

“I’ve always loved prodigal stories, especially ones that are filled with biblical truth, such as *Stronger than the Storm*. This book follows an imperfect and broken family struggling to learn, love, grow, and restore with the help of the Lord and His Word. I could see myself in the pages, and I loved that the characters felt honest and authentic. This is a moving and inspiring story that reminded me to never give up hope for the prodigals in my own life. For fans of books such as *Swimming in the Deep End* by Christina Suzann Nelson and *This Promised Land* by Cathy Gohlke.”

—Katie Powner, Christy Award-winning author of *When the Road Comes Around*.

“The storms of life flood even the best of families with threats to destroy their strongest defense: love. This story and its twists and turns kept me turning pages and longing for this family to be right again. *Stronger than the Storm* is for every family who has faced heartache. Only God can stop a raging storm.”

—DiAnn Mills, Best-selling and Christy Award-winning author of *Canyon of Deceit*.

“Deena Adams’s debut novel offers up a family that readers will fall in love with—not despite their flaws, but *because* of them. The Holbrooks endure heart-wrenching circumstances, but they discover the hope Christ can give in the fiercest storm, and that makes all the difference for generations to come.”

—Deborah Raney, author of *Breath of Heaven* and The God Who series

“*Stronger than the Storm*, a moving debut novel by Deena Adams, offers an intensely honest exploration of what binds—and breaks—a family. Well-crafted characters grapple with life-

altering situations, serving as a reminder of how a single wrong decision can have lasting repercussions. Yet where there is heartbreak, there is hope, if one is brave enough to look for it. A powerful family drama.”

—Michelle Shocklee, Christy Award-winning author of *All We Thought We Knew* and *The Women of Oak Ridge*

“In her debut novel, Deena Adams writes with the grace and maturity of a seasoned storyteller. Her characters feel achingly real, and her story beautifully explores family resilience, faith through life’s storms, and the hard, holy work of forgiveness—especially the forgiveness we owe ourselves. With every carefully woven word, Adams reminds us that brokenness is not the end of the story, but the beginning of redemption.”

—Janine Rosche, Selah Award-winning author of *With Every Memory*

Stronger than the Storm is a beautiful story that shows what hurts, helps, and ultimately heals the heart of a family. Deena Adams uses a deft, yet gentle hand to communicate powerful truths through the lives of her fictional characters. Rich, compelling, and entertaining to boot. Readers won’t believe this is Adams’s debut. Well done!

—Robin W. Pearson, Christy Award-winning author of *A Long Time Comin’* and *The Stories We Carry*

The Holbrook Family: Book One

stronger
than the
storm

Deena Adams



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Please note that this novel presents potentially triggering topics, such as dealing with a prodigal, abuse, unplanned pregnancy, adultery, life-altering secrets, marital strife, mother/daughter conflict, and a distressing DNA element.

Those who've suffered abuse should contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) to access tools, resources, and services.

If you are currently facing, or have faced, any of the family struggles mentioned, please seek professional help through Focus on the Family, the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, or a local Christian counseling center.

“But now this is what the Lord says: ‘Do not weep any longer, for I will reward you,’ says the Lord. ‘Your children will come back to you from the distant land of the enemy.’”

Jeremiah 31:16

To every parent of a prodigal. God is stronger than your storm and will carry you through it.

To every child who has run away from God and your family. It's never too late to return home. Grace, mercy, and forgiveness are waiting for you.

To every member of my family. Thank you for sticking with me through our tough seasons. You make me a better person and help strengthen my faith. There are no other humans I'd rather muddle through life with than you.



Chapter 1

Finally, the call Beth had dreamed of for years. She stuffed her phone in her shorts pocket and let out a whoop that sounded more like her youngest teenage daughter than a forty-year-old mom, but incredible news deserved that squeal.

Abandoning her morning walk around the neighborhood, she turned toward home, relishing the beautiful spring day even more.

She took the front porch steps of their house two at a time, hurried inside, and followed the glorious aroma of fresh-brewed coffee through the family room and into the kitchen. Kevin sat at the island with his favorite *DAD* mug and a plate of breakfast, fixated on his computer screen.

Overheated from the impromptu jog home, she walked past her husband and grabbed a water bottle from the refrigerator. After swallowing three huge gulps, she wiped a dribble of liquid from her chin, then stood across from him. “You’ll never guess who just called.”

Kevin’s fingers hovered above the keyboard, but he offered his full attention. “Don’t keep me in—”

“Hey, I’m heading to Vanessa’s.” Leesa bounded into the room sporting a baggy T-shirt and jean shorts, her purse slung over one shoulder. Their middle child’s eyes shone brighter than they had in a while.

Beth held back her thrilling announcement and focused on Leesa. “I didn’t realize you had plans.”

“We’re going shopping and to lunch, then to a friend’s beach party tonight.” Leesa snagged a soda from the fridge. “Before you ask, no, you don’t know them.” She popped the can’s top and took a sip.

The snarky comment jabbed at Beth’s chipper mood. “I thought we agreed to limited interaction with Vanessa until she’s in a better headspace. And hanging out at the beach at night isn’t a good idea. Especially during tourist season.”

Leesa blew out a sharp breath. “In your opinion, nothing I do is a good idea, but I won’t bail on my best friend when she’s going through a hard time. Aren’t we supposed to support people who are struggling?”

Time for backup. Beth looked to Kevin, who suddenly grew enamored with his coffee cup. Seriously, honey? Not this time. “What do you have to add, babe?”

He gripped his mug in both hands, but an easy smile spread across his face. “What kind of party is it, Punkin Pie?”

Their daughter rounded the island and plopped onto the stool on his other side, placing her purse on the counter. She dropped her gaze and fiddled with her purity ring. At least she still wore the Sweet Sixteen gift they’d given her two years ago. “Just chillin’ with friends, listening to music, eating food. Normal stuff.”

Beth traced her finger through condensation on the water bottle. “Will that boy you met over Memorial weekend be there?”

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Leesa's chin jutted as if the little cleft there had the power to launch fiery darts. "He might go."

Even more reason for Leesa to stay at home. Beth could overlook the boy's vulgar tattoo sleeves, saggy pants, and skull earrings decorating each ear. But the disgusting, foul language and photos of him flaunting a gun that littered his social media feed? Absolutely not.

She shuddered. "You know he isn't someone you should associate with."

"You've never even met Isaac." Leesa's eyes blazed. "Why are you judging outward appearance when only what's inside matters? At least, that's what you preach."

Kevin patted Leesa's hand. "Let's discuss this without the attitude, please."

Yes, settle down, Beth, and implement the tips outlined in your book. Show her you value her feelings.

Beth shifted to stand opposite her daughter. "I understand being with your friends is important to you, but a late-night beach party is asking for trouble. There was a drug bust at the Virginia Beach oceanfront last weekend."

"Did you forget I'm eighteen now, Mom?" Leesa raised her voice. "Old enough to make my own decisions." She stalked to the window, her back to them.

Pointing out that Leesa's behavior in no way substantiated her claim of adulthood wouldn't improve the conversation. Besides, Kevin's classic calm, cool, and collected personality might diffuse the situation much better than Beth's typical irritated response.

As if on cue, her husband spoke. "Please don't use that tone with your mother. You know we expect anyone living in our home to obey the rules, no matter their age."

Leesa whipped around, arms crossed. "Then I'll move out."

Kevin's brows drew together. "Let's not get carried away, sweetheart."

"We only want what's best for you," Beth said.

"Yeah, right. All you care about is making sure everyone at church thinks their associate pastor and his wife have the perfect Christian family. That I don't hurt your precious reputation."

Beth flinched. She didn't need Leesa for that. A confession from her own lips would tarnish her good name in one fell swoop.

Swallowing the sudden lump in her throat, she approached Leesa and touched her shoulder. "You can see Vanessa today, but the beach party is a no. Please be home for dinner."

Leesa shrank away. "I've wanted to see Isaac again since I met him, and he finally asked me to hang out. Don't mess this up for me."

"Not attending this event won't ruin anything if he's the one for you." Beth retrieved her water and took a long drink, keeping her opinion of Isaac to herself.

"You don't understand what it's like to never have a boyfriend. To be the only kid in our family with boring brown hair and eyes." Leesa's hands landed on her waist. "And I look at a slice of pizza and put on five pounds, while Megan and Tyler eat whatever they want and don't gain an ounce. It's not fair."

Beth choked on the liquid she'd gulped. *Stay calm.* Siblings with opposite characteristics were common. Leesa simply resembled her, while Ty and Meggie took after Kevin. "Please don't talk like that. You're beautiful."

"Save it, Mom. We both know you're embarrassed about my weight."

"That's ridiculous. My concern is for your health."

"Keep telling yourself that." Leesa snatched her bag from

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the counter. "I'm done with this." She stormed away, hard thuds echoing throughout the house. The front door opened and slammed shut.

What happened to their mild-mannered girl? The child who always did the right thing. That familiar version of Leesa had disappeared over the past year. "Should one of us go after her?"

Kevin's comforting arms and woodsy aftershave wrapped her in a warm embrace. "Why don't we give her some space? Once she cools off, she'll realize she overreacted and will apologize." He rubbed circles on her back.

Nodding into his shoulder, she fought tears. "You're right. It just hurts."

Despite their daughter's disrespectful behavior, Beth's heart ached for Leesa. Would she ever grasp her true worth? *Lord, please release her from the heavy weight of low self-esteem.*

She pulled away and searched her husband's face, drawing strength from his confidence. The tenderness in his amazing baby-blues seared her. She brushed a wayward curl from his forehead. "What would I do without you, Mr. Holbrook?"

"You'll never have to find out." He pressed his lips against hers.

Oh, how she loved him. A treasured blessing after their rough early years during his military service, when they almost gave up on their marriage. "Thank you for being my rock."

He stroked a thumb across her cheekbone. "Everything will be all right. Don't worry."

"I'll try."

"Hey, what were you about to tell me when Leesa came in?"

Kevin's simple question reignited her excitement. A small smile emerged. "An acquisitions editor is interested in my manuscript."

“What? That’s amazing. All those years of building your platform are paying off.” He picked her up and swung her around.

She laughed. “It’s not a done deal yet. The editor loves my book concept and writing style, but she wants me to include personal stories to make the parenting principles more relatable to readers and less like a how-to manual.”

“Piece of cake.” He batted a hand in the air.

“Says the man who isn’t a writer. Plus, I only have two months to make it shine.”

“You’ve got this, babe. Once you’re published, I can say, ‘I knew her when.’”

“Thanks for your encouragement. It means a lot.” Especially after the confrontation with Leesa.

As the ugly scene with their daughter replayed in her mind, prickles lifted the hair on her arms.

Stop it, Beth. Don’t allow worry to gain a foothold and steal your joy.

God promised to give His children wonderful gifts. Now was her time, and she wouldn’t let this rare opportunity slip through her grasp.

Leesa paced Vanessa’s bedroom, ears burning. “Can you believe my parents?” She stumbled over a tennis shoe and kicked it across the room. It hit the wall. *Thunk*. “They make me so mad. I figured when I graduated, they’d let up a little, but I still have the same rules as my sister.”

Vanessa shoved a pile of clothes from her twin bed onto the floor and sat on the mattress, leaning against the headboard. “Yeah, I thought the same about my mom, but she grounded me this morning. Who does that to an eighteen-year-old?”

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Leesa dropped into Vanessa's rolling desk chair, letting out a strained laugh. "My parents." She picked up a pencil and tapped the eraser in a staccato beat on a stack of romance novels. "What did you do to make her mad this time?"

"She found empty beer cans and cigarette butts in the trash. Threatened to send me to Dad and his new girlfriend unless I *straighten up*." Vanessa made air quotes. "In what world is it okay to force me to live with him when she doesn't want to?"

"That stinks." When Leesa returned home tonight, she would be in major trouble too. Her parents wouldn't let her storm out without consequences. But seeing Isaac would be worth it.

"Tell me about it. If I don't land a full-time job by the end of July, I have to attend community college."

"Ugh. I'm so sick of my mother harping about college. Why can't they let us make our own choices?"

"For real. Like school is the only option or something." Vanessa punched the pillow beside her. "If I owned a car, I'd be out of here."

"Where would you go?" Leesa stopped tapping the pencil and twirled it between her fingers.

"Anywhere away from my control-freak mom." Vanessa piled her long red hair into a messy bun atop her head, securing it with a plastic clip. "Ever since Dad left last summer, it's like I'm the only thing in Mom's life she has any power over, so she loses it when something doesn't match her plan for me."

"Well, my dad didn't leave, and my mother acts the same way." Even in such a lousy situation, the weight on Leesa's chest lightened. Vanessa understood. They'd be besties forever, no matter what Mom and Dad said. "I'm glad we have each other."

“Same.” Vanessa bolted upright with a gasp. “Hey, I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Let’s escape their stupid rules. Move away and rent an apartment together.”

“If only.” Leesa plunked the pencil into a decorated aluminum can. The lead tip clinked on the metal bottom.

“I’m not joking. With high school finished, what’s stopping us?” Green flecks in Vanessa’s eyes sparkled. “If we share the bills, we can swing it.”

“Mom and Dad would never agree to that. Besides, ever since your mother quit church, she can’t stand me. She wouldn’t let us live together.”

“We don’t need our parents’ permission anymore.”

Ha, not true in Leesa’s world. “My mother would do everything possible to stop me. Bring up every reason we would fall flat on our faces.”

“Then we don’t tell them. We just go.” Vanessa hugged the pillow to her stomach. “Come on, Leese, let’s do it. We can leave today. Be free.”

“I don’t know.” She chewed a fingernail.

“Why? You got something great happening in your life you haven’t told me about?”

Not unless she and Isaac hit it off. “I’m hoping things will work out with Isaac. I can’t miss the chance to see him tonight and find out.”

“Fine. We can go to my friend’s party, crash at his place for the night, and head out tomorrow.”

Starting a new life sounded tempting. But people planned big moves. Right? “I can’t leave without my stuff, and I need to pick up my paycheck this weekend.”

“We’ll go by the restaurant today and to your house tomorrow morning while your family’s at church.” Vanessa

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rushed to the closet, pulled out a duffel bag, and set it atop her comforter. “I’m gonna pack. You with me?”

Leesa’s phone pinged with a text. She tugged it from her jeans pocket.

Be home by six. We’ll talk about what happened this morning after dinner. I’m making your favorite—spaghetti and meatballs.

Typical Mom. Trying to make amends with a kind act after forbidding something. She sighed. The thought of another frustrating conversation with her parents ruined any desire for pasta.

From early childhood, she had tried to please her parents ... and everyone else. To always be the good girl. But her efforts were never enough. She graduated with honors, served in the fifth-grade girls’ Sunday School class like they asked, and they still didn’t trust her. Time to do what *she* wanted for a change. “Where would we go?”

Vanessa beamed as if Leesa’s question meant agreement to her plan. Maybe it did. “My uncle lives in Myrtle Beach. I’m sure he’ll let us stay there while we look for jobs and find a place.”

Move to South Carolina and live in her favorite vacation town? What a dream. Vanessa was right. Leesa had nothing going for her in Virginia Beach. With Dad transitioning into the senior pastor position next year and Mom building her following to publish her book, the fishbowl life had only intensified. In a different city, she could be whoever she wanted. Start over.

A zing shot through her. She jammed her cell into her pocket. “Call your uncle.”