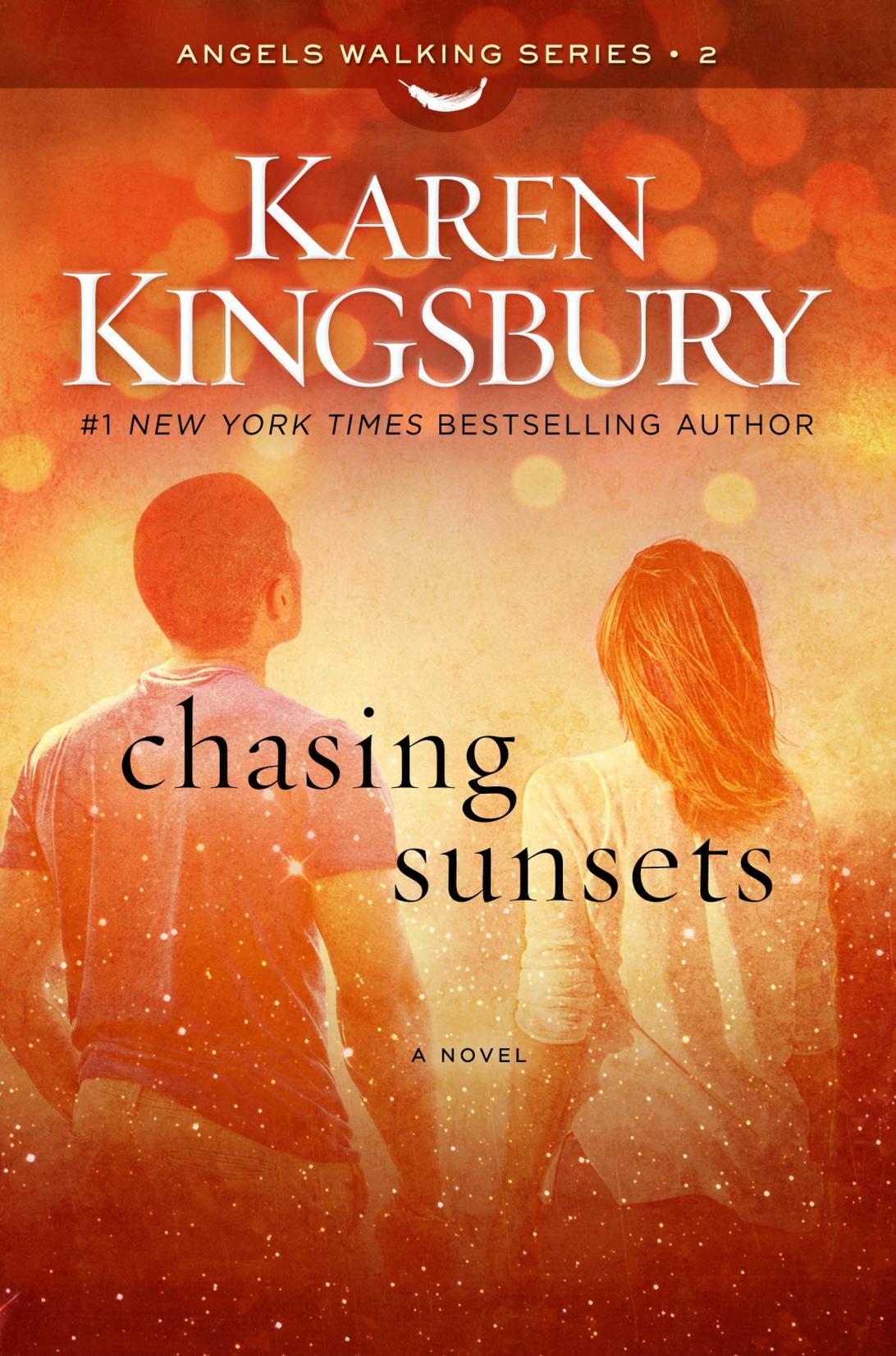


ANGELS WALKING SERIES • 2



# KAREN KINGSBURY

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR



chasing  
sunsets

A NOVEL



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*To Donald:*

Well, my love, the nest isn't empty just yet, but it's getting there. The years have picked up speed and now most of our boys are out of the house and caught up in the wonder of college at Liberty University. Kelsey has been married to her wonderful Kyle for nearly three years and Tyler is about to graduate from college. Where in the world has the time gone? Wasn't it just yesterday that we were taking the kids to the zoo for a Super Surprise Saturday? Or bringing home three wide-eyed orphans from Haiti? So much laughter, so much fun, and always you at the center, leading the way. I remember once writing down the ages the kids would be as the years ahead unfolded. The years sounded almost futuristic—2014, 2015, 2016. A million miles away from my comfortable place at the turn of the century. I would try to imagine life without the noise and homework and music and childlike laughter. Life without six sports and theater and dance schedules to somehow balance. I couldn't picture it. But now that we're here I can see something I didn't see back then. I see you, my love, ever so much more clearly. You and me, holding hands and having more and more time together, the two of us rejoicing over the goodness of God, the faithfulness of Him. The lesson we're learning is this: It's all wonderful. Every amazing season back then and now and yet to come. It's been said the best is yet to be. And so it is, especially with you by my side. Let's play and laugh and sing and dance, and together we'll watch our children take wing. The ride is breathtakingly wondrous. I pray it lasts far into our

twilight years. Until then, I'll enjoy not always knowing where I end and you begin. I love you always and forever.

***To Kyle:***

Kyle, our newest son, who so beautifully leads and loves our only daughter. I think of Don and me, standing on the beach in Mexico on the last day of our honeymoon, praying for the next generation—kids that God might bless us with and their future spouses. That day as we prayed on the beach, thousands of miles away, you were born. While we were praying. Amazing how God works out His plan and how faithful He is to answer prayers. Kyle, your heart is beautiful in every way. You cherish simple moments and are kind beyond words. You see the good in people and situations and you find a way to give God glory always. Your music is taking wing and now everyone knows about Kyle Kupecky and your gift of singing for Jesus. God is doing such great things with you and Kelsey and your ministries, your love for people. I thank God for you and look forward to the beautiful seasons ahead. Love you always!

***To Kelsey:***

My precious daughter, how wonderful that our dream of making a mother-daughter card and gift line has come true. Possibilities by DaySpring/Hallmark is now in stores everywhere . . . and we are hearing such beautiful things about how this line is bringing people closer. It's all just a dream come true—something I couldn't have seen coming. But God did . . . and He continues to surprise us, doesn't He? Also, I'm so happy for you and Kyle. Your first book comes out soon and girls everywhere will want to read *The Chase: When God Writes Your Fairytale*. I pray it

will change the hearts of this generation. I've never known you to be so happy, and time and again I point to you and Kyle as proof of God's faithfulness. Now, as you two move into the future God has for you, as you follow your dreams and shine brightly for Him in all you do, we will be here for you both, praying for you, believing in you, and supporting you however we best can. In the meantime, you'll be in my heart every moment. I love you, sweetheart.

***To Tyler:***

It's hard to believe you're so close to college graduation. The time has moved along faster every year and now here we are . . . knocking on the door of all that is ahead. All that God is still revealing to you. I'm so proud of the lead roles you've had in your college musicals. To think your papa told you he could see you as Tony from *West Side Story* one day . . . and that this past year you were Tony—it's further proof of God's love. But most of all I am proud of the example you have been to your friends—day in, day out. People around you are stronger because of you, and they are closer to God because of your example. I love that most of all about you, Ty. I'm so excited about your future. You are such a talented screenwriter, songwriter, director. One day the whole world will know! However your dreams unfold, we'll be in the front row cheering. Hold on to Jesus, son. Keep shining for Him! I love you.

***To Sean:***

You're finishing your first year at Liberty University with the dream of playing football. No one has worked for it harder than you, and we're so proud of your effort. But more than

that, we are proud you want to be at a school that puts God first. In every sense of the word. He has such great plans for you. Sean, you've always had the best attitude, and now—even when there are hard days—you've kept that great attitude. Be joyful, God tells us. Be honest. Be a man of character. Keep working, keep pushing, keep believing. Go to bed every night knowing you did all you could to prepare yourself for the doors God will open in the days ahead. You're a precious gift, son. I love you. Keep smiling and keep seeking God's best.

***To Josh:***

What changes you've gone through in the last year. You're at Liberty University now, working on becoming a champion for Christ! Whether on the football field or soccer field, you play with everything in you, leaving everything you have in the moments between the whistles. I'm so proud of you! This we know: there remains a very real possibility that you'll play competitive sports at the next level. God is going to use you for great things, and I believe He will put you on a public platform to do it. Stay strong in Him, and listen to His quiet whispers so you'll know which direction to turn. I'm so proud of you, son. I'll forever be cheering on the sidelines. Keep God first in your life. I love you always.

***To EJ:***

EJ, it's hard to believe you're finishing up your first year at Liberty University! As you continue to walk into this new season, I'm so glad you know just how much we love you and how deeply we believe in the great plans God has for you. With new opportunities spread out before you, keep your eyes on

Jesus and you'll always be as full of possibility as you are today. I expect great things from you, and I know the Lord expects that, too. I'm so glad you're in our family—always and forever. Thanks for your giving heart, EJ. I love you more than you know.

***To Austin:***

Austin, what changes God has brought about in your life this past year. First the devastating blow that you could no longer play football, that you would never suit up for your junior year or ever again, for that matter. The heart defect you were born with finally caught up with you in ways we didn't see coming. And though you are so very healthy, as the doctor told you that very sad day, his job is to keep you alive. And so we have watched you cry and call out to God, but also we have watched you embrace this next stage of life like a quarterback, fourth and twelve. Like everything about tomorrow depends on it. We've always known there's no quit in you, and now we can see that happening. God has great plans for you still, son. What they are? Well, that's still taking shape and it has all of us more excited than ever! God saved you at birth and again when you gave your life to Jesus. Now He has saved you a third time by taking you off that field before the unthinkable might've happened. Whatever He has ahead, I pray you will change the world for the better. I am completely convinced. But through it all I pray you remember you are only as strong as your dependence on Jesus. Only as brave as your tenacious grip on His truth. Your story is a series of miracles and this next chapter will be more of the same. Along the way, your dad and I will be in the front row cheering you on—whatever you play.

Whatever you do. Sky's the limit, Aus. The dream is yours to take. I thank God for you, for the miracle of your life. I love you, Austin.

*And to God Almighty, the Author of Life, who has—for now—  
blessed me with these.*

# Prologue



## *Town Meeting—Heaven*

**J**AG WAS GOING TO volunteer.

He had decided long before he walked into the meeting. It had only been a matter of convincing his still-broken heart. He moved into the room as the others took their seats. A spot at the back was still open. He slipped in and waited.

At the front, Orlon rose to face them. “You know why we’re here.” His voice sounded somber. “It’s time for the next part of our mission.” He set his shoulders back, strong, determined. “This time the task ahead is very serious. Life or death.”

Jag closed his eyes. The feel of the moment, the electricity and sense of expectation—all of it was familiar. Just like last time. *Am I wrong? Wrong to think I can make this journey when I failed last time?*

No answer whispered to him, but Jag knew what God

would say. The Father had already told him after his last Angels Walking mission. What had happened, the tragedy of it all—it wasn't Jag's fault. Earth belonged to the ruler of the kingdom of the air. Darkness would often prevail among men.

Until the trumpets sounded. And the Father would defeat evil for all eternity.

But that truth didn't lessen the weight of Jag's decision this time around. He had been told he would work again, that the day would come when another Angels Walking mission would require his skills. The time was now. Jag was convinced.

He opened his eyes.

Orlon was explaining the situation. "This time our mission involves Marcus Dillinger, the pro baseball pitcher."

Around the room the angels nodded. They had all shared a window to the work of the last Angels Walking team. The way Marcus Dillinger was used by God to bring his childhood friend Tyler Ames to Los Angeles.

"Marcus was MVP for the World Series win a few months ago." Orlon smiled. "On earth this is a big deal." His smile faded. "But now more than ever, Marcus is searching for meaning. Not only in life, but in love."

*Of course he is,* Jag thought. *Man's trophies and titles, his fortune and fame, could never satisfy.* Deep in the depths of any human heart that much was understood. Chasing after such meaningless things resulted in emptiness every time.

Orlon went on. "Marcus is a good man. He will not let darkness satisfy the longing in his soul. He wants the plans of God. This will work in our favor." His voice fell. "Even when everything else in Marcus Dillinger's world will seem to work against us."

He explained that Tyler Ames and his longtime love, Sami Dawson, would be part of this mission, as would Mary Catherine—Sami’s friend and roommate. “The success of this mission will come down to Mary Catherine.” Orlon narrowed his eyes, his shoulders set. “Our team will work in the inner city of Los Angeles, where survival is key. I’ll be clear with you. The enemy wants to cut short several lives—especially the lives of Marcus and Mary Catherine.”

Orlon hesitated. “You remember the ultimate goal.” It wasn’t a question. Of course they remembered. All of heaven was mindful of the near-impossible goal for this angel team, the way each mission would require victory before the next could begin. How only at the end of these missions would they know if they were ultimately successful.

That success would come with the birth of a baby named Dallas Garner.

“As I’ve told you”—Orlon moved along the front of the room—“if the child is born, he will grow to be a very great evangelist, a teacher who will help turn the sons and daughters of Adam back to knowledge of truth and love. Back to a foundation of Scripture. Dallas will offer a revival, especially for the United States. A nation that once trusted and revered God.”

Orlon had never looked more serious. “We have one successful mission behind us. We have several more ahead. But this one . . . this one will be dangerous for everyone involved. Even our team of Angels Walking.”

The angels shifted in their places, as if the heaviness in the room had taken up residence on each of their shoulders. Jag felt it most of all. Angels were never in physical danger, of course. They were eternal. But they could lose a battle with

man, and certainly they could be detained by the enemy. When Jacob of the Bible wrestled an angel, Jacob won. And when an angel was sent to Daniel in Babylon, the angel was prevented from his mission—blocked—by the prince of darkness.

Orlon checked the notes on his mahogany podium. “Michael tells me the baby has only a two percent chance of being born. The enemy has orchestrated a number of very dangerous circumstances. Health issues, relationship struggles, discouragement.” He looked around the room again. “Our Angels Walking team will be very busy.”

Jag ran his hand through his wavy blond hair and flexed his muscles. The tension in the room was building. It was time to choose the angels. Everyone could feel it.

“I need experience on this Angels Walking team. Veterans.” Orlon searched their faces. “Who would like to go?”

Jag didn’t hesitate. He rose to his full height. “I volunteer.”

Orlon paused but only for a moment. His eyes spoke volumes, for he knew Jag’s history, his heartbreaking past. “Jag.” A smile tugged at Orlon’s lips. “I was hoping you would consider this. It’s time.”

Once more Orlon looked around the room. “Who will take this Angels Walking mission with Jag?”

From the front of the room a willowy black angel rose from her seat. Her eyes shone like emeralds as she looked back at Jag and then at Orlon. “I volunteer.”

*Aspyn.*

If Jag could’ve chosen any angel in the room, he would’ve chosen her. The two of them had succeeded at a dangerous Angels Walking mission a hundred years ago in Germany.

Aspyn was skilled at intervening in battle, practiced at working with people who lived angry, violent lives.

Orlon looked satisfied. He drew a deep breath. "Very well." He motioned to the others. "Our job will be important also. We will watch and we will pray. Beginning now."

In a rush the other angels surrounded them. And with that their voices rose to the Father on behalf of the mission ahead.

Never mind the danger. Jag had a decade of defeat to put to an end.

He was practically desperate to begin.



# 1



**T**HE JANUARY SUNSHINE CAST an array of shimmering diamonds across the Pacific Ocean that early morning as Mary Catherine kicked off her sandals and headed for the water.

“We’ll freeze. Even with our wetsuits.” Sami Dawson, her best friend and roommate, was right behind her, laughing at the insanity of their decision.

“Only for a few minutes.” Mary Catherine’s long golden red hair was caught up in a ponytail and it flew behind her as she ran. She was laughing, too, but more because she loved starting her Saturday like this. “Once we’re in we won’t feel a thing.”

They carried their boogie boards as they ran through the shallow surf and then jumped over the frigid foamy breakers. In no time they were in up to their shoulders, past the foam and ready to ride the next set of waves.

Mary Catherine shook the water from her hair, breathless. “See? It isn’t terrible!”

“Sure.” Sami shivered. She nodded to the wave headed their way. “Come on. Keep moving.”

They caught the first one and rode it all the way to shore. The spray of cool seawater in their faces, the rush of the powerful ocean beneath them. Mary Catherine loved everything about this. She felt alive and whole and connected to God. A thrilling diversion from the news she’d received last week.

The news that her heart didn’t have long.

Sometime today she would tell Sami the truth about her health, come clean about the things she’d been hiding. But for now she would enjoy this moment. And she would remember what her mother told her years ago. Life could never be measured in the number of days a person lived, but only by the beautiful, brilliant life that had colored those days.

Mary Catherine paddled back out alongside Sami. Her friend’s eyes were wide. “I think I saw a dolphin.” She pointed behind the waves. “Like fifteen feet that way.”

Mary Catherine scanned the distant water. “I hope it wasn’t a shark.”

“What?” Sami let out a quiet scream. “Don’t say that!”

“I’m kidding.” Mary Catherine laughed again. “I saw it, too. A few of them. Definitely dolphins.”

Another swell came and again they caught the ride all the way in. They took their boards and sat on the wet sand, trying to catch their breath. Sami shook her shoulder-length dark hair. “Thank you for making me do this. I’m not cold.”

“It’s perfect out here.” Mary Catherine headed back out. “Come on. A few more.”

They pushed through the white surf to the smooth area and waited. Sami wiped the water from her face. “I can’t wait

for tonight. I really think Marcus is onto something with this youth center.”

“Me, too. I’m glad we’re going early.” Mary Catherine felt it, the way she always did at the mention of Marcus’s name. A feeling that started in her heart and made its way down her arms and up the back of her neck. She hated the reaction. The last thing she needed was a crush on Marcus Dillinger. “Is he still dating his coach’s niece?”

“He is. We’re double-dating with them next week.” Sami wrinkled her nose. “I don’t think they’re a good match.” She shrugged. “I don’t see it.”

Between her heart condition and half a dozen charities she was involved with, Mary Catherine certainly had no time to worry about a professional baseball player. The guy could never be her type.

They rode a few more waves and then Mary Catherine nodded to the shore. “Let’s dry off.”

“Good idea. I still have to do laundry before we meet up with the guys.”

Their towels were ten yards up the beach, and after a few minutes they pulled on sweats and sat on the sand facing the water. Mary Catherine turned her face to the winter sun and savored the way it melted through her. How could anything be wrong with her heart? She felt too good to be sick.

The quiet suited them. Since rooming together a few years ago they’d had the sort of friendship that could erupt into laughter or feel comfortable in complete silence. They were very different, she and Sami. Mary Catherine broke the silence. “Did you and Tyler have fun last night?”

“We did.” Sami’s smile lit up her face more than the morn-

ing sun ever could. "I can't believe how good things are. I think he's going to ask me to be his girlfriend. Officially."

Mary Catherine jumped to her feet. "Really?" She danced around in a circle. "Yes!" She raised both fists in the air. "Yes, yes, yes!" Then just as quickly she dropped back to the beach. "What in the world is taking so long?"

"Well . . ." Sami shrugged, sheepish. "It's more me. Like I told you." This time her laugh sounded more nervous. "I needed time."

"Come on." Mary Catherine leaned back on her hands and grinned at her friend. "You've been in love with him since you were in high school."

"But I was practically engaged to Arnie." Sami's tone held a mock protest, nothing serious. After a few seconds she burst into the sort of laughter she and Mary Catherine shared so often. "Okay, okay! You're right. I don't need much more time."

"Oh, come on." Mary Catherine leaned forward and crossed her legs. "How long before he'll ask you to marry him?"

"Seriously?" Sami looked shocked. "Let's not rush things!"

"It won't be long." Mary Catherine raised her eyebrows. "You heard it from me first."

"You're crazy."

"But in this case, also right." Mary Catherine let her silliness fade, let the breeze off the ocean frame the moment, the significance of it. "Was it beautiful? Your date?"

"It was. We were at Disneyland, as you know." She looked so much happier than before, back when she was dating Arnie. "When it was dark he took me to the bridge in front of Sleeping Beauty's castle." Sami was sitting cross-legged now,

facing Mary Catherine. “He told me he never stopped adoring me, never stopped thinking about me. Even with every bad decision he made back then.”

“That’s sweet.”

Sami’s smile held a contentment that hadn’t been there in the beginning, back when Tyler first returned to Los Angeles. “He says he has just one regret now. One that still haunts him.” She paused and lifted her face toward the sun for a few seconds before looking back at Mary Catherine. “That he ever left me at all.”

The story touched Mary Catherine. She couldn’t be happier for her friend, for the love she’d found. “I want to be maid of honor.” She held up both hands in a teasing surrender. “That’s all I’m saying.”

“Seriously, though . . . you could be right.” Again Sami’s joy was tangible. “I love him so much. This new Tyler, the one with lessons learned and a faith that gets stronger every day . . . I just never dreamed we would have a second chance.”

“I did.” Mary Catherine gave Sami a knowing look. “Remember?”

“True.” Sami’s laugh mixed with the disbelief she still clearly felt. “You told me I couldn’t leave Florida on that business trip, unless I spent a few hours with him.”

“Let’s just say I’m a very good friend.” Mary Catherine grinned.

“Definitely maid of honor status.”

The sun was higher in the sky, temperatures heating up. Mary Catherine allowed the silence again. She needed some kind of buffer before she could tell Sami the truth about her health. The one thing they’d never talked about. She checked

her phone. Nearly eleven o'clock. They needed to be at the newly renovated youth center by three that afternoon to help with last-minute details for the grand opening.

Finally Mary Catherine shifted on her towel so she was facing Sami. "You ever wonder why I changed my eating habits lately? No more frozen pizza?"

Sami's smile came easily. "The whole no sugar, no gluten, no grain thing?" She uttered a quick laugh. "Because you're amazing and you like feeling good enough to climb walls and jump out of planes?" She laughed again. "That's what I always figured. I sure couldn't eat that clean."

Mary Catherine hated what was coming. She wanted everyone in her world to go on thinking she had switched up her eating because of her zest for life. Nothing more. She hesitated.

Finally Sami's laughter faded. "Isn't that why?"

"No." Mary Catherine's smile remained, but she could feel a sadness filling her eyes. "I'm diabetic. Type two."

"What?" Sami put her elbows on her knees and leaned closer. "Since when? How come you never told me?"

"I only found out last month, and my eating keeps it under control." She angled her head, willing her friend to understand. "I don't like thinking about it. Obviously. And, well, the way I eat I don't need pills or shots. I check my blood sugar every morning. So far, it's controlled."

Sami hesitated. "Okay, good. You scared me for a minute."

"There's more. Diabetes runs in our family." She paused. "Just like congenital heart defects. My uncle died because of his heart disease when he was in his late twenties. My mom never had any problem, but the gene passed on to me."

Again Sami looked beyond confused. She stared at Mary Catherine. “You’re saying . . . there’s something wrong with your heart?”

Mary Catherine took a slow breath. “I was born with a coarctation of the aorta, and a bicuspid aortic valve. I had emergency surgery when I was a few weeks old and since then I get checkups every year.” She forced her smile. “No big deal.”

“You should’ve said that first.” Sami looked like she wasn’t sure whether to relax or expect more news. “So . . . you’re okay? Like long-term?”

“Not really.” She hadn’t talked about this with anyone. Not even her parents. “I had a checkup last week. My heart’s enlarged—which isn’t good. And my valves are deteriorating. I’ll need a transplant sometime in the next year.”

Sami pulled her knees up to her chest and hung her head for several seconds. When she looked up, there was no mistaking the fear in her eyes. “What does that mean?”

“The valve transplant isn’t the worst thing. People survive those—though mine will be trickier for a lot of reasons.” Mary Catherine looked to the sky; the California sun filled the morning. “It’s my enlarged heart that’s the real problem. Even with a transplant I may not have more than ten years. Maybe less.”

The color left Sami’s face and she simply stared, like she couldn’t begin to believe the news. “That’s . . . awful.”

“You’re the only one who knows.” She reached out and gave Sami’s hand a brief squeeze. “You’re my best friend, Sami. I’ve been looking for a way to tell you.”

Sami hung her head for a long moment again. When she

turned to Mary Catherine, there were tears in her eyes. “There must be something they can do. Your parents know the best doctors, right?”

“They do. But this . . . well, you can’t fix an enlarged heart like mine. There are drugs that can slow the process. But that’s about it.”

“I can’t believe this.” Sami stared at the sky. A minute passed before she lowered her arms and faced Mary Catherine again. Tears fell down her cheeks. “We have to find another opinion.”

“I’ve done that.” She looked straight into Sami’s eyes. “Look, the reason I’m telling you is so you’ll pray. God can do anything—even with this.” Again, she worked to keep discouragement from her voice. “That’s why I care so much about living. Why I’m always talking about only living once. Because I don’t have as long as most people.”

Sami wiped her tears with her fingertips. “It’s not fair.”

“It is.” Mary Catherine sat up straighter. “God’s given me all these years of life and probably many more. I still have lots to do—like get that youth center up and running tonight. And maybe move to Africa for a year and work with orphans.”

“You always say that.”

“I’ll do it one of these days.” Mary Catherine found her smile again. “Of course, I’ll probably skydive another dozen times at least, and look.” She turned her face toward the ocean again. “I have mornings like this, with you.” She felt a familiar peace fill her soul. “God has been far more than fair with me.”

“Are you in pain? I mean . . . like, does it make your chest hurt?”

“Not at all.” She raised her hands and dropped them again. “I feel perfect.”

“Good.” Sami looked off, her expression marked with sorrow. “What about love?”

“What about it?” Mary Catherine felt her heart sink.

Sami stared at her. “You deserve love.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I won’t have time.” Mary Catherine felt tears sting her own eyes. “But I’m okay with that.”

Sami looked into her eyes again. “You were going to find someone real, remember? Someone like you, with faith like you and a love for life like you.” Sami shook her head. “That was supposed to be the miracle of your life.” She exhaled hard. “I can’t believe this.”

“Sami . . . it’s all right.” Mary Catherine put her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “God’s going to give me a different kind of miracle.” She stood and reached out her hand. “Come on. Let’s go find those dolphins.”

Sami waited several seconds before she took Mary Catherine’s hand. “Really?” She shaded her eyes so she could see better. “Can you do this? Swimming in the ocean? Is that good for you?”

“It’s all good.” She slipped back into her wetsuit and ran a few steps ahead. “The more life in my days, the better. Then it doesn’t matter how many days I have. Just that I really lived them.”

“I hate this.” Sami climbed into her wetsuit and caught up to her. “You’re probably supposed to be home resting.”

“Never.” Mary Catherine grabbed her boogie board and ran through the surf. Her laughter mixed with the sound of the waves. “God wants me out here.”

Sami paddled alongside her. The moment they reached the calm area before the swells, they spotted the dolphins. Three of them, playing in the water a few yards away.

“See!” Mary Catherine’s joy was as genuine as the sun on the water. “I don’t want to miss this.”

For the first time in many minutes, Sami smiled again. “I don’t know anyone like you, MC.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Mary Catherine looked over her shoulder as the perfect wave came straight for them. “Here we go!”

And with that they both caught the wave and started to ride it in. The moment they did, Mary Catherine spotted two of the dolphins riding alongside them. “Look!” she shouted.

Sami turned her head and saw what was happening just before the dolphins kicked out of the wave and headed back out to sea. “Wow!”

“That never happens!”

“So beautiful.” Sami was laughing now, too.

Mary Catherine turned her attention to the shore as the ride continued. Tears filled her eyes and mixed with salt water and a happiness that knew no limits. The heaviness from earlier was gone. No matter how many years she had or where God would lead her from here, one thing would always be true.

As long as she drew breath, she would spend her days living.

## 2



**D**WAYNE DAVIS WAS HER life now.

Lexy watched him behind the wheel, his face twisted in an angry look. He was determined . . . this time he was really going to do it. Which was crazy, because a daytime robbery was the stupidest thing ever. They could both get caught and Lexy would wind up in prison just like her mama. How was she going to tell her grandma something like that?

Dwayne jerked the car into the parking lot of the Shell gas station. Lexy couldn't breathe, couldn't talk. What if the guy behind the counter had a gun? What if Dwayne got shot?

"I'm not sure if we should . . ." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

Dwayne slammed the car into park and glared at her. He left the engine running. "Shut up." He looked over his shoulder. "Stay low."

She did as he asked. Her heart pounded against her thin

T-shirt. Dwayne was her man. She wasn't ready to lose him. If the store guy had a gun then this could end bad. Really bad. Lexy closed her eyes. She was only sixteen. But they would throw her behind bars. She could already feel the cold metal handcuffs on her wrists.

If he could do it, if Dwayne could pull off the robbery, he'd be leader of the gang. Which would make her the girl everyone wanted to be. That girl. Gang leader's girl. She opened her eyes. Her heart was beating so hard, the noise was all she could hear. Where was he? What was taking so long?

For a quick second she caught her reflection in the mirror. Her dad was black, mom was Hispanic. She had long, straight hair and light brown skin. Guys thought she was pretty. She'd been sleeping around for a year, but the last few months she'd belonged to Dwayne. Him alone.

He made her feel special. Like she was someone.

Lexy peered through the window. She couldn't see the cash register, but she could hear yelling. Probably Dwayne. He was so angry today. Like he could shoot someone without thinking about it. He was actually scaring her.

Suddenly Dwayne burst through the door with a paper bag, probably full of money. He stopped, aimed his gun back toward the store, and fired. At the same time a bullet whizzed past Dwayne's head, barely missing him. "Dwayne! Hurry!" she cried out.

Dwayne turned and ran for the car. He jumped in and sped out of the parking lot. He didn't look at her or say anything. His eyes were like black steel.

Lexy felt like she was going to throw up. The wheels spun

as they turned left and peeled down the street. She tried to understand. “Where you going?” Her voice was loud and frantic. She hated this. Why couldn’t he talk to her? She could hardly breathe. “Dwayne, where?”

“I’m thinking.” He was breathing hard. He looked into the bag as he drove and let out a victory shout. “We did it, Lex . . . we got this thing. Gotta be a couple hundred dollars here.”

“Did you . . . did you kill him?”

Dwayne glared at her. “I missed, okay?” He kept one hand on the wheel and lunged at her like he might slap her. Instead he shoved the bag onto the floorboard.

Lexy didn’t dare ask where they were going again. Dwayne was eighteen—he would think of a plan.

Sirens sounded in the distance. Dwayne rattled off a bunch of cusswords. He leaned forward, like he was looking for a way out. The car’s steering wasn’t the greatest, so he took a turn on two wheels and sped halfway down the street before he pulled over.

Dwayne dropped down in the seat and pulled his baseball cap low over his eyes. “Don’t talk.”

Lexy wanted to yell at him that she wasn’t a baby. She could talk if she wanted to. But then Dwayne might tell her to get out and walk home. If she wanted to belong to him, she needed to do what he asked. She crossed her arms and kept her mouth closed. At his house, when they were in bed, he was the nicest guy in the world. One day he’d quit getting so angry. Maybe if he became leader of the gang. That would make him happy.

Dwayne’s phone rang. He was shaking, looking at the

money and then checking the rearview mirror. He took his phone from his pocket and answered it. "S'up."

It was a guy's voice on the other end. Lexy could hear that much. But she couldn't make out what he was saying.

Dwayne cursed at the guy and then lowered his voice. "You can't keep changing the rules."

Lexy felt sick again. Must've been someone from the committee, the guys who would decide the next leader of the gang. So far Dwayne was only supposed to hit up a convenience store in the middle of the day. Nothing more. But it was never that easy, not with the WestKnights.

Dwayne shook his head and then smacked his hand on the dashboard. He cursed under his breath this time. "Fine. Tonight." He shook his head, angrier than before. "Later."

Lexy knew better than to ask. Instead she looked straight ahead, her arms still pressed against her stomach.

He slammed his hand against the dashboard again. "Gotta kill three EastTown thugs or Marcus Dillinger. Tonight."

"The baseball player?" Lexy stared at him. "You can't kill him."

Dwayne made a fist and then relaxed it. "Marcus is an easy kill." Dwayne laughed, but the sound seemed dark. Almost evil.

Lexy's heart raced faster than before. Dwayne couldn't be for real. He couldn't kill Marcus Dillinger. The guy was a hero. MVP of the Dodgers. The opening of his youth center was tonight. Killing Marcus? Lexy wanted to scream. Marcus was the hottest player on the Dodgers. From everything she'd

seen on TV he seemed like a great guy. Why would the committee want Marcus dead? None of it made sense.

Dwayne picked up his phone and made a quick call. The voice on the other end sounded like the same guy. “Yo. I made up my mind. I got Dillinger. Tonight.”

Dwayne took off his baseball cap and rubbed his head. He looked over his shoulder behind them. “Police missed us.”

*This time*, Lexy wanted to say.

He tossed the bag of cash at her. “See what your man did for you, baby? This is only the beginning.” He peered at her as he pulled the car back onto the street. “Now put it down. You don’t touch my money unless I tell you.”

He drove down the street and turned right toward the freeway. With every mile he seemed to relax a little more. “Gonna be a bloody night, baby. Gonna make you proud.”

“You should get the EastTown guys. That’d be better.”

He glared at her again. “Maybe I’ll start with you.”

“I’m just saying you can’t kill a professional—”

“Shut up!” He cussed at her again. “You take orders from me. You got that?”

Lexy felt her anger rise up, but then it fell away. She was here by her own choice.

They drove ten miles south before Dwayne pulled off the freeway and headed north again, toward home. Toward the streets just a few miles from Dodger Stadium.

Lexy felt tears in her eyes. The feeling wasn’t something she was used to. Gang girls didn’t cry. Too much going on. Still, Lexy wished they could take a week off from stealing and killing and claiming territory. The whole thing was ex-

hausting. And now Dwayne was going to kill the city's favorite baseball player. She should've demanded he pull over so she could get out, demanded to be done with this life, but she couldn't. It was the only life she knew. Besides, she had everything she'd ever wanted.

She was Dwayne Davis's girl.

# 3



COACH OLLIE WAYNE WALKED into the bathroom where his wife, Rhonda, was finishing up her eye shadow. Ollie came to her and kissed her neck. “You look beautiful. Prettiest coach’s wife ever.”

She cast him a teasing look. “Coach’s wife?”

Ollie loved her spunk. He gave his own forehead a light smack. “What? Did I say coach’s wife?” He did a humble bow. “Forgive me. I meant you’re the prettiest woman in all the world. Wife or not. Forget about just us coaches.”

“Thank you.” She gave him a flirty grin and returned to the mirror. “Will Tyler be there today?”

“Yes. Tyler and his girlfriend. A few other friends of Marcus and the volunteers from the neighborhood.”

Rhonda smiled. “I’m proud of Marcus. What he’s done, it’s really something.”

“He and Tyler have worked on it around the clock.” Ollie

sat on the edge of the tub. “He requested that the media not be there tonight. Doesn’t want it to be a circus.”

“See! That’s what I love about him.” Rhonda was putting on her lipstick. “This isn’t about getting another headline.”

“The exact opposite.” Ollie stood. “I’ll bring the car up.”

“Okay.” She grinned at him and returned to the eye shadow. “Five minutes tops.”

Ollie chuckled as he left the bathroom and walked downstairs to the garage. They lived in Silver Lake, in the shadow of Dodger Stadium, an area recently voted the number one most hipster neighborhood in the country. Of course, that wasn’t why Ollie and Rhonda and their family lived there. They’d moved to Silver Lake fifteen years ago when Ollie was hired by the Dodgers. He’d been the head pitching coach for the last decade. They didn’t plan on going anywhere.

Besides, the neighborhood suited them. Organic food and farmer’s markets and the new Whole Foods down the street. People were friendly and the coffee was the best in all of Los Angeles. Ollie and Rhonda loved being with their neighbors and sharing their faith whenever possible.

Ollie climbed in the family’s Suburban and pulled it up the driveway and around to the front of the house. As he waited, Ollie thought about the goodness of God. He and Rhonda were about to celebrate twenty years of marriage. Their three kids were healthy and finding their way through life with a faith that was increasingly their own. Shane was eighteen, a senior shortstop at nearby La Mirada Academy, and at eleven, Tucker was finishing up fifth grade and excited about middle school next year.

The only one Ollie worried about was Sierra. Their pretty

brunette was sixteen, a sophomore at La Mirada. All her life Sierra had been close to Rhonda. The two of them shopped and shared coffee dates and spent Saturday mornings hiking around Silver Lake. But this year things had changed. Sierra had started to hang out with a rougher crowd, and before Christmas break a school monitor caught her in the parking lot with a group of shady kids, ditching class.

*More prayer*, Ollie told himself. They wouldn't lose Sierra without doing everything in their power to keep her from straying. She was inside now, up in her bedroom studying for a biology test. Ollie almost wished she was coming with them to the youth center instead. Serving someone else might help Sierra remember who she was and the family she belonged to.

Part of the problem was his niece, Shelly. She was nineteen, a fashion design major at USC. Shelly didn't share the same faith as the rest of the family, but Sierra looked up to her. The two would go for coffee or shopping every few weeks. Shelly figured herself too smart to need Jesus, too gifted and financially secure to need redemption. That attitude was rubbing off on Sierra.

Her father—Ollie's brother—was a neurosurgeon. He'd lost control of Shelly long ago. Even before her freshman year at USC, when she moved in with a grad student she was dating at the time, she'd told her parents she didn't share their beliefs or their values.

And now Shelly was dating Marcus Dillinger.

Rhonda came hurrying out and jumped in the passenger side. "Let's do this." She smiled at him as she set her purse on the floor.

"We're picking up Shelly?" Ollie assumed as much.

“Yes.” Rhonda gave a careful nod. “Your niece wouldn’t miss this.”

“Amazing. She’s found this sudden desire to help others.”

Rhonda gave Ollie a polite smile. “She would pick up trash in the gutter if it meant being close to Marcus.”

“I know.” Ollie sighed. “What does Marcus see in her?”

This time Rhonda cast Ollie a wary glance. “Really?”

Ollie thought about his niece for a long moment. Tanned, bleach blond, with a body that bore the proof of her twice-daily yoga. She had confidence, a career ahead of her, and money. She was the kind of girl Ollie was used to seeing on the arms of his ballplayers.

But Marcus Dillinger?

His star pitcher had changed so much in the past year. Ever since Tyler Ames arrived, the two of them had shared a quest to change life in the inner city. He had watched Marcus’s faith in God grow every week in every area except one: Marcus’s decision to date Shelly.

Ollie could only pray that in the next six weeks before spring training, Marcus would see the light about Shelly. Sooner than later. Before things got more serious. He’d seen some very good men brought down by the wrong women.

Marcus was a great guy, but he wasn’t bulletproof.