

Chapter One

Hailey Anderson closed her office door and collapsed into her cool leather desk chair. She would have savored a leisurely lunch hour instead of a frenzied rush of errands in the July heat of North Carolina. But lately, that was typical, amidst the pressures of her family's textile mill. She sat motionless, allowing herself five minutes to close her eyes and relax her shoulders. Cool air poured with a rattle from a vent in the corner of her office and its icy flow chilled her neck, drying the beads of perspiration.

The phone jangled into the quiet. Her eyes flew open, and she glanced at the phone. An inside line. "This is Hailey."

"Did you see the paper today?" The breathless whisper came from Lenore, her longtime secretary.

Hailey leaned back in her chair and peered through the space between the vertical blinds to the area where mill administration was corralled. Her eyes met the worried gaze of Lenore, who clutched the phone to her ear.

"Not yet, Lenore. I haven't had a chance. Bad news, I guess?"

"Another mill is closing. Pristine. It's one of the oldest in North Carolina. They're falling like dominos."

"I knew they were struggling. That's a shame." Hailey swallowed and fingered the loose thread dangling from her skirt. Her hands were moist and tension needled her stomach. "But we're not closing, Lenore. Don't worry."

"Are you sure? Even Cannon, as big as they were. And other mills our size, one right after the other. Why would we be any different?" Panic laced each word.

Hailey bit her lip. How to comfort the woman while her own insides were in similar turmoil? She struggled to think of words that would be reassuring, convincing when, to even her ears, they sounded hollow.

"Just because another mill has closed doesn't mean that we will. People still need fabrics and clothes, don't they, now?"

A long pause hung on the line. "I guess so. Still, that doesn't guarantee . . . I'm sorry, Hailey. I know you and your dad are doing the best you can. I—I just don't know what I'd do if I lost this job. You know, with Jerry out of work and all . . ."

"I know, it's hard. But we're trying to be proactive and creative so we don't join the statistics. Be assured of that."

"Thanks." Lenore's voice lost its edge, but its usual cheerfulness was still missing. "Sorry to bother you."

"No, you haven't bothered me. I'll take a look at that article. Maybe it'll give me some ideas."

Hailey hung up the phone and stared at the newspaper, perched on the edge of her overfilled desk. It taunted her like a cobra about to strike. If only she *could* be proactive and creative. Paul Anderson, her father and owner of the mill, was anything *but*. He seemed to be hunkering down for the final and tragic defeat of Anderson Mill.

If Anderson closed its doors, she'd have to find a new job, like everyone else who worked here. Yet for her, it was more than a job. Even as a child, she'd wandered in and out of the various buildings—the carding department, where the raw wool was cleaned, the spinning room with hundreds of dancing vertical spools, the weaving area with rows of noisy looms—asking dozens of questions about what went on there. Everyone in town knew the Anderson family and their mill. They'd employed hundreds of the residents of Larkspur, North Carolina for four generations. For Hailey, many of those employees had names, faces, histories. And she was part of them, yet felt responsible for them at the same time. Like a good parent.

She pulled the newspaper closer to read the headline and the first few sentences, then shook her head. It had happened again, this time, to a neighboring mill whose owner she'd known for years. She leaned back in her chair and sighed. Her gaze panned the small office, a dingy square closed in by colorless walls. The drawing table, spread with designs and fabric samples, dominated the room. Against the wall her desk grimly shouldered her stacks of unfinished work and her computer, which broadcast bad news almost daily.

A tall window behind her desk overlooked a swatch of land with tall grasses and a few dumpsters, a dreary scene that matched her current life, except for one detail. During most of the day she could hear the faint rumble of dozens of looms one floor below, churning an endless, comforting heartbeat into the quiet.

Hailey glanced back at the newspaper, hesitant. Might be worth a try. She rose and took the paper in one hand. After launching a determined glance at Lenore's frightened one, she strode down the hall toward the presidential office, her mind churning out words and phrases as she went. Maybe she'd luck out and Dad would be receptive.

"Hey, Dad," she ventured as she crossed the threshold of his office. A pleasant smile might pave the way.

Her father swung his chair around and motioned to her with one finger, pulling the phone closer to his ear. Fatigue painted his pale blue eyes, which were surrounded by creases she hadn't noticed before. His gaunt face no longer resembled the ruddy Scotsman he was when she was a child. Every day bad news and criticism rained down on him, yet he only dug deeper into his favorite strategy of "wait and see". Only she was pretty sure he'd wait until there was nothing left to see.

"Yes, Hailey." He let out a gut-deep sigh as he set the telephone back on the cradle, his weary eyes on her.

For a split-second Hailey was more worried about him than frustrated. His withered frame no longer filled the executive chair. She reminded herself why she was there and rallied her arguments.

“Dad, did you hear about Pristine?” She placed the paper onto his desk, with a twinge of guilt for dumping more bad news on her beleaguered father. Yet, he had to see facts. The headline, an ugly black gash, read “Another Mill Falls in Forsythe County.” She watched his face as he glanced down at the paper. His frown deepened as bushy white eyebrows furrowed, but he didn’t speak.

“It has me worried. We need to be more proactive.” Despite wanting to stay calm and professional, she added, “*Please*, let’s do something new before we have to lay people off. I know you don’t want to do that.”

Paul Anderson’s gaze hardened on his youngest daughter. That stare used to freeze her in her tracks when she was a child. She knew what he’d say next.

“Hailey, my drama queen, you always were emotional about the mill. We *are* taking action, and that’s all you need to know.”

She wouldn’t let him off that easily, patronizing her as if she were still eight years old. “We have to plan a strategy. I’m afraid we’ll shut down if we don’t do something different. We—we lost another order to Pakistan, just this morning. The Owens account.”

A flash of alarm slid across his face, but he pulled on a mask of calm just as quickly. Hailey schooled her voice, knowing it could easily burst out in staccato notes of panic, just like Lenore’s had. *Calm, Hailey.*

“I’m asking you again to leave this to me. You are a designer. That’s your role. It’s not your job to save the mill. That’s *my* job. I have lots of pressure on me. Now please, I have a meeting in ten minutes.” He turned his chair slightly away as if to dismiss her. She saw only the shiny bald spot amidst wiry red-gray hair as he bowed his head toward his papers. Deflated, Hailey could only leave the office, as her eyes burned. She’d said what she had to say. But as usual, it hadn’t made any impact on the elder Anderson. None.

She lowered her gaze, pretending to scan the newspaper she still clutched in her hands, as she passed Daniel Carlton, the assistant manager. The last thing she needed was for him to see tears in her eyes. He’d find some way to use it, sooner or later. Besides, she wasn’t in the mood for greetings, especially his. All she wanted to do was wail. As she passed Lenore’s desk she just shook her head then closed her office behind her.

Six years. She’d tried to make a difference at Anderson Mill for the past six years, tried to reverse the fast leak, and had failed. Whatever she said to her father about any subject—especially the mill—was like talking to the wind. An indifferent, chilly wind. It had always been that way, and it had always stung. An acute and all-too-familiar pain, yet it paled against the threat nearly engulfing her family’s business. For some crazy reason she had deep roots in this factory, whose employees were closer to a surrogate family for her than her own family. It wasn’t merely a job. If only she could make a difference. If

only she weren't fated to watch it slowly grind down and go the way so many other mills had gone in the last decade.

Growing up in a textile town, Hailey had always taken for granted the fact that these factories would always be part of her landscape. Textiles had once been the largest industry in North Carolina, but during the eighties and nineties, they rapidly lost their place. Hundreds of jobs vanished and would never return, having been replaced by foreign contracts and automation. The new millennium had shown improvements, but the mills weren't out of danger, even now in 2004. Hailey had watched the trend with interest, then mild panic, as she understood that it could happen to them, too. Especially with the current style of leadership. In response, she'd tried to court new clients on the side, bring suggestions to the presidential office. Nothing made a scratch.

When the long workday ended, Hailey wearily drove toward her townhouse a few miles from the mill. Her languid gaze painted across the familiar buildings . . . the town hall, the park in front of it where the city held an art festival in summer and placed a tall evergreen at Christmas, colorfully lit, towering in the center, gathering townspeople for caroling or New Year's Eve festivities.

On the diagonal corner sat The Scoop, a local ice cream parlor where she and her sister, Hope, went as children, escaping from their preoccupied parents on Saturday afternoons. They'd share secrets while enjoying one of twelve homemade flavors.

How she'd love to be able to sit down with Hope right then, pouring out her fears and anguish, since Hope had always been the one she'd turned to for family warmth. But Hope had never shared Hailey's attachment to Anderson Mill. She'd moved away to Colorado without a twinge for the family business, while Hailey was still anchored and rusting in place.

She could always talk to her best friend, Nina, whose calm manner usually put Hailey's frustrations into perspective. But Nina had recently gotten engaged to Justin. Hailey wouldn't dampen her friend's joy with her own struggles.

Hailey passed the post office, Hank's Auto Repair, the Ace Hardware store. So many memories from a lifetime in a small town that now hemmed her in, narrowing her possibilities, suffocating her.

Tears moistened her lashes and blurred her vision. It was bad enough that things didn't look good for Anderson Mill, in danger of joining all the bleak statistics of textile manufacturing in the previous decade. So many of Anderson's employees were like grandmothers and grandfathers to her. She'd known their children and their grandchildren, had watched them grow up. She saw the dread on their faces as they spoke to her of their fears. It squeezed her gut to see them tied in knots by day and likely losing sleep, as they wondered when they, too, would hear that their jobs were gone. For some, it was the only work they and their children had ever known. She could only guess what they would do.

Hailey pulled into the numbered space at her condominium complex and, with a deep sigh, left the air-conditioned sanctuary of her car. The sweet fragrance of fresh-cut grass wafted toward her. Up the street, her neighbor, Alex, was shoving something bulky into the dumpster. When the mass finally disappeared into the opening, he stepped back and turned in her direction. Seeing her, he lifted an arm in a static wave then sauntered away toward his condo.

Her hand raised in a weak response as she watched him, for too long. She hadn't seen Alex since the homeowners' meeting a couple of months earlier. That evening they'd had a minor debate, as she objected to the landscaping fees. She'd probably come across as stubborn and hot-tempered. She'd considered dropping by his house to apologize, not for her opinion, but for her tone. That gesture might have smoothed things out instead of reminding him to avoid her.

Hailey let out another long breath from a deep well inside as she locked the car. Friday afternoon. What would her weekend hold? Trying to stay cool and push away dark dread until Monday, when she'd have to face it all over again. She'd forgotten what it was like to feel any other way.

