



# Prologue

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*Flight*

*I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm."*

—Psalm 55:6–8

(NIV)

The clouds were streaming from beyond the Western Hills like a massive flotilla being launched from a distant, unseen harbor. Large clusters of various sizes moved steadily toward the east, pushed by the wind, slowly reducing the sunlight to a few rays and giving the cloudy sky an opaque glow. The west wind moved down into the valley, gently stirring the trees, plants, and grass.

Slowly a storm began to build, with the wind increasing in force and speed, the clouds blanketing the sky, and the light dissipating into darkness. Seen through the deep, narrow Western Gap, where the adjacent hills were at their highest, the western horizon was totally black. The air in the valley became dense, filling the atmosphere with a heaviness that affected the creatures within it. The unusually strong storm forced an abrupt halt to the normal early spring activities of the valley's animals.

Creatures in the valley were seeking or had already sought shelter from the incoming storm. Ants and bees were in their respective homes, spiders that could hide in burrows or the safer parts of their webs did so, and other insects hid in the deep grass or under the bark of the trees. They knew the wind, the rain, and the darkness were coming, and most were prepared.

The sound of the wind racing through the valley started lightly, as if the air were being sucked through a straw. Then it grew until it swelled to a steady howl whose timbre and

pitch modulated with variances that gave a mysterious, foreboding quality to the storm. Dust and dirt particles collided on the ground as the churning air caused small cyclones of loose soil to form throughout the valley.

In the middle of the valley, in a neatly plowed field, standing on all six legs behind a small rock, was a female paper wasp named Amanda. With her brownish-red markings, she was of the northern species, which was uncommon in this region. She was facing toward the west, trying to avoid the full force of the wind. The rock behind which she stood sat precariously atop a ridge flanked by two wide furrows caused by recent plowing. The wasp's wings were flapping, pulled upward by the drag of the air moving around the rock.

"I can't go back!" Amanda shouted. "Please let me move forward!"

The loose soil of the field was lifted by the wind, creating a dust storm that not only obscured the environment but also filled the air with projectiles. If it were not for the protection of the small rock behind which the wasp hid, she would have been shredded.

Shifting carefully, Amanda moved to the side of the rock to peer forward. Beyond the valley floor, she saw a massive cold front crossing over the hills and gaps with a steady speed. It towered over the valley like a gigantic fortress wall, ascending several thousand feet into the sky. Its clouds were an ugly, menacing orange color, and its front was formless, constantly shifting in shape.

As the northern paper wasp observed the storm creeping over the Western Hills, she was awed by what appeared to be

faces in the storm wall. As it approached, the storm's surface morphed into humanlike countenances, with expressions varying from anger and rage to forlornness and despair. The approaching shelf cloud was like an army charging into an enemy, ready to conquer.

Amanda didn't want to see the developing storm circling around her, but she was forced to watch by her mere physiology. Wasps cannot close their eyes. They have two large compound eyes consisting of hundreds of small, simple receptors on each side of their head, allowing excellent vision to both the front and rear.

Soon the wind increased to a strength that could be deadly to the wasp. She crawled underneath the rock with as much effort as she could muster. However, she soon discovered a new problem: the force of the wind and the flying dust, coupled with the unstable soil under the rock, was causing it to move. The rock was creeping slowly down the ridge into the furrow, threatening to crush her.

Quickly Amanda moved to the side of the rock to avoid being flattened, but the wind caught her and tossed her violently across the gulley toward another ridge. She landed just above the swirling dust rising from the bottom of the furrow. As she frantically tried to climb up the ridge to avoid the furrow, a powerful gust of wind blew her upward toward the top of the ridge, and she landed headfirst near the peak. She catapulted upward, over the peak, then down the other side of the ridge, where a small twig that was protruding from the soil snagged her, pulling her upright. She clung to the branch with all of her strength.