just walking home from the store and I saw the door . . . it was . . . the door was open, and I—"

The siren's assault on his ears made Andy wince.

Della Rose stood and reached into the pew, picking up a bright-pink pocketbook, and moved the strap over her head to rest on the opposite shoulder. Long fingernails, the same shade as the pocketbook, passed beneath her eyes as she wiped her face.

There was a subtle change in the sound of the siren, and Andy cast a glance over his right shoulder. The first-responder truck was just past the church and had slowed, like it would turn soon.

When he looked at Della Rose again, frozen in the middle of the sanctuary, the rapid rise and fall of her chest and the desperate look in her eyes made his heart ache. She took two more steps down the aisle, a shaky hand outstretched, as if searching for a support that wasn't there.

Andy scrambled for something else to say, anything to say. Before the words came, the offensive siren stopped as abruptly as it had begun, unsettling him with its sudden stillness, its eerie, pervasive quiet. A knot formed in Andy's stomach. It was obvious why the siren had stopped. The vehicle had reached the scene of the emergency.

In slow motion, he turned to his right, in the direction of Maple Ridge. Panic sucked the air from his chest, and the grocery bags he'd forgotten he was holding slipped from his fingers. Cans of food clattered against the bricks. Andy took one more fleeting look at Della Rose, then he spun and sprinted down the church steps, catching his heel on

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the last one and stumbling at least two yards before he found his footing. A drumbeat pulse thundered in his head as he tromped across the lawn and into the parking lot, keeping his good eye fixed on the EMS truck parked in front of his apartment. Two paramedics hopped from the vehicle and hurried toward the building, each with a large black bag strapped on their shoulders. With the angle at which the building sat, he couldn't be sure they'd entered his apartment.

A football-field length stretched before Andy. In his adrenaline-fueled sprint, the giant mass on his face—the burden he'd carried all his life—bounced and pulled at the skin around it, making his forehead ache. Sweat formed in the crevices of the bulging tumors and stung beneath the folds of flesh. It didn't matter. He had to get to Wendell.

Please be okay. Please be okay.

He entered the cemetery, his feet pounding on the soft parcel of ground that separated the church and the apartments. Even in his panic, remorse struck. He knew better than to disrespect a graveyard, but there wasn't time to even consider whose grave he might be stepping on.

As he reached the border of the properties, his neighbor's cries from inside his apartment joined the sound of another siren heading toward them. "No, no, no." The wailing was high-pitched and haunting, like the siren.

His windpipe shrank to the diameter of a drinking straw. Air flowed down, and an invisible force pulled it back up. His lungs couldn't be doing it. They'd stopped working.

Heartache slowed Andy's pace a fraction. He knew. Before he even went inside, he knew. Mrs. Garcia's growing cries as Andy rounded the corner of the building confirmed that Wendell was gone. There would be no asking for cookies today. His best friend was dead. He already knew.

Chapter Two

Della Rose

Thursday, April 13

SHE COULDN'T GET over the sight of him standing there in the doorway of the church, staring at her. More than a full day later, the memory replayed over and over. Why on earth was she still thinking about that, with everything else on her mind? With all the harder-than-hard, life-changing, gut-wrenching things she was dealing with? It made no sense. Then again, nothing made much sense right now.

Della Rose folded a nightgown and placed it alongside three others in the bag on her bed. She pinched the thin straps of the last one—a silky pink teddy—and held it high, the sunlight from the window piercing the tissue-thin fabric. She shook her head. The garment wasn't practical in the least, and not at all comfortable, but it was the kind of thing Wade always bought for her, said he liked her to wear. She looked it over one more time, clenched her jaw, and gave a resolute nod. Then she carried the gown to the corner of the room and let it slide unceremoniously from her fingers and into the wastebasket. The satisfaction that followed was fleeting. The discarded garment was a reminder that Wade had thrown away their marriage with just as much ease. Sorrow rose from deep within her and came out in a long, slow breath.

There wasn't time to wallow in the hurt. Get out today and grieve tomorrow—that was the plan. Pretending she and Harper were just going on vacation helped. A Caribbean cruise or back to Cabo. But instead of picturing sandy beaches and clear water as she resumed packing, her mind jumped back to yesterday and the run-in with Andy Clark. Again!

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Why was seeing him after all this time bothering her so much? She couldn't care less that he'd caught her crying.

The bump-covered mass that protruded from half his face hadn't shaken her either. At least not much. That was always a bit unsettling, but no. She couldn't forget the look in his eyes. *Eye*. That one eye that wasn't swallowed up by his condition had disturbed her in a way she couldn't figure out.

Della Rose placed the rest of the clothes she'd picked out, plus a pile of underthings, in the oversized quilted duffel on the bed and zipped the bag closed. With a slow pivot on the lush carpet, she took in every detail of her bedroom, down to the lavender scent of the candle on the nightstand. The gold button-tufted headboard perfectly matched the fringe on the drape tiebacks, and the shade of blue in the duvet cover trimmed in gold and ivory was the same as the accent pillow in the chair by the window. The room was an absolute oasis. Pristine. As if she'd staged every piece of furniture, the bedding, all the pillows, and every framed painting on the wall for a magazine photo shoot. She'd worked hard to make it look that way. Now she was leaving it.

"Mom, does the place we're going to have a swimming pool?" Harper came in holding a navy bathing suit with white polka dots and a red bow in the middle.

The hope that shined in her daughter's eyes served as a reminder. There were more important things in life than pretty bedrooms.

She sighed. "No, baby. There's no pool. But it's not quite pool season yet anyway." She tried to keep her voice chipper.

Harper's face sank, but she stopped short of whining—an amazing show of self-restraint for a seven-year-old whose entire life was being turned upside down. Somehow Harper had learned to take it easy on Della Rose these last few hellish weeks.

"But hey, there's a neighborhood pool close by. I went there when I was a little girl." Della Rose stroked her daughter's cheek. "We don't have to live there to join. I'll sign us up before it opens at the end of next month." She'd do it for Harper, even though it meant having to pass her childhood home to get there.

Harper brightened the tiniest bit. “And I can pack my princess dress, right?”

“Of course, honey. Just hurry. We need to get going soon.”

Harper made a quarter turn toward the door but stopped as the old orange tabby sauntered into the room. Whiskers walked between them, then circled Della Rose’s feet in silent protest. The cat was smart enough to know that luggage meant leaving. Harper looked up at Della Rose, then back to Whiskers with a pained expression.

Della Rose took a deep breath. “I know it’s going to be hard, baby, but . . . but Daddy will take care of Whiskers. I know he will.” Wade Miller was a low-down lying, cheating snake in the grass, but he wasn’t a total monster.

Harper sniffed. “What about when he goes away?”

“When Daddy goes out of town for work”—or whatever else it was that he did—“he’ll get the neighbor to come feed the kitty. And one day soon, either when we’re able to come back here or when we find a place that allows pets, we’ll be with Whiskers again.”

She and Harper had debated about Whiskers more than any other question—even more than why they had to leave their home and why Mommy and Daddy didn’t love each other anymore—and Harper had finally understood. The cat had to stay at the house in Ariston.

“I don’t want to go, Mommy.”

Della Rose’s stomach tightened, and her chest ached. “I know, sweetie. I don’t either. But it’s what’s best for us right now.”

“I can come back to get more stuff, right? Or Daddy will bring it to us if we leave something important?”

“Yes, Harper. We only need a few things for now. I already have two suitcases for you in the car. We’ll get everything else later.”

When later, Della Rose had no idea. Tomorrow, next week, next month. When the divorce proceedings were over, they’d come back for good if things went the way she expected. Then Wade would be the one who’d have to leave. But she couldn’t spend another night here with him, and since he refused to go, they had to. Wade thought she wasn’t strong enough to leave, but she’d show him. She and her daughter would wake up tomorrow in a tiny little apartment thirty

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minutes away in her old hometown, and it wouldn't matter what they had with them as long as they were together and Wade wasn't anywhere nearby.

She pulled Harper close and held her there—the miniature version of her—stroking her fine, silky yellow hair, and for a moment Della Rose almost believed what she'd told her daughter over and over—that things were going to be okay. But it was all a lie.

A glance at her smartwatch made Della Rose pull away. The digital numbers over a scene of the London skyline meant Wade would be home in a little less than half an hour. They needed to move fast. She bent down at eye level with Harper. "I'll come help in a minute. Just hurry and finish, baby."

Harper bounded out, and the cat followed. Della Rose turned her attention back to packing. Makeup and toiletries next. Then the cash from the safe. At least part of it. She'd already secretly opened a new bank account and moved money from the joint account just in case he tried to cut her off. But a bigger safety net wouldn't hurt.

She set the duffel bag near the door, then headed to the bathroom and dropped bottles, brushes, and compacts into travel bags—one for her morning routine and another for the evening facial. Just the essentials. In the mirror, a slight puffiness edged by a dark tinge under each eye reminded her to pack concealer.

Tonight, after Harper had a chance to see the apartment, they'd go out to dinner. Maybe a special place, to make themselves feel better. The Japanese steakhouse in the city might be good. Harper loved to watch the flames shoot up from the grill, and she clapped whenever the chef flipped an egg into his tall hat.

Thoughts of food turned her mind to the plastic bags that had littered the porch just outside the church door. A can of Vienna sausages had escaped one of the bags, found the ramp on the far side of the brick porch, and come to rest on the sidewalk. Andy's groceries.

It was more than possible he lived in the apartments next to the church, considering how he'd dropped everything and ran toward the building. Why had the first responders been there? Hopefully, not for some junkie who'd overdosed. The property manager had assured her

it was a decent place, like most of Flatsboro—one of the quietest little towns in the whole Piedmont region of North Carolina.

After she had signed the lease yesterday, she'd gone to the church—a place she'd never imagined visiting again—to talk about their after-school program for Harper, just in case. Though she didn't foresee needing a job, Della Rose had to plan for every ugly, unpleasant possibility. What she hadn't planned was her detour to the sanctuary or her breakdown near the altar where she and Wade had said their meaningless marriage vows seventeen years ago, when she'd been barely twenty. And she certainly hadn't planned for Andy Clark to see it.

She zipped both bags and found a third one to hold the remaining makeup, cursing the memory of Andy that she couldn't shake. But *why*? One more replay held the answer. The expression on his face—distorted as it was—hadn't been sympathy. That would have been bad enough. But it had been a shade different, more like empathy. She slapped the marble countertop, making her palm sting. Empathy. That was why seeing him bothered her so much, though it made her a terrible person. Had she really sunk so low as to receive *empathy* from a poor soul like Andy Clark?

Andy was no stranger, of course. She'd sat next to him through all of third grade, after the school had figured out he didn't need to be in the *special* class and put him in a regular classroom. There was nothing wrong with Andy's mind. He was so smart that she'd copied his biology exam when they were juniors in high school—he was especially good at animal classification, her downfall—and he never knew because she'd sat on the side on which he had no peripheral vision.

Come to think of it, Andy had sat near her their ninth-grade year, too, in English class. He was probably there the day she'd met slick-talking Mr. Wade Miller. If only she could go back and warn her fourteen-year-old self. But no. She wouldn't do it. Harper made the heartache worth it. She was the only thing that did.

The low rumble of the garage door opening made Della Rose freeze. *He's home. Early.* She ran to the closet and, with trembling fingers, punched the code for the wall safe. A six-inch-high stack of bills lay inside, along with the pearl necklace he'd given her for their tenth an-

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niversary and a few baubles. She bypassed the jewelry, grabbed half the cash—her fair share—then rushed to the duffel by the door to shove the money into a side pocket.

“Harper,” she called. She swallowed hard and choked down the panic. “Grab your bag, honey. We’re leaving now.”

Wade had never hit her before, but he wouldn’t take her leaving well.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. She should have left an hour ago. Maybe if she hadn’t got caught up thinking about her perfectly decorated bedroom or obsessing over seeing Andy. *Stupid, stupid.*

Headed out of the bedroom with the duffel bag on one shoulder and her purse and a tote bag on the other, keys in hand, Della Rose ran straight into Wade’s chest, and she stumbled back. His broad-shouldered frame filled the doorway.

He sneered. At her or at the sight of her luggage? Maybe both.

After a long, silent face-off, he spoke. “What are you doing?” His voice was tundra cold.

“You know good and well what I’m doing, Wade.” She halved the distance between them, then second-guessed the move, but she willed herself to stay put. “I’m doing exactly what I told you I was going to do. The night I found out about Leslie.” The taste of the woman’s name on her tongue made her want to vomit. “This has been coming for weeks, so don’t play dumb now.”

One side of his mouth turned up in an infuriating look of amusement as he loosened his tie. “*Today?* I didn’t know you were leaving today, honey. Where are you gonna go?”

“I’ll let you know whenever you need to know.”

The amused look left. “I have a right to know where you’re taking my daughter.”

“You can call my cell and talk to Harper anytime.” She steadied her voice. “Just because you cheated on me doesn’t mean I’m going to deny her a relationship with her father.”

Wade leaned against the doorframe and squared his jaw. “You’re making a big mistake, Della Rose.” The words were slow and deliberate. “Big mistake. I am not a loser. I am *not* going to lose my family. Do you understand me?”

Of course, the senior vice president of sales for Archer Pharmaceuticals wouldn't relinquish control easily. It wasn't in his nature. But this wasn't his decision to make.

"You're not losing anything, Wade. You gave us away. Or should I say, you traded us? Yeah, that's what it is, a trade. And a pretty lousy one, if you ask me. A wife of seventeen years and a daughter—a family—for what? A good time with a younger woman who doesn't have the start of crow's feet yet or maybe has a firmer stomach from not having carried your baby? And one who probably won't care a thing about you when you stop buying her expensive presents."

Wade straightened, bringing his right arm high across his chest with the back of his hand toward her. But he stopped short of swinging.

A wicked satisfaction filled his eyes, as if making her flinch was some kind of sick game.

"I've given you all this." His raised hand came down and swept wide, like a television spokesmodel's, pointing out the material splendor their life together had afforded.

She found herself looking around the room, which was about the same size as the entire apartment in Flatsboro. *No, Della Rose. You have to be strong.* She had to think of the example she was setting for her daughter by refusing to be a doormat.

"It's not worth it, Wade." She squared her shoulders and tried to sound more confident than she felt. "A nice house isn't worth my dignity."

"Oh, spare me." A derisive chuckle leaked from his thin lips, lighting rage inside Della Rose's belly.

Harper appeared behind Wade, then she squeezed her little body by him and through the doorway. Wearing her school backpack that was nearly bursting at the seams, she came to stand beside Della Rose. "I'm ready, Mommy."

Harper's presence gave Della Rose the extra dose of courage she needed. She'd been so careful not to bad-mouth Wade to their daughter, though the truth had eaten at her heart like termites in a lumberyard. They'd kept most of their arguments quiet for her sake, but Harper had to have heard them just now. She had to sense the tension in the room,

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and her instinct was to stand with her mother. Her sweet, brave girl stood tall by her side.

Wade's expression softened as he looked down at their daughter. Della Rose almost felt sorry for him in that moment. Almost. He *did* love his child. Just not enough to honor the vows he'd made to her mother, and that wasn't the kind of example she wanted for Harper. Love was supposed to be loyal.

The moment ended when Wade's eyes locked with hers—steely gray eyes she'd fallen for as a teenager, eyes that could still make her weak in the knees if she let them. Della Rose tore her gaze away, but his silent message rang loud in her soul.

He would concede. He'd let her leave. But only for now. If Wade Miller wanted something, he didn't give up. Their fight had just begun.