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The Good Father

By Diane Chamberlain



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A beloved daughter. A devastating choice. And now there's no going back.

Four years ago, nineteen-year-old Travis Brown made a choice: to raise his newborn daughter on his own. While most of his friends were out partying and meeting girls, Travis was at home, changing diapers and worrying about keeping food on the table. But he's never regretted his decision. Bella is the light of his life. The reason behind every move he makes. And so far, she is fed. Cared for. Safe.

But when Travis loses his construction job and his home, the security he's worked so hard to create for Bella begins to crumble....

Then a miracle. A job in Raleigh has the power to turn their fortunes around. It has to. But when Travis arrives in Raleigh, there is no job, only an offer to participate in a onetime criminal act that promises quick money and no repercussions.

With nowhere else to turn, Travis must make another choice for his daughter's sake.

Even if it means he might lose her.



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Editorial Review

Review

"A complex, heart-wrenching tale, Chamberlain's latest novel...offers a Jodi Picoult-like story line yanked from the most shocking of headlines. ...[The] frankness of each scene and character should grab readers and keep them eagerly turning pages right up to the startling climax."--Booklist on *The Midwife's Confession*

"Diane Chamberlain's characters are so realistic that you feel you know them in person, and when you get to the end of the book, you miss them."--New York Times bestselling author Tatiana de Rosnay

"Diane Chamberlain's *The Midwife's Confession* is a compelling tale of friendship and motherhood told with compassion and vivid honesty. Chamberlain takes the reader on a taut journey filled with secrets, heartbreak and the power of hope. Impossible to put down *The Midwife's Confession* will break your heart and then mend it tenderly back together."--New York Times bestselling author Heather Gudenkauf

"*The Midwife's Confession* is an engrossing tale, one that keeps you guessing to the end, with all its twists and turns. This is a novel you won't want to miss!"-Eileen Goudge, New York Times bestselling author of *Once in a Blue Moon*

"Chamberlain weaves an intensely engaging story of three people with a tragic past, complicated present, and unknown future who must struggle with trust, betrayal, and forgiveness." Booklist on *The Lies We Told*

About the Author

Diane Chamberlain is the bestselling author of twenty novels, including *The Midwife's Confession* and *The Secret Life of CeeCee Wilkes*. Diane lives in North Carolina and is currently at work on her next novel. Visit her Web site at www.dianechamberlain.com and her blog at www.dianechamberlain.com/blog and her Facebook page at www.facebook.com/Diane.Chamberlain.Readers.Page.

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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 rest-room 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 toward 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*.

Users Review

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