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Before the Storm

Written by Diane Chamberlain

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Before
the Storm

*Diane
Chamberlain*



Laurel

They took my baby from me when he was only ten hours old.

Jamie named him Andrew after his father, because it seemed fitting. We tried the name out once or twice to see how it felt in our mouths. Andrew. Andy. Then, suddenly, he was gone. I'd forgotten to count his fingers or note the color of his hair. What sort of mother forgets those things?

I fought to get him back, the way a drowning person fights for air.

A full year passed before I held him in my arms again. Finally, I could breathe, and I knew I would never, ever, let him go.

Chapter One

Andy

WHEN I WALKED BACK INTO MY FRIEND Emily's church, I saw the pretty girl right away. She'd smiled and said "hey" to me earlier when we were in the youth building, and I'd been looking for her ever since. Somebody'd pushed all the long church seats out of the way so kids could dance, and the girl was in the middle of the floor dancing fast with my friend Keith, who could dance cooler than anybody. I stared at the girl like nobody else was in the church, even when Emily came up to me and said, "Where were you? This is a lock-in. That means you stay right here all night." I saw that her eyebrows were shaped like pale check marks. That meant she was mad.

I pointed to the pretty girl. "Who's that?"

“How should I know?” Emily poked her glasses higher up her nose. “I don’t know every single solitary person here.”

The girl had on a floaty short skirt and she had long legs that flew over the floor when she danced. Her blond hair was in those cool things America-African people wear that I could never remember the name of. Lots of them all over her head in stripes.

I walked past some kids playing cards on the floor and straight over to the girl. I stopped four shoe lengths away, which Mom always said was close enough. I used to get too close to people and made them squirmy. They need their personal space, Mom said. But even standing that far away, I could see her long eyelashes. They made me think of baby bird feathers. I saw a baby bird close once. It fell out of the nest in our yard and Maggie climbed the ladder to put it back. I wanted to reach over and touch the girl’s feather lashes, but knew that was not an appropriate thing.

Keith suddenly stopped dancing with her. He looked right at me. “What d’you want, little rich boy?” he asked.

I looked at the girl. Her eyes were blue beneath the feathers. I felt words come into my mind and then into my throat, and once they got that far, I could never stop them.

“I love you,” I said.

Her eyes opened wide and her lips made a pink O. She laughed. I laughed, too. Sometimes people laugh *at* me and sometimes they laugh *with* me, and I hoped this was one of the laughing-with-me times.

The girl didn’t say anything, but Keith put his hands on his hips. “You go find somebody else to love, little rich boy.” I wondered how come he kept calling me little rich boy instead of Andy.

I shook my head. "I love *her*."

Keith walked between me and the girl. He was so close to me, I felt the squirmies Mom told me about. I had to look up at him which made my neck hurt. "Don't you know about personal space?" I asked.

"Look," he said. "She's sixteen. You're a puny fourteen."

"Fifteen," I said. "I'm just small for my age."

"Why're you acting like you're fourteen then?" He laughed and his teeth reminded me of the big white gum pieces Maggie liked. I hated them because they burned my tongue when I bit them.

"Leave him alone," the pretty girl said. "Just ignore him and he'll go away."

"Don't it creep you out?" Keith asked her. "The way he's staring at you?"

The girl put out an arm and used it like a stick to move Keith away. Then she talked right to me.

"You better go away, honey," she said. "You don't want to get hurt."

How could I get hurt? I wasn't in a dangerous place or doing a dangerous thing, like rock climbing, which I wanted to do but Mom said no.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Go home to your fancy-ass house on the water," Keith said.

"If I tell you my name, will you go away?" the girl asked.

"Okay," I said, because I liked that we were making a deal.

"My name's Layla," she said.

Layla. That was a new name. I liked it. "It's pretty," I said. "My name's Andy."

"Nice to meet you, Andy," she said. "So, now you know my name and you can go."

I nodded, because I had to hold up my end of the deal. "Goodbye," I said as I started to turn around.

"*Retard.*" Keith almost whispered it, but I had very good hearing and that word pushed my start button.

I turned back to him, my fists already flying. I punched his stomach and I punched his chin, and he must have punched me too because of all the bruises I found later, but I didn't feel a thing. I kept at him, my head bent low like a bull, forgetting I'm only five feet tall and he was way taller. When I was mad, I got strong like nobody's business. People yelled and clapped and things, but the noise was a buzz in my head. I couldn't tell you the words they said. Just bzzzzzzzzzz, getting louder the more I punched.

I punched until somebody grabbed my arms from behind, and a man with glasses grabbed Keith and pulled us apart. I kicked my feet trying to get at him. I wasn't finished.

"What an asshole!" Keith twisted his body away from the man with the glasses, but he didn't come any closer. His face was red like he had sunburn.

"He doesn't know any better," said the man holding me. "You should. Now you get out of here."

"Why me?" Keith jerked his chin toward me. "He started it! Everybody always cuts him slack."

The man spoke quietly in my ear. "If I let go of you, are you going to behave?"

I nodded and then realized I was crying and everybody was watching me except for Keith and Layla and the man with glasses, who were walking toward the back of the church. The man let go of my arms and handed me a white piece of cloth from his pocket. I wiped my eyes. I hoped Layla hadn't seen

me crying. The man was in front of me now and I saw that he was old with gray hair in a ponytail. He held my shoulders and looked me over like I was something to buy in a store. "You okay, Andy?"

I didn't know how he knew my name, but I nodded.

"You go back over there with Emily and let the adults handle Keith." He turned me in Emily's direction and made me walk a few steps with his arm around me. "We'll deal with him, okay?" He let go of my shoulders.

I said "okay" and kept walking toward Emily, who was standing by the baptism pool thing.

"I thought you was gonna kill him!" she said.

Me and Emily were in the same special reading and math classes two days a week. I'd known her almost my whole life, and she was my best friend. People said she was funny looking because she had white hair and one of her eyes didn't look at you and she had a scar on her lip from an operation when she was a baby, but I thought she was pretty. Mom said I saw the whole world through the eyes of love. Next to Mom and Maggie, I loved Emily best. But she wasn't my girlfriend. Definitely not.

"What did the girl say?" Emily asked me.

I wiped my eyes again. I didn't care if Emily knew I was crying. She'd seen me cry plenty of times. When I put the cloth in my pocket, I noticed her red T-shirt was on inside out. She used to always wear her clothes inside out because she couldn't stand the way the seam part felt on her skin, but she'd gotten better. She also couldn't stand when people touched her. Our teacher never touched her but once we had a substitute and she put a hand on Emily's shoulder and Emily went ballistic. She cried so much she barfed on her desk.

"Your shirt's inside out," I said.

"I know. What did the girl say?"

"That her name's Layla." I looked over at where Layla was still talking to the man with the glasses. Keith was gone, and I stared at Layla. Just looking at her made my body feel funny. It was like the time I had to take medicine for a cold and couldn't sleep all night long. I felt like bugs were crawling inside my muscles. Mom promised me that was impossible, but it still felt that way.

"Did she say anything else?" Emily asked.

Before I could answer, a really loud, deep, rumbling noise, like thunder, filled my ears. Everyone stopped and looked around like someone had said Freeze! I thought maybe it was a tsunami because we were so close to the beach. I was really afraid of tsunamis. I saw one on TV. They swallowed up people. Sometimes I'd stare out my bedroom window and watch the water in the sound, looking for the big wave that would swallow me up. I wanted to get out of the church and run, but nobody moved.

Like magic, the stained-glass windows lit up. I saw Mary and baby Jesus and angels and a half-bald man in a long dress holding a bird on his hand. The window colors were on everybody's face and Emily's hair looked like a rainbow.

"Fire!" someone yelled from the other end of the church, and then a bunch of people started yelling, "Fire! Fire!" Everyone screamed, running past me and Emily, pushing us all over the place.

I didn't see any fire, so me and Emily just stood there getting pushed around, waiting for an adult to tell us what to do. I was pretty sure then that there wasn't a tsunami. That made me

feel better, even though somebody's elbow knocked into my side and somebody else stepped on my toes. Emily backed up against the wall so nobody could touch her as they rushed past. I looked where Layla had been talking with the man, but she was gone.

"The doors are blocked by fire!" someone shouted.

I looked at Emily. "Where's your mom?" I had to yell because it was so noisy. Emily's mother was one of the adults at the lock-in, which was the only reason Mom let me go.

"I don't know." Emily bit the side of her finger the way she did when she was nervous.

"Don't bite yourself." I pulled her hand away from her face and she glared at me with her good eye.

All of a sudden I smelled the fire. It crackled like a bonfire on the beach. Emily pointed to the ceiling where curlicues of smoke swirled around the beams.

"We got to hide!" she said.

I shook my head. Mom told me you can't hide from a fire. You had to escape. I had a special ladder under my bed I could put out the window to climb down, but there were no special ladders in the church that I could see.

Everything was moving very fast. Some boys lifted up one of the long church seats. They counted one two three and ran toward the big window that had the half-bald man on it. The long seat hit the man, breaking the window into a zillion pieces, and then I saw the fire outside. It was a bigger fire than I'd ever seen in my life. Like a monster, it rushed through the window and swallowed the boys and the long seat in one big gulp. The boys screamed, and they ran around with fire coming off them.

I shouted as loud as I could, "Stop! Drop! Roll!"

Emily looked amazed to hear me tell the boys what to do. I didn't think the boys heard me, but then some of them *did* stop, drop and roll, so maybe they did. They were still burning, and the air in the church had filled up with so much smoke, I couldn't see the altar anymore.

Emily started coughing. "Mama!" she croaked.

I was coughing, too, and I knew me and Emily were in trouble. I couldn't see her mother anywhere, and the other adults were screaming their heads off just like the kids. I was thinking, thinking, thinking. Mom always told me, in an emergency, use your head. This was my first real emergency ever.

Emily suddenly grabbed my arm. "We got to hide!" she said again. She had to be really scared because she'd never touched me before on purpose.

I knew she was wrong about hiding, but now the floor was on fire, the flames coming toward us.

"Think!" I said out loud, though I was only talking to myself. I hit the side of my head with my hand. "Brain, you gotta kick in!"

Emily pressed her face against my shoulder, whimpering like a puppy, and the fire rose around us like a forest of golden trees.

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