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The Good Father

Written by Diane Chamberlain

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The Good Father

*Diane
Chamberlain*

GETS TO THE **HEART** OF THE STORY



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Also by Diane Chamberlain

The Lost Daughter

The Bay at Midnight

Before the Storm

Secrets She Left Behind

The Lies We Told

Breaking the Silence

The Midwife's Confession

Brass Ring

The Shadow Wife

Keeper of the Light

For Nolan and Garrett, Claire and Olivia,
who are so lucky to have very good fathers!

1 Travis

Raleigh, North Carolina

October 2011

IT WAS NINE-FORTY WHEN I WOKE UP IN THE back of the van. Nine-forty! What if Erin had already left the coffee shop by the time we got there? *What if she's not there?* That sentence kept running through my head as I got Bella up and moving. She'd had a dream about her stuffed lamb and wanted to tell me the whole thing, but all I could think about while I changed her into the cleanest clothes I had for her was, *What if she's not there?*

On the phone yesterday, Roy had told me I was making the smart choice. "You can get rich doing this, bro," he'd said.

I thought of the gold watch he wore. The red Mustang he drove. "I don't care about getting rich," I'd answered. "I just want enough money to keep me and Bella fed till

I get a real job.” I felt smarmy just talking to him on the phone. The dude was a total cretin.

“You feel that way right now,” he said, “but wait till you get a taste of easy money.”

“Look,” I said, “just tell me where to meet you and when.”

“We’ll come to you about eleven tomorrow night,” he said. “You still hanging in the same place? The lot by the Target?”

“Yeah.”

“Just make sure you’ve got enough gas to get us to the Virginia border and back,” he said, and then he was gone from the line.

So, now I’d have all day to freak out about my decision and, if things went according to my plan, I wouldn’t have Bella with me. My chest tightened at the thought. I wasn’t sure I could do this. Erin was a good woman, though. I could tell. Plus, Bella knew her and liked her. The only thing was, she might be *too* good. The kind of person who’d call the cops on me. I just had to trust her not to.

My hands shook as I scratched a note on the back of a gas receipt and stuck it in Bella’s pants pocket, sneaking it in there so Bella wouldn’t ask me about it or try to pull it out. I remembered the tremor in my mother’s hands. “A fine tremor,” the doctor had called it and he’d said it was harmless and barely noticeable. Mine wasn’t so fine. I could hardly help Bella get her socks straight on her feet.

“I’m hungry, Daddy,” she said as she pulled on her shoes.

I opened some Tic Tacs and shook a couple into her

hand. "We'll get breakfast in a minute," I said, as she popped the Tic Tacs into her mouth.

I pictured Erin finding the note. She *would* find it, wouldn't she? If she didn't, then what? I thought of all the things that could go wrong and my head hurt like a bitch. *First things first*, I told myself. First I had to get to JumpStart before Erin left or else the whole plan was going to cave in.

"I got to go potty," Bella said.

"Yeah, baby, me too." I ran a comb through her dark hair, which I really should have tried to wash in the Target restroom last night like I did once already this week. Last night, though, washing her hair had been the furthest thing from my mind. She needed a haircut, too, but it wasn't like I'd thought of bringing scissors with me when we left Carolina Beach. Her bangs were almost long enough to put behind her ears now, and I tried that, but as soon as she hopped out of the van, her hair fell into her face again. Poor kid. She looked like an orphan nobody cared about. I prayed to God she didn't become one tonight.

I held her hand as we walked toward the coffee shop.

"You're hurting my hand, Daddy," she said, and I realized I was holding on to her way too tight. How could I do this to my baby girl? I couldn't even prepare her for what was going to happen. *Bella, I'm sorry*. I hoped she was so young that she'd never remember this. Never think of it as the day her daddy abandoned her.

Wildflowers filled the grassy strip of land next to the coffee shop and I had a sudden idea. They were nothing but weeds, but they'd do. "Look, Bella." I pointed to-

ward them. "Let's pick some of these for Miss Erin." We stepped onto the lawn and began picking the flowers and I hoped Bella's bladder could hold out one more minute. The flowers were the only way I could think of to thank Erin for what I was going to ask her to do.

She was sitting in the brown leather chair where she always sat, reading something on her iPad, as usual, and brushing a strand of light brown hair out of her eyes. I felt a crazy rush of relief and a crazy rush of disappointment. If she hadn't been there, I would have no way to do what I was going to do tonight, and that would have been a good thing. But she *was* there and she smiled like she'd been waiting for us.

"There she is!" Bella shouted loudly enough for the two girls at the corner table to look over at us. They were close to my age. Twenty-two. Twenty-three. One of them smiled at me, then went red in the face and looked away. I hardly glanced at her. I only saw the thirtysomething woman sitting in the leather chair. I felt like hugging her.

"Hey," I said, like it was any other morning. "How's it going?"

"Good." She reached out to run a hand down Bella's arm. "Good morning, honey," she said. "How are you today?"

"We had Tic Tacs for breakfast," Bella said.

"Well, we'll get something a little better here," I said, embarrassed.

"Did you?" Erin asked. "Were they yummy?"

Bella nodded, her bangs falling over her eyes.

"We need to use the bathroom, don't we, Bell?" I said, then I looked at Erin. "You'll be here a minute?"

“Oh, I’m not going anywhere,” she said.

“These are for you.” I held the flowers toward her and wished I’d thought to tie them together with something, but with what? “Bella picked them for you this morning.”

“How pretty!” She took the flowers from my hand, sniffed them and then put them on the table. “Thank you, Bella.”

I spotted a kids’ book on the table next to the flowers. “Looks like Miss Erin has a new book to read you,” I said, hoping that was true. A book would keep Bella busy while I...I couldn’t think about it.

“I got to go potty, Daddy,” Bella reminded me.

“Right.” I reached for her hand. “We’ll be back in a sec,” I said to Erin.

In the restroom, I rushed through the teeth-brushing, the going potty and the face-washing. My hands were like a guy with DTs and I mostly let Bella brush her own teeth. It was all I could do to brush mine. I didn’t bother to shave.

Erin had moved the book to the arm of the chair by the time we got back.

“I think you’re going to love this one, Bella,” she said. She held her arms out to my four-year-old daughter, who climbed into her lap like she’d known Erin all her life. *Thank you, God*, I thought. What I was going to do tonight was as wrong as wrong could be, but the fact that Erin had been put in my path this week made me think maybe it was supposed to happen.

“I’m going to grab my coffee and our muffin,” I said. “Can I get you anything, Erin?” I asked, like I could actually afford to buy her something.

"I'm fine," she said. "I picked up an OJ for Bella."

I knew—and had known from day one—that it was Bella she was into and not me. That was fine. Perfect, actually. "Okay," I said. "Thanks."

I ordered my coffee and a muffin and a cup of water for Bella. When I went to pick up the water from the counter, I knocked the damn thing over with my not-so-fine tremor. "Sorry!" I grabbed a handful of napkins from the holder on the counter and started to mop up.

"No problem," said Nando, the barista who waited on me every morning. He called to a girl in the back who came out and cleaned up my mess while he got me another cup of water. He put the cup and the coffee and muffin in one of those cardboard carriers, and I lifted it carefully and took it back to my seat.

Erin and Bella were deep in their story. Bella asked her questions, pointing to things in the book. She rested her head against Erin's shoulder, looking kind of sleepy. That dream had gone on and on last night, she'd said, and we woke up so late. She looked as totaled as I felt. I'd use some of the money I'd make tonight to find a clinic and get her checked out. She wasn't exactly eating a great diet these days, either. I was about to break the muffin in half to split with her, but decided to give her the whole thing instead. I didn't think I could eat this morning, anyway.

I sat down on the couch, wondering how to time things. I couldn't wait too long. I had no idea when Erin would leave the coffee shop. I sipped my coffee and it felt like acid going down. *You suck as a father*, I thought to myself.

Erin came to the end of a chapter and said they'd take a little break while Bella ate her muffin.

"Come over here to eat so you don't get it all over Miss Erin," I said to Bella.

"Oh, she's fine here," Erin said. "Just set the water on the table."

I did, although I wanted Bella back right then. Yeah, I was glad she was so happy on Erin's lap and all that, but I wanted to hold her right now. I'd scare her, though—holding her too tight the way I'd squashed her hand when we walked across the parking lot. It was better this way. Now, how to make my graceful exit. I hadn't quite thought through that part. Maybe I'd say I needed to use the restroom again, but they'd be able to see me if I left the restroom and went out the door.

"So, just a couple more days till you go back to work?" I asked Erin. I needed to make sure she didn't need to go back to the pharmacy any sooner than that. I hoped I'd figured this out right.

"Don't remind me." She rubbed Bella's back. Bella had blueberry stuck in her teeth and I was glad I'd remembered to put her toothbrush in her little pink purse.

"Do you ever feel, you know, *tempted* being around all those drugs all the time?" I asked. Why the hell did I ask her that? I had no idea. Nerves. I was a frickin' mass of nerves.

She gave me a look like I was a total lowlife. "Not even a little bit," she said. "And please don't tell me you *would* be tempted."

I tried to smile. "No way," I said, "It's not my thing." Why'd I even go there? I worried she could see how I was

shaking today and think I was using something. Suddenly, I knew how to handle the next few minutes. "I've got another interview today," I said.

"Great! You found something on Craigslist?"

"No, my friend came through." I tapped my sweaty fingers on my thighs. "I hope this one works out."

"Oh, me too, Travis. I guess it's in construction? Is it for a business? Or residential? Or—"

"I've got the info in my van," I said, getting to my feet. "Can you watch Bella a sec and I'll go get it? I can tell you the address and maybe you can tell me how to get there."

"Sure," she said. I couldn't move all of a sudden. I wanted to take Bella back into the restroom and hug her so hard, but I had to get this over with. Just do it. I bent over and kissed Bella's head, then walked away fast. Out the door, across the parking lot, into my van. Fast, fast, fast, before I could change my mind. I turned the key in the ignition. I couldn't leave the van here where Erin and Bella would be able to see it when they came out of JumpStart. I drove all the way to the other end of the lot, nearly crashing into parked cars, my foot jerking all over the gas pedal, the whole wide world a blur in front of me and one word on my mind.

Bella Bella Bella.

2 *Travis*

Six Weeks Earlier

Carolina Beach, North Carolina

YOU KNOW HOW EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE happiness kind of comes over you like a bolt of lightning, surprising you so much it makes you laugh out loud? That's how I felt as I worked on the molding for the kitchen cabinets of the oceanfront house. I'd been doing construction four years and always thought of it as a job I hated, just something I had to do to put food on the table for me and Bella and my mom. But construction jobs were hard to find at the beach these days, especially in Carolina Beach, which wasn't exactly overflowing with high-end properties even though the ocean was just as blue and the sand just as white as the rest of the coast. Plus, it would always be my home. The foreman on my last job watched me work on a deck addition for a few days and he must have seen something in me because he asked me to do

some custom work inside the house. He was teaching me stuff, like the detailing on this molding. He was grooming me. I didn't know I was learning skills that, on this late August day, would make me laugh out loud when I realized I was actually enjoying the work. I was glad I was alone in the kitchen so I didn't have to explain my reaction to any of the guys.

I was on the ladder working on the molding when I heard sirens in the distance. A lot of them, but far away and echoey, hardly loud enough to cut through the sound of the ocean, and I didn't pay all that much attention. After a while, they became part of the white noise of the sea as I kept working. I was climbing down from the ladder when I heard someone rushing up the stairs to the living room.

"Travis!" Jeb, one of my coworkers, shouted as he ran into the kitchen. He was red-faced and winded, bending over in the middle of the room to catch his breath. "It's your house, man!" he said. "It's on fire!"

I dropped my hammer and ran for the stairs. "Are they safe?" I called over my shoulder.

"Don't know, man. I just heard and ran here to tell—"

I didn't hear the rest of what he said as I nearly slid down the stairs, stopping a fall with my hand on the banister. My brain was going crazy. Was it the screwed-up electrical in the living room? Or one of those scented candles my mother liked to burn to get the musty smell out of the air of the old cottage? Or maybe it was her damn cigarettes, though she was careful. She wasn't the type to fall asleep smoking, especially not with Bella in the house.

Bella. Oh, shit. *Let them be okay.*

I ran out to my van and as I turned it around to head toward my house, I saw smoke in the sky. It was the pale gray of a fire that had burned itself out, not the black you'd see if the fire was still raging, and that gave me hope. The gray billowed into the sky and then hung in an air current drifting toward the mainland. I made the four miles to my house in three minutes flat.

There were two fire trucks, a couple of cop cars and one ambulance in front of the charred shell of the small cottage that had been my home for the past eight years and would never be my home again. Right then, I didn't care. I jumped out of my van and headed straight for the ambulance. Ridley Strub, a cop I'd known since we were in middle school together, showed up out of nowhere and grabbed my arm.

"They took your mother to the hospital," he said. "Bella's in the ambulance. She's going to be fine."

"Let me go!" I pulled away from him and ran to the open rear of the ambulance, jumping inside without waiting for an invitation.

"Daddy!" Bella's cry was muffled by an oxygen mask, but it was strong enough that I knew she was okay. I sat on the edge of the stretcher and pulled her into my arms.

"You're all right, baby." My throat was so tight that *baby* came out like a whisper. I looked up at the EMT, a girl of about twenty. "She's okay, right?"

"She's fine," the girl said. "Just needed a little O2 as a precaution, but—"

"Can we take the mask off?" I asked. I wanted to see her face. To check her all over for damage. I wanted to

make sure the only thing she'd suffered was a scare. I noticed she had her stuffed lamb clutched tight in one arm, and on the floor of the ambulance I spotted her little pink purse. The two things she was never without.

"I want it off, Daddy!" Bella picked at the edge of the plastic mask where it pressed against her cheek. She hiccupped like she always did when she cried.

The paramedic leaned over and slipped the mask from Bella's face. "We'll leave the O2 monitor on her finger and see how she does," she said.

I smoothed my hands over my daughter's brown hair. I could smell the smoke on her. "You're okay," I said. "You're perfect."

She hiccupped again. "Nana fell down in the living room," she said. "Smoke comed out of the windows."

"Came," I said. "That must've been scary." My mother fell? I remembered Ridley saying she was in the hospital. I looked at the EMT again. She was checking some monitor on the wall above the stretcher. "My mother," I said. "Is she okay?"

The EMT glanced toward the open doors and I didn't miss the relief in her face when she saw Ridley climbing into the ambulance. He put a hand on my shoulder. "Need to see you a sec, Trav," he said.

"What?" I didn't look up from Bella, who was clutching my hand like she'd never let it go.

"Come outside with me," he said.

Mom. I didn't want to go with him. I didn't want to hear whatever he was going to tell me.

"Go ahead," the EMT said. "I'll be here with Bella."

"Daddy!" Bella clung harder to my hand as I stood up,

knocking the monitor off her finger. “Don’t go away!” She tried to scramble off the stretcher, but I held her by the shoulders and looked into her gray eyes.

“You have to stay here and I’ll be right back,” I said. I knew she’d stay. She always did what I told her. Nearly always, anyway.

“How many minutes?” she asked.

“Five at the most,” I promised, glancing at my watch. I’d never once broken a promise to her. My father’d never broken a promise to me, and I remembered how that felt, knowing I could always trust him no matter what.

I leaned down to hug her, kissing the top of her head. The smell of smoke just about seared my lungs.

Outside the ambulance, Ridley led me to the corner of the lot next door, away from the fire trucks and all the tourists who’d gathered to watch somebody else’s disaster.

“It’s about your mom,” he said. “Neighbor said she was outside hanging laundry when the fire started and it went up like a...just real fast. Your mom ran in for Bella and she was either overcome by smoke or maybe had a heart attack. Either way, she fell and—”

“Is she okay?” I wanted him to get to the point.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Trav. She didn’t make it.”

“Didn’t make it?” I asked. The words weren’t getting through to me.

“She died on the way to the hospital.” Ridley reached a hand toward my arm but didn’t touch me. Like he was just holding his hand there in case I started to keel over.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “Bella’s fine. How can Bella be

fine and my mother's dead?" My voice was getting loud and people turned to look at me.

"Your mom saved her. They think she fell and Bella knew enough to get out of the house, but your mom was—"

"Shit!" I pulled away from him. Looked at my watch. Four minutes. I headed back to the ambulance and climbed inside.

"Daddy!" Bella said. "I want to go home!"

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from crying. "One thing at a time, Bell," I said. "First we make sure your lungs are okay." And then what? Then *what*? Where would we go? One look at the house and you knew everything we owned was gone. I closed my eyes, picturing my mother running into the house through smoke and flames to find Bella. Thank God she had, but God had done a half-assed job this time. I hoped my mother had been unconscious when she fell. I hoped she never had a clue she was dying. *Please, God, no clue.*

"I want to go home!" Bella wailed again, her voice loud in the tiny space of the ambulance.

I held her by the shoulders and looked her straight in the eye. "Our house burned down, Bella," I said. "We can't go back. But we'll go to another house. We have plenty of friends, right? Our friends will help us."

"Tyler?" she asked. Tyler was the five-year-old boy who lived a few houses down from us. Her innocence slayed me.

"All our friends," I said, hoping I wasn't lying. We were going to need everyone.

I saw something in her face I'd never seen before. How

had it happened? She was two weeks shy of her fourth birthday, and overnight she seemed to have grown from my baby daughter to a miniature adult. In her face, I saw the girl she'd become. I saw Robin. There'd always been hints of her mother in her face—the way her eyes crinkled up when she laughed. The upturn at the edges of her lips so that she always looked happy. The rosy circles on her cheeks. But now, suddenly, there was more than a hint and it shook me up. I pulled her against my chest, full of love for the mother I'd lost that afternoon and for the little girl I would hold on to forever—and maybe, buried deep inside me where my anger couldn't reach, for the teenage girl who'd long ago shut me out of her life.