

Chapter One

Chapter 1

It was starting. I knew it was coming, knew that something horrible was going to start up any minute. I didn't even know how to explain that I knew, just that it was on its way and that I was scared. My stomach hurt and every time I closed my eyes, I could see the ground shaking. There weren't even earthquakes in North Carolina. It wasn't something that ever happened here, but it didn't stop me from feeling like *it* was coming. I'd dreamed about it for a few weeks now and today, the moment I woke up, I knew it was coming.

Mom hadn't believed me at all. She thought I was a liar, was making up stories, but I wasn't. The ground was going to shake so hard and our little house wasn't made for it. All the shelves would fall, the windows would crack. She still didn't believe anything I said. I cried then, screamed as loud as I could, threw myself on the ground and yelled. Frustrated, mom took me to my bathroom, to the one room without windows. Dad joined us both when he came home for his lunch break from the store. I was still crying, had been for hours, and it was the only way to keep them from leaving. Dad was trying to pry me from the tub when the rumbling hit. After that no one tried to move me at all.

When the quake was done, mom just stared at me like I had three heads or something. Her mouth was open so wide.

"How did you know?"

Blinking back at her, I burst back into tears. "I just did."

Mom didn't have an answer for that, just stood there and didn't even move to hug me. That hurt, and I felt so confused and scared, at least until dad hugged me and went with me to my room. My bed was still together. I curled up under my covers and let my dad pat my back. I was too old for that, you know? I was almost in seventh grade but it had been a bad day and mom was being weird.

"Caleb, shh," dad said. "It's okay. I don't care how you knew. Thank you."

I sniffled and forced myself not to finally stop crying. Guys my age weren't supposed to do that. "You're welcome."

Mom didn't come in the room at all, and, less than a week later, was gone from our lives forever.

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Six Years Later...

Sighing, I shoved the manila envelope back in my locker and slammed it shut. I would have to get that. It was the week before winter finals and the last thing I needed was something like that. It'd make me think things. Of course, it would also be inevitable that my girlfriend, Joanna,

would catch me with it.

"What was that?"

Shaking my head, I shoved my backpack over my shoulder. "Huh?"

Green eyes bore into mine, their usual intense focus not welcome this time. Joanna usually charmed me with her tenacity; it was definitely the only reason I'd ever worked under her at the run down *Mt. Airy High School Gazette*. It still was. Writing wasn't my thing as much as science and I'd have set all my focus on the Science Olympiad team and being captain this year if not for her. Writing, being on the trail of what she loved was addictive, and it rubbed off on me as well. It didn't make me any more thrilled to have five feet of intrepid brunette reporter glaring at me.

"That was a massive envelope. It's the middle of December. All the honors track kids are panting for those things."

"You just got yours from Chapel Hill," I corrected. Indeed she had. Joanna had applied early decision to the University of North Carolina's journalism school and been accepted four days ago. She'd yet to shut up about it. It was cute, except when she was trying to pry information out of me about my college news.

"And you never told me you'd applied anywhere early decision," she countered, reaching for my lock.

I grabbed her wrist. "Jo, don't."

"It's a *huge* freaking envelope, Caleb. The only thing it could be is an acceptance." She grinned. "Where's it to?"

"It was stupid."

She yanked her arm back and then slipped under my grasp, starting to enter in the combination on my lock. "It was something or you wouldn't be hiding it in your locker instead of telling me or your dad!"

"Jo---"

She had the door open then and maybe I wanted her to see it just a little. It would be nice to have someone know what I'd done before I had to turn down my acceptance. Her eyes grew inhumanly huge the second she saw the school crest. "Duke? You applied?"

I swallowed and shut my door a second time and relocked it. "Yup, early decision to their engineering school. It was a lark, really. I didn't think they'd take me. They get like a billion

people."

She nodded and, taking my hand, led me to the empty *Gazette* office. The envelope was still clenched in her hand, mocking me. "You got in to one of the best schools in the country. How could you not tell me you were thinking of going? UNC and Duke are like nine miles apart."

"I didn't expect to get in."

"So you applied and spent like eighty bucks to *not* get in somewhere?"

I sighed and straightened my glasses; they had a tendency to slip. "Look, of course I want to go, I do, but I can't afford it."

"You can take out school loans, Caleb. It'd pay itself back in the long run."

"No, I mean, I just can't be that far away. Even if I got a loan and like four student jobs and ate Ramen until I'm forty, I can't be that far east."

"It's four hours; you're not moving to like New York City."

Nodding, I pulled out a rolling chair and straddled it. "Yeah, I know that. Still, it's far away enough that it's not convenient. I couldn't come home on weekends."

"To Mt. Airy, home of all exciting and fancy," she drawled.

Joanna had moved to town from Charlotte with her parents five years ago. She'd never gotten over the lack of big city excitement. I'd also gathered she wasn't much of an Andy Griffith Show fan and, since that was the town's only (slim) claim to fame, it wasn't like any part of my hometown's eccentric nature charmed her.

"Your dad's never asked you to. It's not like he can't survive down at the *Mayberry Market* without you or without the extra change you bring in selling stale popcorn at the theater on Main Street.

"Yeah, but money or anything the store or anything financial aside, you know that's why I can't go. Winston-Salem State is fine and affordable. This was just a fluke."

She snorted and tossed the acceptance letter on the desk in front of me. "One of the top engineering schools in the country said yes. It's not a fluke. It's a sign."

Equally as stubborn, I picked up the letter and crumpled it, tossing it into the basket beside me.

"No, it's not. I'm all dad has since mom left and I can't go four hours away. He needs me, Jo."

"And what do you need?"

"Probably not to be twenty-two with two hundred thousand in loans to pay off," I huffed. "I just can't. It's just us on all this and I'm not gonna leave him stranded."

"I think if you told him, he'd be beyond excited for you. Your mom's been gone for a long time now."

"Over six years now, yeah, but he's still lonely and a state school's fine. Besides, I like it here. I can do that live at home and commute to school thing."

Bending over, Joanna pulled the letter out of the trash and uncrumpled it. Handing it back to me, she shook her head. "At least tell him. I'd bet a million dollars that he wants for you exactly what I do."

"And I want him not to be alone."

My dad and I work next to each other on Main Street. I suppose that Mt. Airy would be just another burned out southern town if not for tourism. In the winters, it was pretty dead but in the spring and into even September, the town filled with tourists, those people more than willing to spend \$14.95 on a t-shirt with Barney Fife's face on it or a bobble head doll of Aunt Bee for under thirty bucks. My dad and I lived in a modest one story brick house down on Rockford Street. It was once a more upscale area with a Methodist church on it about the size of a city block, something that was a throwback to the 1920s. Where we lived was about on the dividing line. We were closer to the grocery store that took WIC and food stamps than we were downtown but, it being Mt. Airy, there was only so much town to drive through. The good parts and the bad ones ran right into each other.

We were close enough to walk where we had to go, and that was a wonder saving on gas. We had one truck, an old Chevy from the fifties that had been my grandfather's and that my dad had spent years restoring. It got chores done when we needed it, but mostly it was on foot. Like I'd mentioned, dad was the manager for the *Mayberry Market*, which, to be honest was exactly identical to about three other stores on Main Street selling the same overpriced memorabilia. Still, that stuff sold and if autographed pictures of Otis and Gomer as well as a ton of old timey post cards kept me in food, I wasn't going to complain. I will admit, however, that at fourteen, I'd gotten a work permit so I could do my time being an usher at the two screen theater down the street. By then, I'd spent so many hours sweeping up at the Market that I could quote any episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* or *Mayberry R.F.D.* by heart.

Now I was better at quoting summer blockbusters. Granted, we got them about a month late but a free ticket was a free ticket even if I had to wear ochre colored polyester to do it. That day, I helmed the main desk until six (not that we had any customers this close to exams). After a brisk walk home, I then settled down to look over my notes for my biology midterm in three days.

I wasn't really feeling it. It wasn't just that I knew the material cold; I did. What I was most interested in was bio-chemical engineering so I could count that as my pre-med requirements. I wanted to help people, really I did. Still, it did feel sort of pointless to study. I could go to the best school at least in the state, if not one of the best in the world. I'd go into massive debt, sure, but I...

Sometimes I think mom left because of me.

I know that doesn't make sense. I know moms don't do that or, at least, aren't supposed to do that. I guess you could just say it was post-traumatic stress and mom never recovered from it and instead of trying to get better with me and dad and rebuilding the house that she just split town and went who knows where. Earthquake or not, trauma or not, she should have stayed with us.

However, mom was really off for a few days after that, distant, always staring at something only she could see. Then one day she wasn't there at all. I came home from school in sixth grade and dad was sitting on the sofa, a shot of Jack in hand, which had scared me so much cause I'd never seen him as much as have a beer before. Mom was gone with the wind, and he'd been even more shocked by it than I had been.

She's never contacted us since. I've thought sometimes, I'm not going to lie, about having Jo take a crack at finding her. There are few things that Joanna Queen can't track down with her contacts. If she doesn't have the resources, she usually knows someone who does. God knew my pathetic Google searches hadn't done anything. When I was younger, the first couple years after she left, I had these elaborate fantasies of trying to find mom or about her returning with presents and "please forgive me"

It was all I thought about actually.

By the time Mt. Airy's answer to Woodward and Bernstein showed up, however, I didn't want anything to do with my mother anymore. She left us, not the other way around. Good riddance. I had dad and he was awesome; we were partners fifty-fifty.

Mom clearly didn't want any of that.

Not one freaking letter in going on almost seven years. Good riddance.

Those were the thoughts circling my brain when dad finally came home and found me not-quite-studying at the kitchen table. "Hey sport, test studying going well?"

"Well enough," I hedged.

"Good, I picked up some fried chicken from the grocery store."

"Perfect, I'm starved," I finished, putting my books aside and smiling eagerly up at him. "Serve me!"

"Nice try. You're almost eighteen, taller than I am, and have two working legs last time I checked. Get your own chicken," he said, running one hand through his shortly trimmed yet graying beard.

I sighed. Dad wasn't super old. He and mom had waited a bit for me, but he wasn't much over fifty currently. He'd just seemed so much older since the earthquake fall out. Walking over to the island in the kitchen, I prepped a plate with two breasts and extra mac n' cheese that he'd bought. I grabbed a Coke and a couple biscuits for good measure. I was over six feet and, no, I hadn't stopped growing yet. I was pushing 6'3 now and some of that had come on in just the past year.

It didn't impress my dad. "You left me thighs."

"School stress makes me hungry."

He laughed and set up a less heaping plate for himself before joining me at the table. "Then you must be more stressed than I thought. You're acing biology. I'm sure when the national exam comes in the spring you'll get a four."

"Five," I corrected. "APs? Perfect is a five."

Dad blushed and started in on a wing. I hadn't meant to sound even a little snotty. Dad had only finished two years at junior college. I was sort of a bit ahead of his academic experience.

"Exactly. You'll be fine."

"I...actually," I said, setting down my fork still half full of cheesy noodles. "It's about something else."

"Joanna and you seem solid."

"No, it's actually about college. I didn't tell you but I applied to Duke early decision."

"Did they reject you? They'd be complete morons to do that, son."

I swallowed and felt my throat grow tight. "No, actually, they offered me a slot and I'm supposed to turn in my acceptance by January so I can start figuring out financial aid."

My dad's reaction was not at all what I'd imagined. Breaking into a wide grin, he reached across the table and squeezed my forearm. "That's fantastic."

"Dad, it's over fifty thousand dollars a year. It costs more than we make combined."

"And you said they wanted to give you aid."

"Yeah, but loans and it's far away and I---"

He dropped his hand and shook his head. "Is it because it's expensive? Because everyone knows it's not cheap and you applied anyway. This is more because of me, isn't it?"

"I---"

He leaned back in his chair and tired, gray-blue eyes looked back at my own. "Caleb, you don't have to stay in town because of me. I know you've never complained but this is not what you want."

"I'm not bad at taking tickets and hawking souvenirs. It works well enough."

"Yes, but you're a great science student and not a bad writer. You have a lot more talents than staying around here and maybe working up to theater manager. I love Mt. Airy, and I always wanted to work around here, but I know you don't."

"But you live here. I don't really need all the crap down in the Triangle. It's pretty Yankee-fied by now anyway. The theater's fine enough to run after Winston-Salem State."

He shook his head. "It's not *yours*. Besides, I have friends in town. I've lived here almost fifty-one years. If my son visits on school breaks and I have more time alone with Sampson, that's fine."

"Mom's not here," I said. It was the first time I'd mentioned her since I'd started high school. Silence fell between us and it was a long time before he spoke again.

"Your mother hasn't been here in a long time, Caleb. Just because I don't have her, doesn't mean I still don't have a life when you go to school. It's the Piedmont, not Alaska. All parents have to deal with empty nests and kids who flew the coop."

"Mixed metaphor," I joked. "I don't want you to be here by yourself is all."

"And I don't want it to be five years from now or fifteen and you resent me."

"I wouldn't. You didn't ask me to."

His dad shrugged. "It doesn't matter. You would because it's normal, son. Look let's just take this as good timing."

I snorted. "Okay?"

"Your Aunt Moira called me today."

"Huh, that's good."

Aunt Moira was my mom's only living relative. She was in Los Angeles with her four kids (they were quadruplets who were a year older than I was, already in college) and her husband, a Greek restaurant magnate. The Katsaros Family was essentially everything my family wasn't--- large, rich, well-traveled. I didn't get to see them often because we didn't have the money to fly to California really, but we'd visited a few times when I was a kid and before mom left. After the earthquake, Aunt Moira kept in contact with us. She sent us letters at least every couple months and had encouraged my cousin Kalista to be my email pen pal.

We actually did correspond a bit. We weren't exceptionally close; three thousand miles between us prevented it but we still talked and tried to see each other in person when we could. They'd paid for me and dad both to fly out to the quad's graduation from Harvard-Westlake just last June.

My dad picked up another piece of chicken. "Anyway, yeah, your aunt and Kalista both wanted to know if you'd like to come out there for Christmas."

"With palm trees?"

"It was a nice offer. The boys are at Oxford and apparently aren't coming home for the winter break. I think she's lonely. It might be fun."

"It wouldn't be actual winter," I said, grinning.

"No, but...look I don't want to sound like we're mooching or have ulterior motives---"

"But?"

"Your aunt's always offered to help you after everything with," he paused and thought better on how to phrase that. "She's always wanted you to feel you had an outlet to that side of your family, and she and Kalista try very hard."

"Yes."

Truly they did. I wasn't overly fond of my three guy cousins. They were bullies and tended to gang up on me, a full pack mentality thing. If it was just going to be Aunt Moira, Uncle Nicholas, and Kalista, then that would be sort of exciting.

"They're very well off, and maybe if you explained to your aunt what happened, maybe you can

work out taking a loan from her instead of a bank, something without any interest."

"That's like two hundred thousand dollars all told."

"Which you'd pay back, I'm sure. I...it might be worth asking and, either way, I think it's good for you to see your family when you can. My mom's so fuzzy now."

Grandma was in a home and had had Alzheimer's for five years already.

"And it's not like I have any siblings and your mom..."

"Left," I spat.

"Yes. This is what you have and they've never written us off even if I'm not related to Moira at all. It couldn't hurt to ask, Caleb. If she says no, you're back to good old Centura Bank."

"So I'm going to Duke, huh?" The smile spreading across my face was huge, made my cheeks hurt.

"We'll find a way and, knowing your aunt, I think she'll at least brain storm options with us. Besides, 'swimming pools and movie stars,' son. Don't you want to have a fun vacation?"

"Could have potential," I finished, pushing away my plate and taking up my textbook. "Definitely different."

"Exactly," he replied, taking both our plates to the sink. "I think this whole thing is a sign, your acceptance and your aunt's invitation. I think things are really gonna start going our way."

I spent the rest of the night at the table with that same grin on my face, happily re-learning the nervous and endocrine systems. Things really might have a great turn around if my aunt came through. I'd be at the school I wanted with my girlfriend practically on my door step and with my dad's blessing to boot.

Yup, everything was looking up, impossibly perfect.

Of course then I woke up the following morning naked in our basement, wrapped up in a deer hide my dad had been tanning and with no memory of how I'd gotten there.