

Book 1 in the Angels Walking Series

# *Angels Walking*

# KAREN KINGSBURY

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

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## Prologue

*Town Meeting—The Mission*

A REVERENT SILENCE DEFINED THE heavenly room as the participants took their places.

This was a new team. A new set of chosen travelers gathered for a desperate series of battles. A mission with the highest stakes. Orlon rose to his full height and took his place at the front of the room. The walls shimmered with gold and sparkling stone. The brightest possible light streamed through the windows. No one seemed to notice.

Angels were accustomed to the light.

Orlon stared at the faces before him. He could feel their concerns, their questions, their curiosity. Each of the twenty angels gathered here had been hand-picked, carefully selected for this team because together they possessed something rare and beautiful: a discernment that set them apart.

Of all heaven's angels, these compassionate beings best understood matters of the heart.

"Each of you was created for such a time as this." Orlon's voice resonated with power in the meeting space. "Our team has been given a mission to rescue the hearts of a very few sons and daughters of Adam. Humans on the precipice of history."

The angels remained silent. Their collective empathy colored the room with peace.

"The first part of our mission involves a battle for the heart and soul of a troubled man, a baseball player named Tyler Ames, who lives in Pensacola, Florida. The second centers around a young woman in Los Angeles. The girl Tyler once loved. Her name is Samantha Dawson." Orlon smiled, even beneath the weight of the mission. He felt a fondness for the two already. "Tyler called her Sami."

Orlon drew a breath. "Michael has scrutinized all angels and found you—in particular—worthy of the assignments ahead, ready for the battles that are to come."

He detailed the setup. "The situation with Tyler and his former love is complicated.

Over time other people will be involved. It will take several missions to succeed. In each, we will interact with a number of humans in various earth locations.” He made eye contact with several angels. “We will take our assignment one stage at a time.”

A slight shift came from the angels facing him. Not a restlessness. More of an anticipation. If sons and daughters of Adam were in trouble, these chosen angels were ready.

Orlon took his notes from a polished mahogany table at the front of the room. “The abandonment of faith continues unabated throughout all of earth. This is nothing new.” Orlon felt heaviness in his heart. “But Michael has learned of a child not yet conceived, not yet born. This child will grow to be a very great teacher. Like C. S. Lewis or Billy Graham. Because of him, many will change their ways and return to faith.”

Angels didn’t feel confusion. But the expressions on the faces in front of him showed the closest thing to it. Orlon moved a step closer. “The salvation of countless souls depends on this child.”

A few of the angels nodded. Some leaned closer, intent, focused. Orlon turned the page of his notes and his heavenly body tensed. “Tyler and Samantha are in a battle they do not know and cannot see. A battle of discouragement and defeat. A battle for their souls.” Orlon sighed. “To make matters worse, these two have forgotten their potential. They have lost their way. And if”—he looked carefully around the room—“if we fail, all of history will suffer.”

Every face in the room showed commitment to the fight.

Orlon steadied himself. Whatever happened, Michael had chosen correctly. These were the right angels for the mission.

“Hear me now. These two humans must not give up. For if they do, the child who would change history will never be born. In that case, people will suffer . . . and die.” He paused. “You must know the name of the child. He will be called Dallas Garner. Remember that. Pray for him every day.”

From the front row, an angel named Beck raised his hand. Beck was the tallest, strongest one there. He was dark-skinned with shiny brown hair and pale green eyes. If he were human, he could’ve easily played professional football. Instead, Beck was an angelic veteran in battles of the heart. He sat up straighter. “The child will be theirs? Tyler and Sami?”

“No.” Orlon did not blink. “Those details will come. Michael stressed that we will learn about one aspect of the battle at a time.” He paused. “Hours are passing. I need two of you to leave now on a mission. You will be given more information along the way—where to go, when to interact.”

Beck rose from his chair. “I volunteer.”

“And me.” Ember had been sitting at the back of the room, her long golden-red hair framing her enormous blue eyes. Ember had a strength other angels would never know. She stood, her passion for the sons and daughters of Adam palpable. “Send me, Orlon.”

He thought for a long moment. “Very well.” He crossed his arms. “Beck and Ember. We will send you.”

Michael had told him the teams would be easy to choose. They usually were. Countless angels were on assignment from heaven to earth. Two at a time. Thousands of pairs working in tandem on missions taking place around the planet at any given moment.

Most humans never knew, never understood. Man did not need to understand for

angels to do their work. The idea of an earthly assignment was familiar to all of heaven, as was the term used to describe the common phenomenon.

*Angels Walking.*

Beck and Ember came to the front of the room. Without a word, the others gathered around and laid hands on the two. The prayer was brief and powerful: that God's Spirit go with Beck and Ember, and that somewhere in Pensacola and Los Angeles two hearts might be rescued from destruction.

Not only for their sakes. But for the sake of a baby not yet conceived.

For the sake of all mankind.

Orlon stared into the faces of Beck and Ember. They were ready for the mission, anxious for the battle.

It was time to begin.



# Chapter 1

SINCE HIS FOURTH BIRTHDAY, Tyler Ames had logged nearly twenty thousand hours training and practicing and preparing for the game of baseball. Two decades of wins and losses, warm-ups and strikeouts, game after game after game. But there was one thing Tyler had never accomplished.

He'd never been perfect.

Until now.

Tyler adjusted his Blue Wahoos cap and dug the toe of his shoe into the soft dirt of the pitcher's mound at the Pensacola Bayfront Stadium. Redemption was at hand. Bent at the waist, the ball an extension of his arm, Tyler stared down the next batter. Nearly five thousand fans screamed beneath the lights on this beautiful August evening.

Here . . . now . . . Tyler actually felt perfect.

As if tonight even the ghosts of his past were cheering for him.

His heart slammed around in his chest as he reeled back and released a pitch. *Ninety miles an hour*, he thought. *At least ninety.*

"Strike!" The umpire stood and pumped his right arm. "One ball, two strikes!"

*One more*, Tyler caught the ball from the catcher. Just one. A breeze blew in from the bay, but Tyler couldn't stop sweating. *Breathe, Ames. Just breathe.* They were the words he told himself every time the game got tense. He dragged his arm over his forehead, stood straight up on the mound, and took a deep breath.

One more strike. Tyler squinted at the catcher's signals. The dance was as old as the game: catcher signaling the pitch, pitcher waiting for the right signal, the pitch he wanted to throw. The signal came.

*No.* Tyler shook his head. Not that one. The catcher changed signals. Again Tyler shook his head. The third signal made Tyler smile. At least on the inside.

The change-up. Perfect pitch for this batter, this moment.

Tyler glanced at the stands. Four scouts from the Cincinnati Reds were here. If things went well he could bypass triple A and join the Big Leagues. As early as next week. The Majors. His dream since winning the Little League World Series twelve years ago. Six years making minimum wage, trekking around down South on a bus would all be worth it after to- night. He could do it. He had never pitched like this.

Not in all his life.

Tyler wound up and released the pitch. It flew from his hands like a blazing fastball, but halfway to the plate it braked. The batter—a new third-round pick out of Texas— swung early. Way early.

"Strike three!"

Tyler jogged toward home and high-fived his catcher, William Trapnell. Six innings, eighteen straight batters. Fourteen strikeouts. Three ground-outs to first. One caught fly ball. Jep Black, the Blue Wahoos manager, met him at the dugout. "Got someone to hit for you, Tyler." He patted his back. "Rest your arm."

Tyler nodded and took a spot at the end of the bench. This was his second season with the Blue Wahoos, and though the roster changed constantly, he generally liked his teammates. Several of them shouted congratulations.

“You’re perfect tonight, Ames.” William swigged down a water bottle, breathless. “You own this.”

Tyler gave him a thumbs-up. “Thanks. Keep it up.” He volleyed a couple more compliments, slid a jacket over his pitching arm, and leaned back. He could relax this inning with the designated hitter taking over.

He closed his eyes and filled his lungs with the ocean air. Hadn’t he known this would happen? When he got moved up from the Dayton A team last spring he had expected great things.

Tyler blinked and stared at home plate. The first Blue Wahoos batter was up. Tyler worked the muscles in his hand, making a fist and releasing it. His team was at the top of the lineup. Plenty of time. Tyler squinted at the distant lights, the sponsor signs on the outfield walls. Like a grainy YouTube clip, the seasons ran together in his mind. Star of the 2002 Little League World Series. In high school, California’s Mr. Baseball. Most recruited pitcher in the history of UCLA.

How had it all gone so wrong?

The fallout with his parents, his back injury, the public drunkenness charges, the girls. He had fallen out of grace with his fans and everyone he loved.

Sami Dawson most of all. Her name made his heart hurt. *Sami, girl . . . where are you?* What happened to us? He closed his eyes again. He had loved her more than life. But that was a hundred years ago.

Cheers interrupted his personal highlight reel. He opened his eyes and watched their centerfielder hit a triple. Blue Wahoos up, 3–0. He massaged his right arm. It was sore, but a whole lot better than usual. He had three more innings in him. Definitely.

A picture filled his mind. He and Sami, both of them seventeen, sitting together on her grandparents’ roof. Aww, Sami. *We thought we had forever back then.* The stars had looked brighter that night, the silhouette of the trees like something from a dream. No one had believed in him more than Sami Dawson.

*What was I thinking? How could I let you go?*

Tyler gritted his teeth. Tonight was where it would all turn around. He would Google his own name tomorrow and see something different. Tyler Ames: Perfect. Story after story would say the same thing. He’d made it. Finally found his way. He would be perfect and everyone would know. Maybe even Sami.

Buried would be all the headlines still there at the moment.

*Tyler Ames: The Kid Who Didn’t Live Up to His Potential.*

*Minor League Purgatory: The Story of Tyler Ames.*

*The Sad Life of Tyler Ames: Mr. Baseball, Mr. Joke.*

Tyler exhaled. The pain of his past was as close as the nearest computer. Any kid with a cell phone could read about the hero he’d been.

And the failure he’d become.

Every game, every inning of the past few years was like an act of penance now, a way to absolve himself for the sins of his past. And every single pitch had led to this.

The chance to be perfect. No hits, no walks, no one on base. Perfect.

For the first time.

What would his parents say after tonight? His father’s face flashed in his mind. Funny. Whenever he thought of his dad, he thought of him angry. Correcting his pitching form, scrutinizing his weight training, questioning him.

Another run scored and the Blue Wahoos were back in the outfield. Tyler felt warm and focused. More ready than ever. Jep Black's words from earlier that day ran through his head: "Tonight's your night, Ames. Go out there and prove me right."

Indeed.

Jep had been talking to scouts from the Reds ever since the season started. Tonight, finally, the scouts were here. They actually wanted him. That's what Jep said. The Reds' director of player personnel knew his name and his numbers. Every wonderful statistic from this season. Tyler was just what they were looking for. They even knew about his past.

And they still wanted him.

Tyler set his jacket on the bench and jogged out to the mound. On the way he stopped and talked to his catcher.

"More of the same." He brushed his glove against William's shoulder. "Talk to me, Trap. Keep me perfect."

"You got it."

He reached the mound and glanced up. When was the last time a guy in the AA minor leagues threw a perfect game? The Pensacola faithful were on their feet. Tyler Ames was about to make history. They could feel it. This was their night as much as it was his.

The beautiful oceanfront stadium had opened two years ago, and already it topped the list of places to see, things to do on the Florida Panhandle. The fans had bought into the Blue Wahoos, the team more than any individual player.

But tonight was different. Tonight the Blue Wahoo fans loved Tyler Ames. They knew his name. He could hear them.

Bottom of the lineup for the team from South Carolina. Easy as the waves in the bay, he thought. If only his parents could have been here tonight. If Sami could see how he'd made good after all. He was going to be moved up to the big show. It was actually going to happen. Breathe, Ames . . . just breathe. He focused on William's glove. The batter was a washed-up second baseman from the Bigs who had been sent down to the AA leagues after an injury. He couldn't swing a bat the way he once had.

Williams flashed him a signal. Tyler nodded. Yes, a fast-ball. That's exactly what he wanted. He lifted his knee and wound up the way he had ten thousand times. In a burst of motion he fired the ball over the plate. The batter didn't swing, didn't even have time to blink.

"Stee-rikel!" The umpire was getting excited, too.

Tyler kept a straight face, but all around him it was happening. His teammates were behind him. He could feel the focus of his infield, feel the gloves of the outfield ready to react. He threw a slider and the batter connected. At the crack of the bat, Tyler's heart skipped a beat. He watched the trajectory overhead. Get it, he thought. Please get it. His team-mate at centerfield responded. Fly out.

One down. Still perfect.

A grounder to first took care of the next batter. Tyler felt stronger now than he had at the beginning of the game. He settled himself on the mound and stared at the catcher. Change-up to start the batter. Tyler liked it. He wound up and caught the guy watching. Strike one. The second pitch was outside, same with the third.

The fans at Bayfront Stadium fell to a hush. He couldn't throw another ball or the

batter would walk. Breathe, Ames. He could be perfect. It would happen. He stared at William. His catcher signaled for a fastball. Tyler shook his head. Not for this batter. The guy had hit four home runs this month.

Next he called for a curveball. *Atta boy, William. Perfect pitch.* Tyler gave the slightest nod. This was it. A curveball would sail straight toward the plate and break hard to the in- side. By then the batter would bite, and the swing would be a strike.

Another notch closer to perfection.

Tyler settled back on his heels, glove up, ball in his hand. The windup was everything it needed to be. He uncoiled him- self and released the ball just as he planned, like he'd done all his life. But this time he heard something snap. Instantly fire ripped through his arm and down his torso, the sort of pain Tyler had never known before.

“Stee-ri-ke!” The umpire made the call.

Tyler was already on the ground, writhing beneath the searing pain. The noise from the stadium dimmed and the only sounds were his racing heart and his own terrible groaning. People were running to him, but he couldn't hear them, couldn't make out their faces. He felt like demons were rip- ping his arm from his body. The world around him faded, every voice and face.

The first uniformed medic reached him, a man Tyler had never seen before. He dropped to his knees and put his hand on Tyler's good shoulder. The guy looked like a linebacker. “You're going to be okay.”

*No!* Tyler wanted to shout at him. But the pain was too great. *I'll never be okay again.* The man was staring at him, his eyes bright with something Tyler didn't recognize. Peace, maybe. Something otherworldly.

“This isn't the end, Tyler.” The medic's hand felt warm. “It's the beginning.”

Tyler shook his head. Angry tears filled his eyes. *Of course it's the end.* The name on the medic's uniform caught his attention. A name he'd never heard before.

*Beck.*

*Figures. Brand-new medic. What would he know?* “My . . . shoulder!” The pain was killing him. Sweat dripped down his forehead and he could feel his body shaking, going into shock. Tyler lifted his eyes to the stadium lights. A strange darkness shrouded them and then gradually, everything else began to fade.

Sami would never want him now. She would blame him for making the wrong choices all those years ago. *I'm sorry, Sami. I still love you. If you only knew how much.* Two more medics with a stretcher rushed toward him, and the rest of the team gathered at a distance, silent, shocked. Tyler had one final thought before he blacked out.

He wasn't perfect.

And after tonight he never would be.

## Chapter 2

THERE WERE TWO THINGS Sami Dawson loved most about her job as an assistant for the prestigious Finkel and Schmidt Marketing Firm in Santa Monica, California: the independence it gave her from her grandparents, and her office's breathtaking view of the Pacific Ocean.

She had another hour of work before she would meet up with Arnie for dinner at Trastevere on Third Street—their Monday night routine. Three years dating and their traditions were pretty well locked in. After dinner they would walk along the Promenade, and after an hour he would drive her home. Sometimes they would play Scrabble or watch *The Office* at her apartment. Arnie had bought her the complete DVD series two birthdays ago. Other nights they tuned in to whatever was on TV – baseball and *I Love Lucy* reruns being the exceptions. Sami didn't like baseball and Arnie couldn't stand Lucy. Too much silliness.

Arnie left Sami's apartment by nine—weekday or not. Every time. They were early risers, both of them. Routines were rungs on the ladder to success. Her grandparents had taught her that. Arnie agreed.

"No one ever got ahead by keeping late nights," he would say. He was right. Studies showed sleep was good for the immune system—eight hours a night.

Sami's immune system was rock solid.

Her current work account was the Atlantis resort in the Bahamas and Dubai. Paradise Island's think tank was located in Pensacola, with business offices in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Sami had worked three months to get last year's Fifteen Minutes winner Zoey Davis to sing at the Bahamas resort. Zoey had agreed last night. Today Sami expected to see news of the decision online somewhere.

Proof that Sami was doing her job.

Before she could search People.com, something on her Google feed caught her eye. A name from the past. It caught her off guard and made her heart skip a beat. Sami read the headline again and sat back in her chair. Her heart beat faster than before.

*Tyler Ames Suffers Season-Ending Injury.*

She leaned in closer to the screen, seeing him again, the freckle-faced boy with blue eyes who had captured her heart the summer before her senior year in high school. She saw him where she would always see him: on a pitcher's mound, ball in his glove, hat low over his pretty eyes.

Baseball was everything to Tyler. He had traded her for the game, after all.

She read the headline again. Her heart was breaking for him even before she clicked the link. A new page opened and there he was. The boy from another lifetime. A smaller head- line gave her more details.

*One-Time Pitching Sensation Was Almost Perfect.*

Almost perfect.

Sami let the sad words play through her mind. She could still hear him saying good-bye the night before he set off to play for the Reds' rookie league. *I'll make it, Sami. I will. Then I'll come find you and we can talk about forever.* Her eyes found the beginning of the article.

*Midway through what would've been his first perfect game since being drafted six years ago, one-time pitching sensation Tyler Ames suffered a season-ending injury Saturday night early in the seventh inning. Ames, 24, pitching for the Reds' Blue Wahoos at Pensacola's Bayfront Stadium collapsed after the pitch. He was taken by ambulance to nearby West Florida Hospital. Team officials have said the injury will effectively end Ames' season.*

With each word, Sami felt her heart sink. Tyler needed baseball the way he needed air. Now he was out for the season in some hospital in Pensacola, Florida. She kept reading.

*Ames gained national fame when he won the 2002 Little League World Series for the Simi Valley Royals by striking out the side in the last inning against Japan. He went on to rack up one of the most successful prep pitching careers at baseball powerhouse Jackson High School in Simi Valley. His senior year Ames was named California's Mr. Baseball, and after graduation he was drafted in the twelfth round by the Cincinnati Reds. He turned down a UCLA scholarship for a spot in the Reds farm system.*

Sami realized she was holding her breath. She slid her chair closer to the computer and exhaled. Again she looked at his photograph. The list of facts about Tyler's life did not tell the world who he had been back then. Not at all. Not the way Sami knew him. She looked intently into his eyes.

She could still hear his laugh.

The rest of the story described the part of Tyler's life that had happened since he was drafted. The quick trip from the Rookie League to the Reds' A team in Dayton, Ohio. Sami kept reading.

*Ames fell from grace with his fans when he was arrested a number of times for public drunkenness after playing in games for the Dayton Dragons. One fan pressed charges against him for harassing her in a bar, and when the story ran another female fan came forward with a similar story.*

This many years later the truth still hurt. Sami blinked a few times and looked out the window of her office. *Ames fell from grace.* Something her grandparents would say. Sami stared at the horizon. The ocean breathed peace into her soul. The vast sea of blue

and the unchanging tide reminded her that God was in control. Even if she no longer really knew what that meant.

Once more she turned her eyes to the computer.

*In 2012 things seemed to turn around for Ames. He began pitching the way he had as a kid, throwing nothing but strikes. The Reds moved him up to the Blue Wahoos, where he continued to improve. Several scouts were in attendance at Saturday's game. According to a spokesperson for the Blue Wahoos, Ames was on the brink of a move to the majors—maybe even in the next week or so.*

Sami studied his face a moment longer. *We had our chance, didn't we?* She felt no ill will for Tyler Ames. He had made his choice. They both had. But Tyler hadn't tried to call her in three years. Besides, he wasn't the same person he'd been back then.

Anyone who had followed him over the last six years could see that. Sami exhaled slowly. Looking at him was like looking backward into a dream, as if that crazy wonderful year had never happened. She searched his eyes once more. She clicked back to People's home page. She had to finish up and get to the restaurant.

Arnie would be waiting for her.

SAMI SENT THE email to the Atlantis executives, grabbed her purse, and hurried to the elevator. Their reservations were in ten minutes. She wouldn't have been late if she hadn't spent so much time on the Tyler Ames story. If she hadn't gone back to the story several times.

She didn't miss him. Not the guy he was today. She didn't even know him. Instead, she missed the girl she'd been when she was with him. That fearless girl who jumped off a rope swing into a mountain of red and yellow leaves one October night or the girl who held a conversation with a homeless man at the beach. A girl with no walls or limits or boundaries.

The girl she no longer knew.

Except for Tyler, Sami's life over the past nineteen years had been as predictable as the tide. Grandma and Grandpa Dawson had raised her since her parents died in a motorcycle wreck when Sami was five. Her grandparents were in their seventies now, good God-fearing church people who had never passed up the offering plate on Sunday morning or the chance to correct Sami if she strayed off the straight and narrow. They both retired from the phone company and were given similar plaques for never having missed a day of work.

Not ever.

Sami leaned against the back of the elevator and stared into the past. With her grandparents there was a right way to do things. Period. A right way to dress—skirts below the knee. A right way to talk—she was the only girl in Southern California who said "sir" and "ma'am." There was a right way to walk—shoulders back—and a right way to visit with boys—briefly and at the Sunday afternoon dinner table. Growing up, Sami never had to wonder if she was perfect.

She was. She had no choice.

After high school, UCLA was the obvious next destination for Sami for three reasons. The school offered Sami a scholarship to write for the newspaper and of course, it took her away from her grandparents—at least during the school year. But the main reason was Tyler. He had planned to go to UCLA since he was twelve. That was his plan right up until the first week of June the year they both graduated.

The day Tyler was drafted, ten rounds earlier than he expected.

Sami stepped off the elevator and hurried to her car. But she couldn't out-pace the memories chasing her. She breathed deep the sweet ocean air and squinted through the images of yesterday.

Her first semester at UCLA, Sami's roommates drank shots of vodka before an intramural kickball game. "Come on." They passed the bottle to her. "We all have to do it!"

An exhilarating sensation had rushed through Sami's veins. She'd never so much as talked about drinking, not while living with her grandparents. Suddenly the idea of so much freedom made her feel ten feet off the ground. She was her own person, an adult. She could do what she wanted. Before she could change her mind, Sami grabbed the bottle and downed three shots.

"Perfect!" one of the girls squealed. "Let's go!"

But as the alcohol rushed into her blood, Sami's heart had begun to pound. She felt cold and clammy and her chest ached. "I . . . I don't feel good."

"You're fine." Her roommate took her hand. "Come on, it'll be fun!"

Sami had pictured her grandparents, their hands on their hips, looking at her in disappointment. Her heartbeat doubled, pounding so hard she'd wondered if it would rip through her body and fall to the floor. She caught a glimpse in the mirror that hung on the girl's dorm wall. A flaming red covered her cheeks and sweat beaded up on her forehead. She tried to draw a full breath, but she couldn't.

"I . . . I don't feel . . . okay." Sami sat down on the edge of her lower bunk. All around her the walls seemed to be closing in.

"You look sick." One of the girls came close and felt her cheek. "Maybe you're allergic to this kind?"

Sami hadn't wanted to tell them she'd never had a drink. But maybe the girl was right. Sami had dug her elbows into her knees and let her face fall in her hands. Her heart raced and nausea welled up within her. The worst nausea she'd ever felt. "I . . . think I'll stay here." She waved off her friends and when she was alone she went to the bathroom and threw up. Even then she wondered if she would die, the pain in her chest, the way she couldn't catch her breath. How terrible, she told herself. If she died here alone in her dorm with vodka in her system. Her grandparents would be so ashamed. Not until the morning did Sami feel like herself again.

She hadn't had a drink since.

Sami blinked back the memory. She was almost to her car. The drinking episode had convinced her she was allergic to alcohol. That's what she told her friends. The next week when they offered her a drink she blamed the allergy and stayed sober. She became the responsible one, the designated driver. But the symptoms hit again later that freshman year when the girls tried to sneak out of their dorm well after curfew to meet up with some boys across campus. And again at a party when the guy she was talking to led her

to a back room and started kissing her.

“No.” Sami pushed him back. In the dark she could hide her sweaty forehead and racing heart. But the symptoms were gaining on her. She glared at him. “I don’t even know you!”

Only then did she understand. She was having panic attacks. She wasn’t allergic to alcohol or boys or breaking cur- few. She was allergic to being bad. Her grandparents had so thoroughly instilled in her the right way to behave that choosing any other option made her physically sick.

Sami reached her car, but the traffic was so bad she decided to walk. She was already late. A few minutes more wouldn’t make a difference. Her memories kept up with her like before. She met Arnie in the spring semester her freshman year. He was a junior, focused and determined.

Once they started dating, Sami’s panic attacks disappeared.

“I like that you’re a good girl,” he had told her. “I don’t need any trouble.”

After their third date, Arnie kissed her before saying good night. A sweet, simple kiss. It felt nice. Her heart didn’t race even a little. The second time, she took the lead. After a few minutes she sat back against the door, breathless. “I won’t sleep with you.” She’d blurted out the words before she could change her mind. “It’s a promise I made.”

She didn’t tell him the promise was to her grandparents, not to God. It didn’t matter. Arnie only smiled and kissed her cheek. “That’s fine. The last thing I need is a kid before I finish law school.”

The truth was, Arnie already had his eye on politics. He had no interest in filling a closet with skeletons. The chaste arrangement was a win for both of them. Arnie turned out to be a good friend, helping her study for tests and regaling her with stories of his debate team victories. They didn’t kiss often, but he made her think. Sami felt smarter around him. All her free time was spent with him. When he graduated, he moved straight into law school. She finished her bachelor’s degree a week before he passed the bar.

Her life had played out like a resume since. She joined Finkel and Schmidt as an intern her senior year and a month after graduation the firm brought her on fulltime. That summer she moved out of her grandparents’ house in Woodland Hills and into a small two-bedroom walk-up with another new-hire at the firm, a girl from Nashville named Mary Catherine Clark.

Sami smiled as she neared Third Street.

Mary Catherine was a red-headed free spirit who rode her bike to work along Ocean Avenue, wind-surfed the breakwaters at Will Rogers Beach, and couldn’t wait for Sunday church. She ate frozen dinners and stayed up late drinking coffee past midnight. They couldn’t have been more different, which was what Sami loved about her. Mary Catherine made her laugh and reminded her every day of the most wonderful truth:

She had somehow escaped the years of living with her grandparents.

Not that she didn’t love them. They meant well, Sami believed that. She had just never really learned to live under their roof. They didn’t mind her separation from them. In their eyes, dating Arnie Bell was the best thing Sami had ever done. By now Arnie was a third-year lawyer at a storied firm on Santa Monica Boulevard. He’d be making six figures in no time. Running the country one day, no doubt. That’s what Sami’s grandmother said about him.

The restaurant was just ahead. Trastevere. Sami could see Arnie sitting at their

favorite corner table, looking over his shoulder, slightly irritated. Poor Arnie. He hated being off schedule. She giggled to herself, thinking about something her roommate had said the night before.

“Arnie needs a few surprises to shake him up a little.” Mary Catherine had grinned at the idea. “Like maybe let a mouse loose in his Acura. You know. See what he’s made of. He’s too safe for you.”

Despite her friend’s objections, Sami liked Arnie. He was good for her. He had the same desire to be successful, the same sensible spirit. He was loyal and dependable—no weekend motorcycle trips for Arnie Bell.

No panic attacks.

Which in a world of uncertainty was a good thing for Sami. But sometimes she wondered if safe would be enough. As a kid she was terrified of two things: heights and living on her own, away from her grandparents. Now her high-rise office and her apartment were two of her favorite things.

Which sometimes made her wonder if she was missing out on something even more exciting. Something she hadn’t yet considered. Like sky-diving.

Sami rushed up to the table, breathless. “Arnie, I’m sorry.” She kissed his cheek and took the chair across from him. Arnie was a few inches taller than Sami with brown hair that wouldn’t be around for long. He’d been a sprinter in high school, but his athletic days were behind him now.

“I was beginning to wonder.” He smiled, but his eyes held a hint of disdain.

“You’re never late.”

“The Atlantis account.” She gave a slight shrug. “I got distracted. Took longer than I thought.”

“Well.” He fluffed his napkin across his lap and his eyes lit up. “I have good news!”

Sami hesitated. Okay. So they were done talking about Atlantis. She slid her chair in and set her purse beside her.

“Tell me.”

“You won’t believe this.” He smiled, clearly satisfied with himself. “The senior partner told me today they’re looking for me to take on a case by myself next month.” He raised his brow in her direction, waiting for her response. “Can you believe it?” He leaned closer. “Samantha, this is huge. It usually takes five years of assistant work before new lawyers get their own case.” He didn’t give her a chance to respond. “This case is one of the most difficult in the medical malpractice division of the . . .”

Sami stopped listening. The blue sky through the front window of Trastevere distracted her and made her remember that summer. Sitting at Tyler’s games his senior year, watching him pitch and believing there would never be anyone else for her as long as she lived.

“Samantha?” His tone changed. “Are you listening?”

“Yes. Definitely.” She sat a little straighter.

“What did I say?”

“You’re working on a big medical malpractice suit next month. You’re handling it by yourself.” She leaned closer to him. “That’s wonderful. I’m so proud of you, Arnie. Really.”

“Thank you.” He looked hurt. “But I was telling you about Manny being jealous.

He's been at the firm longer and he hasn't had a case of his own yet." He paused, studying her. "Did you hear any of that?"

Sami glanced around, looking for some way of escape. A nervous bit of laughter slipped between her lips. "It all sort of blends together sometimes. The law stuff."

His shoulders and face fell at the same time. "That bothers me. I mean, we're talking about my future here." He caught himself. For the first time since she sat down he reached for her hand. "Our future. Samantha, this is very important."

She nodded. "I'm sorry. Go ahead."

"Anyway." Arnie seemed to take longer than usual to gather his thoughts. "Manny talked to me at lunch about it and I guess he's going to the partners tomorrow morning and . . ."

*Samantha.* The name grated on her now. Arnie had called her that from the beginning. He thought it sounded important. Academic. She was raised with the name. Samantha was how she had thought of herself until that summer. Only two people had ever called her Sami: Mary Catherine.

And Tyler Ames.

Otherwise she was Samantha Dawson. When Tyler was in her life her grandparents frowned on the fact that he called her Sami. "It's insulting to be called something other than your given name," her grandma had told her. "Sami sounds demeaning. Especially when Samantha is such a beautiful name."

Sami had seen her grandmother's point. Back then she liked the name Samantha. It worked well with professors and her boss at Finkel and Schmidt. There was an elegance about it, a sense of success and professionalism. But it didn't fit her the way Sami did.

And while she would always introduce herself as Samantha, privately she thought of herself as Sami.

The way Tyler had seen her.

"Samantha?"

She jumped. "Hmm?"

Arnie looked shocked. "What's wrong with you?"

Before she could answer, Jean, the waiter, appeared with his perpetual smile and broken English. "Hello! How you are today?" Jean was their guy. Every time. He seemed to sense things weren't great between them. "I give you time? Yes?"

"A few minutes, Jean." Arnie's smile looked stale. "Please." Jean nodded and waved, backing up from the table and hurrying to the adjacent one. When he was out of earshot, Arnie sounded disappointed. "Could you try to listen to me? I mean, first you're late and then you're"—he waved his hand around—"I don't know, distracted. Like you don't care."

"I'm sorry." Sami gave a quick shake of her head. "Really."

"You understand how big this is, right?" His tone softened. He took her hand again. "The firm is very political. In a few years—if I'm interested—there's talk of me running for office." Arnie leaned in and gently kissed her lips. "We'll be married by then, of course." Clearly, there wasn't a doubt in his mind. He touched her face and smiled. "I'll need your support, Samantha. Fully."

"Of course." She covered his hand with her own. "Just a long day at the office."

Her smile came easily, even if she didn't feel it. "You have my support. You know that."

The rest of the meal she listened better, interjecting her approval or affirmation where appropriate. She was happy for Arnie and his career, his dreams, and even his political aspirations, if that's what he wanted. But every so often, despite her best efforts to stay focused, Sami caught herself looking at the blue sky and thinking about a boy who lay broken in a hospital somewhere in Pensacola, Florida. A boy who traded everything for the dream of playing baseball.

Even her.



## Chapter 3

CHERYL CONLEY DREADED ANY call from Merrill Place Retirement Center, but especially tonight. The call came just after eight o'clock, when she and her husband had settled down in front of the TV with their granddaughters for a much-anticipated showing of Disney's *Tangled*. Saturday was their night to babysit the girls, something they looked forward to all week.

Cheryl took the call in the next room. Her mother had been in the retirement center's Alzheimer's unit for the past year. Lately she'd been on a steady decline. "Hello?" She held her breath.

"Ms. Conley, it's Harrison Myers over at Merrill Place. Sorry to bother you." He sighed. "Your mother isn't doing well. I thought I should call."

"What happened?" Cheryl sat in the nearest chair and rested her elbows on her knees. *Dear Jesus. Not again . . .*

"I found her at the front door trying to leave. She was in her nightgown and a wool coat. She was pulling an overnight bag packed with most of her things." Frustration sounded in his voice. Harrison had been manager of Merrill Place for ten years. He practically lived there. If he was worried, then things were bad.

"You really think she was going to leave?"

"Definitely. If the door hadn't been locked, she'd be halfway down the boulevard."

Heartache welled up in Cheryl. Her mother had always been so strong, the pulse of their home. Even after Dad died twenty years ago, her mom had been sharper than women half her age. How could her mind fail her like this? "Did she say anything?"

"I couldn't understand most of it. Something about finding Ben." He hesitated. "She's said that before, of course."

Cheryl closed her eyes. Ben. Her older brother. "At least that makes sense."

"You want to come down and talk to her?" The manager hesitated. "I mean, she's your mother but I understand she doesn't . . ."

"Know me?" Every time Cheryl thought about the fact, her heart broke a little more. "No. She doesn't." She stood and paced a few steps. The sentence was never easy to finish. She thought about her granddaughters in the other room. "You think it would help? If I was there?"

"Maybe. Either way we need to agree on a plan." Harrison sounded weary. "When patients get like this, we have to move them. She needs much higher-level care. There's a facility in Destin." He hesitated. "And yes. I think if you came it could help."

"Okay." They had talked about it before. Destin was nearly an hour from Pensacola. Too far for Cheryl to drop in throughout the week. Too far for a night like this. "I'll be right there."

"Thank you." Relief punctuated his words.

Cheryl walked to the back of the house where the girls were cuddled, one on each side of their grandfather. They were four and six this year. Every hour with them was priceless.

She smiled at them. "Meemaw's got to go out for a little bit. Check on Great-Gram down the street." She walked to the bookcase and pulled out Dr. Seuss's *The Sneetches and Other Stories* from the middle shelf. A quick look at Chuck, her husband of forty years, told him all he needed to know. He would help delay the start of the movie. "Papa will read while I'm gone." Cheryl patted their blond heads. "I'll be back soon."

"You need me?" Chuck took the book, his eyes warm with empathy.

"Stay here." She leaned down and kissed his forehead. "Pray."

His eyes didn't leave hers. "Always."

The drive to Merrill Place was less than ten minutes this time of night. Most of Pensacola

was at the Blue Wahoos baseball game. It's where she and Chuck would be if they weren't watching the girls. Cheryl felt her heart sink. Her poor mother.

She rolled down the window and let the ocean air clear her mind. The night was cooler than usual for August, the stars overhead brilliant. *Father, what's happening? My mother is getting worse. I'm out of ideas. Help us . . . please.*

No answer came, no immediate sense of direction or help. Cheryl prayed until she arrived and then she found Harrison Myers in his office. "I got here as fast as I could."

"She's in her room." He picked up a folder from his desk and handed it to her. "Here. Information about the center in Destin." A shadow fell over his kind brown eyes. "We can't help her much longer. Not if something doesn't change."

Cheryl took the packet. "Thank you." She nodded toward the door. "I'll go see her."

Mr. Myers folded his hands. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." They shared a sad look and then she walked from his boxy office down the white tiled hallway to her mother's room. Room 116 at the end of the building. Cheryl never got used to the smell. Death hung in the air, the way it always did in places like this. Heaven's waiting room. A reminder that every day brought them closer to the last.

Without making a sound, Cheryl opened the door and stepped inside. Her mother was sitting on the edge of her bed. She still wore her wool coat and she looked restless. Her knuckles were white from clutching the edge of the bedspread. As soon as she spotted Cheryl her eyes immediately filled with fear. "Who are you?"

"Hello." She felt the nervousness in her smile. Some days were worse than others. Her mom might scream or even throw things at her. Tonight she looked borderline crazy. Cheryl took a few steps into the room. "It's me. Cheryl."

"What?" Her mother folded her arms tightly in front of her and looked around. "Where's Ben?"

"He's not here." She had long since stopped arguing with her mother, stopped trying to set her straight about the details of life. "He couldn't come."

"I walked to his house." Her eyes darted to the window. "Isn't this his house?"

"No." Cheryl moved slowly to the chair by her mother's bed and sat down. She used her most kind voice. "This is *your* house."

"No!" Her expression became horrified at the possibility. "This is not my house." She squinted at Cheryl. "Are you the housekeeper?"

Cheryl took a slow breath. *Help me, God . . . I need Your help.* She worked to stay calm. "Can I tell you a story?"

Some of the anxiety left her mother's tense shoulders. "A story?"

"Yes, a lovely story about Ben." Cheryl slid to the edge of the seat, her eyes locked on her mother's.

"Ben?" She relaxed a little more. "You know him?"

"I do."

Her mother nodded, her eyes distant. She eased her legs up onto the bed and slid back on the elevated stack of pillows. She seemed to consider the idea. "Yes. I'd like that." Her white hair was messier than usual, adding to the slightly deranged look in her eyes. She smoothed out the wrinkles in her sheet. "Go ahead."

"Ben was playing the baseball game of his life."

"First base." Her mother cast worried eyes in her direction. "He plays first base."

"Yes, that's right. First base." Cheryl leaned back in her chair. "It was the playoffs and this was the season's biggest game. Two outs, game tied at three apiece."

A slow smile lifted her mother's weathered cheeks. She sank a little deeper into the pillows. "Prettiest day of the year. Perfect day to be at a ball park."

"The batter up was a hot hitter from Santa Rosa Beach."

"Nothing but home runs and triples."

“Exactly.” Cheryl looked toward the curtained window. “Only this day he hits a grounder to short. Shortstop bobbles it and recovers. He sweeps it into his glove and fires it to Ben at first base.”

“Ben makes the out!” Her mother was staring at the air in front of her, seeing the game as if it were happening again.

“Three down, Pensacola High up to bat. Last inning. Bottom of the seventh.” Cheryl could see her brother, see the determination in his face. “The first three batters get on. A walk, a hit pitch, and a single. Bases loaded.”

“Ben’s up next.” She looked straight at Cheryl. “He batted cleanup, you know. This is a true story.” A few blinks and she wrinkled her face, studying Cheryl. “I’m sorry. Do I know you?”

“I’m telling you a story about Ben.”

Her mother’s vacant stare stayed several seconds before some sense of light returned to her eyes. She nodded barely. “That’s right.” She shifted her look back to the imaginary game in front of her. “Ben’s up to bat.”

“That’s right. He walks to the plate. Six-foot-three and muscled arms. The outfield knows him.”

“Yes, they do.” Her mother chuckled. “They all back up. Almost to the fence.”

“Yes, but Ben just knows there’s nothing they can do to stop him. Not this time. His blond bangs hang just below his batting helmet. His eyes focused.”

“Such beautiful eyes.” Her mother’s smile held a hint of sadness. “I wish he would come see me more often.”

“He will. One day.” Cheryl paused. “The pitcher stares Ben down, just as ready to win. The only pitcher who ever gave Ben any trouble. But not this afternoon. Ben connects with the first pitch—a fastball—right at the belly of the bat.” She smiled big. “And the ball’s gone. Gone over the centerfield fence.”

“Home run!” Her mother raised both hands and let them fall weakly back to the bed. “Pensacola Eagles win!”

“Season champs.”

“Wait!” Her mother turned, suddenly startled. “We should celebrate. I’ll make dinner.”

Cheryl felt sick. How could she tell her mom the game had happened fifty years ago? She reached for her mother’s hand. “Ben already ate dinner.”

“What?” Her mom jerked her hand back and tucked it in close to her chest. “Who are you? And why won’t you let Ben join us?”

“Did you like the story?” Cheryl knew better than to call her Mom. She hadn’t used the name in years. “It’s a good story, right?”

Again her mother relaxed, her eyes distant once more. “I like it.” She glanced at Cheryl, suspicious. “You can go home now. The housekeeper goes home at the end of the day.”

“You want me to go home?”

“Yes!” She pointed to the door. “I’ve had enough of you.”

“Okay.” Cheryl stood. “You can sleep now.”

“I will.” She worked her arms out of her coat and dropped it to the floor, all while keeping her eyes on Cheryl. She slid her feet beneath the covers and pulled the sheet and blanket close to her chin. “Tell Ben I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“I’ll tell him.” Cheryl fought tears gathering in her eyes. She held up her hand. “Good-bye.”

“Go home.” Her mom nodded, irritated. She made a brushing motion toward the door. “You’re off work.”

Cheryl turned and walked out of the room. She had no idea if she’d really helped her mother or not. But at least now the woman seemed ready to sleep. She stopped in at Mr. Myers’s office on the way out. The man was sorting through a file on his desk. Cheryl found a tired smile. “She’s more settled now.”

“Thank you.” He set the file down and stood. “Nights are the worst.”

“Yes.” She pulled her cell phone from her purse and held it up. “Call me if anything else happens.”

“I will.” Harrison Myers seemed genuinely troubled. “Call the center in Destin. Please. She’d be safer.”

Cheryl tightened her hold on her purse. “I’ll think about it.”

“Sooner than later.” He raised his brow. “For her sake.”

His words ran through her head as she made the drive home and as she and Chuck and the girls watched *Tangled*. Her mother wouldn’t make the move easily. She was eighty-eight years old. Moving her now would probably destroy her.

“You love watching *Tangled*, right, Meemaw?” Her oldest granddaughter looked up, innocent eyes sparkling.

“I do.” She put her arm around the child’s shoulders. “I love a good story.”

Again she shared a quick look with her husband. They hadn’t talked about it, but he would’ve known she had been telling her mother stories. It was the only way Cheryl had found to calm her down on nights like this. Twice this week and twice last week she’d made the trip, told the same story about Ben, and come home emotionally wrecked.

Something had to change.

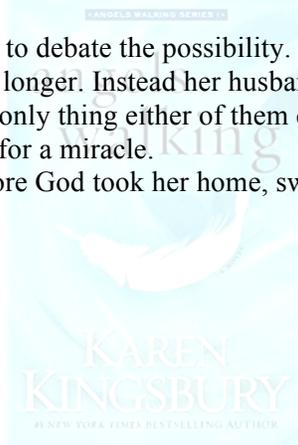
When the girls left for the night, Chuck pulled her into his strong arms. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s so hard. She doesn’t know me.” The tears came now. “They want us to think about moving her.”

Chuck clearly knew better than to debate the possibility. Not now anyway. Cheryl’s mother couldn’t stay at Merrill Place much longer. Instead her husband waited a few heartbeats and then he did the only thing he could. The only thing either of them could do.

Quietly, confidently he prayed for a miracle.

That somehow, some way, before God took her home, sweet Virginia Hutcheson might find peace.



## Chapter 4

PAIN RADIATED FROM HIS shoulder up into his neck and down through his chest. The worst pain Tyler had ever known. Despite that, he was about to be discharged from the hospital—the nurse had told him. But then what? Where was he supposed to go to get help? He couldn't lift his arm, couldn't move his fingers without searing pain.

If he were a praying man, this would've been his finest hour. But prayer was part of another life. If God cared about Tyler Ames, He had never much showed it.

Tyler closed his eyes. The pain meds helped. But he had hardly slept in the last few days. His team had paid for him to stay through this afternoon. Forty-eight hours. Long enough for a complete evaluation. So far no one had told him anything except that he was going home.

"Mr. Ames?" A man entered the room.

Tyler blinked and tried to focus. It was the doctor. He came up to the bed. "I'm Dr. Bancroft. How's the pain?" The man pushed a few buttons and raised the back of Tyler's bed.

The sitting-up position helped rouse him. "Not great." He squinted at the doctor. "What's the verdict?"

"I'm afraid it's bad news." The doctor leaned against the windowsill and crossed his arms. "You blew out your labrum. The rotator cuff is damaged, too. Can't tell from the MRI how bad it is." He let that sink in for a moment. "You need surgery."

Each sentence hit Tyler like so many cement trucks, plowing him down and running him over, leaving him flattened and unable to breathe. He pinched the bridge of his nose with his left hand, inhaled, and held it. If only he could will himself back to the start of the inning. Nine outs left, the crowd shouting his name. Pro scouts capturing every pitch for the brass in Cincinnati. Nine lousy outs.

He lowered his hand. "I was throwing a perfect game."

"I know." The doctor grimaced. "The story was on the front page of Sunday's paper." He pulled a chart from the end of Tyler's bed. "We kept you here because your heart was acting up. Skipping beats and slipping into atrial fibrillation. That's settled down now. The heart tests were negative."

Tyler exhaled. Every heartbeat sent a shockwave of pain through his torso. "What's that mean?"

"It means your heart's fine. Sometimes pain can do that—if it's intense enough." He winced. "This probably qualifies."

Dr. Bancroft shook his head, the way people do when hope is slim. "I'm sorry."

Tyler had a hundred questions. What did the Blue Wahoos think and how about the scouts from the Reds, and when could he have surgery and what would the rehab process look like? But only one question mattered. He steeled himself. "I can play again, right? Next season?"

The doctor nodded, almost too quickly. "Yes. I think so. You need surgery, but athletes come back from this type of thing. Definitely."

"When? When's the surgery?" Tyler looked back at the door to his room. "Could we do it now? While I'm still here?"

“Actually . . . you have to book that through an orthopedic surgeon.”

Tyler remembered one of his teammates needing knee surgery last season. “I think I can get the name of a good one. Someone who can get me in quickly.” With his left hand he braced his right elbow against his body. “Sooner the better, right?”

“Yes. Yes, definitely.” The man seemed troubled, as if he had even more bad news. “There is one thing. I’m not sure team insurance covers this type of surgery. Do you have another policy? Something . . . on your own?”

Tyler’s heart bounced around inside his aching chest. “The team will cover it.” He allowed a laugh that was more outrage than humor. “I was on the mound when it happened.”

“True. Very true.” The doctor pursed his lips and focused on the chart. “You might want to talk to management.” He nodded, clearly nervous. “Just in case.” He jotted something onto the chart. “Your car’s still back at the stadium, is that right?”

“My car?” The haze of pain meds made it difficult to think. Saturday night felt like a lifetime ago. “I think so. Yes.”

“We have a medical transport van. Someone can give you a ride.” Dr. Bancroft set the chart down, took a pad of paper from his pocket, and scribbled a few lines. Then he ripped off the top sheet and handed it to Tyler. “Here’s a prescription for pain medication. You’ll need these for the first few weeks.”

“Thanks.” There wasn’t much else to say.

“My family, we followed your game this fall. You were right there.” The doctor clucked his tongue. “You’ll get back. You’re too good to hang it up now.”

“Appreciate that.” Even talking intensified the pain.

“The nurse will be in shortly with discharge instructions. Obviously I want you to ice it twenty minutes at a time, and take your pain medication. The thing with pain is, don’t let it get ahead of you.”

“Yes, sir.” He still had questions, but he couldn’t remember them.

“The nurse is bringing in a sling. I don’t advise moving your arm until you see an orthopedic surgeon.” The doctor stood to leave. “Sorry again.” He paused. “Any questions?”

Tyler blinked. His mind raced but it couldn’t get ahead of the searing pain. “No. No, questions.” He relaxed the muscles in his right shoulder. Anything to find an edge. “Well, maybe one.”

Dr. Bancroft waited.

“When are my next pain pills?”

He checked Tyler’s chart once more. “Looks like you have about ten minutes.” He set the chart back in the rack at the end of the hospital bed. “I’ll have the nurse bring them in.”

And with that he was gone. Tyler tried to take a full breath, but the pain was too great. He lowered the bed back a few inches and exhaled. There was no comfortable position. Not with his shoulder on fire. Every time he looked at his right arm he expected to see it barely hanging onto his body.

The doctor’s news swirled in his mind. He had destroyed his labrum and damaged his rotator cuff—so badly he couldn’t move his arm without talking to a surgeon. And he’d done all that damage with a single pitch. He could see himself, winding up, getting

ready to throw, and—

“Tyler.” This time the voice was familiar.

He opened his eyes and stared through the pain. “Coach.” As far as he could remember this was the first time someone from the club had been by. But he couldn’t be sure. They’d had him on morphine until this morning.

Jep Black removed his Blue Wahoo baseball cap as he entered the room. “You don’t look too good.”

“Nah, I’m fine.” Tyler’s breathing came in short bursts. All that the excruciating pain would allow. “Got me on the lineup tonight, or what?”

The slightest smile lifted Jep’s lips. But it did nothing to ease the nervousness in his expression. He made his way to the side of the bed. “I talked to your doc.”

“I need a little sewing up.”

Jep shook his head. “Tyler . . . I’m sorry.”

His nurse entered the room holding a tray with a single small cup. The pain pills. “You’re late.” He tried to smile, but his body wouldn’t cooperate.

“Actually . . .” The nurse checked the clock on the wall. “Right on time.”

Tyler had no words. He took the pain pills with shaking hands and downed it with the water at his bedside table. “Thanks.”

When she was gone, Jep stepped closer to the bed again. “I can’t believe it. I mean . . . you were pitching perfect.”

With his left arm, Tyler wiped the water off his mouth. “Another mountain.” He raised the bed again. No matter how much he hurt, he couldn’t let Jep know the extent of his pain. He was a pitcher, not damaged goods. “I’ll be back next season. Better than ever.”

Jep looked from Tyler’s shoulder to his eyes. “The news . . . it isn’t good.”

“I know.” He willed the pain pills to work. “Torn labrum.”

“Well, that. Yes.” He hesitated. “Tyler, there’s no easy way to say this. You’ve been cut from the Wahoos.”

The pain screamed through his body and soul. What had Jep said? Tyler narrowed his eyes. “They cut me?”

“Yes.” Jep muttered something under his breath. “I hate this part of the game.” He pulled an envelope from his jeans pocket and set it on the table next to Tyler. “That’s your final check.” He gripped the bed rail and hung his head for a moment. When he looked up, genuine pain darkened his eyes. “This ain’t right. You’re an incredible pitcher, Tyler. One of the best. You work your way back to that mound. Prove ’em all wrong.”

The room was spinning. Tyler grabbed the manager’s hand and the bedrail at the same time, steadying himself so he wouldn’t pass out. “Nothing to prove.” His words came in short bursts, the best he could do. “They . . . won’t cut me. . . . I’m Tyler Ames. . . . I’m their ace . . . No one can touch me, Coach . . . They’d be . . . crazy to—”

“Tyler.” Jep worked his hand free and took a step back. “The decision came from the higher ups.” He shook his head. “Nothing I can do.”

The man’s words didn’t make sense. Tyler was a Blue Wahoo. He’d been the best pitcher this year and now the Bigs wanted him. That was his life just a few days ago. How could this be happening? He tried to breathe but his lungs wouldn’t work right. Like he was underwater with a two-ton truck on his back. “What . . . about my surgery?”

Jep shoved his hands in his pockets and sighed. “You signed a no-injury clause two years ago in Dayton. After your third arrest, Tyler. Remember? After you hurt your back in the moped accident.” He nodded toward the envelope on the table. “A copy of the clause is there with the check. Management wanted you to have it. In case you forgot.”

Confusion lay like a wet blanket over the conversation. Tyler gripped his elbow. Why wouldn’t the pain pills work? He clenched his teeth. “I signed . . . what?”

A drop of sweat fell off Jep’s forehead onto the hospital floor. “It’s all in there.” He pointed to the envelope. “The injury isn’t covered.” He stared at Tyler for several beats. “We got new guys coming in all the time. You know that.” Jep looked helpless. “It’s a business. Sometimes a player’s luck runs out.” He started for the door and stopped. “Prove ’em wrong, Ames. No one believes in you more than me.” With that he slipped his hat back on and left.

If Tyler’s heartbeat was erratic Saturday after his injury he could only imagine what it was now. He held his right elbow close to his body and turned to the table next to him. The envelope was there. What had Jep said? Something about his final check? He blinked hard, forcing his mind to stay clear even for a few minutes.

He grabbed the envelope with his left hand and wedged two of his fingers beneath the flap. His heart pounded and with each beat the aching sensation spread up into his neck and down through his torso. Finally he ripped open the top and pulled out the contents. The first was a sheet of paper with small print. Jep had tried to explain it. Something about his contract.

With a snap of his wrist the paper opened all the way and he held it close to his face. The jolt caused him to cry out, but he caught himself before he might alert his nurse. If only the medication would take even the slightest edge off. Tyler tried to make out the words, but it took a while. His vision blurred the edges.

Slowly the paragraphs came into focus. He scanned the words quickly until he saw this:

*Clause IV—No Injury: Due to previous off-field injuries and arrests in the Player’s past, he will at this time play without insurance coverage in case of an injury. Player assumes all responsibility for his medical costs, regardless of illness or injury obtained in future games. This clause may be renegotiated at a future date.*

Tyler felt the floor beneath his bed turn liquid. As if nothing was holding him up except the bed frame, and even that was starting to fall away. A no-injury clause? Why would he have signed that? How come his agent hadn’t intervened? He set the paper down on the table and squeezed his eyes shut. Somewhere in his distant memory a moment came to light.

The contract sitting on a long wooden table. The contract and a choice: sign it or walk. Take the offer or head home to California with his hat in his hands. His opportunity gone forever.

Tyler had signed it. His agent never had anything to say about it. But until now he hadn’t remembered anything about it. Two years ago? He’d done nothing but improve since then. Every week, every inning, every pitch. No more off-field craziness, no more mopeds or girls or drinking. His agent should’ve renegotiated the contract a year ago.

The reality of his situation began to make him shake. He might as well have been flung into a sub-zero freezer. And with each excruciating vibration his busted shoulder shot arrows through his body. Was this really happening? He had no insurance? How was he supposed to pay for his surgery? His body shook harder, the pain worse than before. Why weren't the pain pills working?

Tyler clenched his left fist and tried to see a way out. He was going to be released from the hospital, and then what? Where would he go? How would he find relief? He pursed his lips and exhaled. Over and over again. Maybe if he breathed everything out there'd be room in his lungs for air. After a few raspy breaths he settled back into the pillow.

How much money did he have? He forced himself to concentrate. His phone would have the answer. He glanced at the table next to his bed. Where was his phone? He hadn't thought about it until now. He was about to open the only drawer in the table when his nurse entered the room.

"I have your brace." She pulled something from a plastic wrapper and frowned at him. "You don't look good."

"Where's . . . my phone?"

"In here." She kept her eyes on him as she opened a cupboard at the corner of his room. The phone was on a shelf. "I'm not sure if it's charged. We turn them off when patients are admitted."

Everything felt surreal. This couldn't be happening. It was a dream. That had to be it. Maybe if he blinked a few times he would be on the mound again, ready to pitch the next inning. Nothing but perfection behind him and a contract with the Reds ahead of him. The pain pulsed through his body. Wretched pain. It wasn't a dream. It hurt too much.

The nurse handed him his phone and stepped back. Using his left hand, Tyler turned it on. He was going to pass out any second. He could feel it. His eyes narrowed and he stared at the phone's screen. What was he doing? Why did he need his phone?

Doctor says you'll need surgery." She lowered the bed rails. "Here. Swing your legs over the side. You've been discharged."

Surgery. Yes, that was it. He tried to think around the pain. He had to pay for his surgery. No insurance meant no help from his team. His former team. He gritted his teeth. "I have to . . . move slow."

"That last dose of pain medication should take effect soon." She opened up the brace and shifted to his right side. "Turn your body toward me. You'll feel better with this."

Black dots flashed before his eyes. He gripped the edge of the bed with his good hand so he wouldn't fall to the floor. Somehow she helped him get dressed and slipped the sling over his neck and around his waist. It had built-in padding so his forearm could rest against that instead of his ribcage. Again he forced himself to relax. Maybe she was right. Maybe the pain would ease up now that he had a brace.

"Let's get you on your feet." She took a step back.

Nausea grabbed at him from every direction. Tyler held up his left hand. "Hold on. Please."

She hesitated, watching him. "How about the chair? Can we do that much?"

He didn't have enough energy to speak. His eyesight wasn't working and neither

was his mind. Moving like he was in a trance, he let the nurse help him to the chair next to his bed.

“Tell you what. I’ll get you something to eat. That’ll help.”

Tyler leaned his head back against the chair. He needed a new arm, not food. He was alone again and something was in his hand. He looked down. His phone. He tried to turn it on again but another wave of dizziness came over him. The pain was just slightly more bearable. But in its place a drunken feeling started coming over him. The buzz felt wonderful—something he hadn’t felt in the past few years. An intoxicatingly sweet release. He savored the feeling for a few seconds.

The pills were working.

Tyler’s phone screen lit up and he stared at the icons. What was he doing? He blinked a few times and then he remembered. His bank account. He needed to pay for the surgery so he had to check his balance. The process of signing in was nearly overwhelming, but finally the number shouted at him: \$187.32.

Tyler didn’t have two hundred dollars to his name. He sank into the chair and closed his eyes. Then he remembered the check. His eyes flew open and moving slowly, carefully, he reached for the check on the bedside table. The one Jep Black brought. His final check. He opened it up same as the copy of the page from his contract, with a snap of his wrist. He sucked in a quick breath through clenched teeth.

The number had to be wrong. He squinted through the haze of medication but the amount didn’t change. One week of work with the Blue Wahoos: \$312.02.

All totaled, he didn’t have five hundred dollars.

The nurse returned with a tray of food. “We’re going to get you home, Mr. Ames.” She explained again about the icing and the pain medication. “Eat first. Otherwise the pain med will make you sick. Now listen. No driving with these pills. Have someone drive you to your orthopedic appointment. The sooner the better.” She paused. “I understand your car’s at the stadium.”

Tyler lifted his eyes to hers. Her words were coming from at least three mouths. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay, our driver will take you home. You can get your car later. Have your teammates bring it over.”

His teammates. They would be at practice now. The truth slammed him around like a washed-up fighter on the ropes. He no longer had teammates. The Reds had cut him without a conversation. He thought about his part-time job—coaching young pitchers on off days. He couldn’t do that now, either. Besides, it was a job set up for him by the Blue Wahoos. A team he no longer played for. He closed his eyes. His room was three hundred a month. Car insurance, another hundred. His phone cost fifty-something. Gas and food and now his surgery . . .

“I’m gonna . . . be sick.” Tyler reached for a nearby bowl just as the nurse handed him one. He had nothing in his stomach, but the dry heaves continued until the spasms finally eased up. He handed the bowl back to the nurse and slumped forward over his arm. This was crazy. He couldn’t leave here like this.

“The nausea is normal. Take deep breaths.” She hesitated, watching him. “I’ll get the wheelchair.” She was back in a few minutes. “Come on. Hop in.”

Tyler stood and pivoted, then slowly lowered himself into the wheelchair. His shoulder was killing him and his stomach was in knots. “I need . . . the bowl again.” He

closed his eyes and let his head fall in his good hand.

“You won’t be sick. Come on. You’ll feel better in your own bed.”

The words wouldn’t come, so with what energy he had left, Tyler shook his head. He could do nothing about the irony of her statement. His own bed? He rented a room, but he didn’t own the bed. He didn’t own much of anything. Some clothes, a few boxes of trophies and team photos. He had figured he’d find his own place after the season. Get through the next month, he had told himself, and he could rent an apartment. Pick up some used furniture and start clawing his way back to the top. If the Reds had brought him on, they would’ve given him a new contract. His medical would’ve been covered and he would’ve made six figures at least. Even for a post-season contract.

But now? He had no idea what he was going to do.

“Mr. Ames?” The nurse’s tone remained kind. But clearly she was waiting. “The driver’s ready.”

“I don’t . . . I can’t . . .” Tyler stopped trying to talk. After a blur of nausea and dizziness, searing pain and desperation, he was buckled into the backseat of a van. On his lap sat a plastic bag with his pitcher’s jacket, the results of his x-ray, and his discharge papers. When they reached his home, the van driver helped him to the front steps and his landlady’s husband walked him to his room. Tyler lay gingerly on his rented bed. Tomorrow he’d give notice. He couldn’t stay beyond the end of the week. Rent was due on the fifteenth and he was nearly out of money. How would he get a job? Where would he find the means to have the surgery? Where would he live?

And how had the golden boy from the Little League World Series wound up here?



## Chapter 5

**T**HE THIRD DOSE OF pain meds wore off around one in the morning. They must have, because that's when Tyler sat straight up and slammed his hand over his mouth so he wouldn't scream out loud. The pain sliced through his shoulder and straight across the base of his neck, along his collarbone and through his middle.

Tyler gasped for his next breath. *I can't take it . . . this has to stop*, he told himself. *Relax . . . think of something else.*

He didn't deserve this. He should still be in the hospital, with someone taking care of him and keeping him medicated and making immediate plans to put him back together. Tyler scrambled to his feet and rummaged through his top dresser drawer. Advil. He needed that, at least. His hands shook as he opened the bottle. Four pills. He grabbed a water bottle from the case on the floor.

They slid down his throat, but he knew they wouldn't help. He felt like his arm was hanging down to his knees, like his shoulder joint had been hit by a grenade. All from a single pitch. It happened, of course. Every now and then Tyler would hear of a guy losing his pitching career on a single throw. But he never thought it could happen to him.

Tyler dropped into the only chair in the room and slumped over. It hurt more to lie down. At least sitting up, gravity kept his arm in line with his shoulder.

Somehow morning came. Tyler blinked and tried to assess whether his pain was the slightest bit less than yesterday. It wasn't. It was worse. He tried to stand, but any motion made him want to throw up. He gritted his teeth. *Get up, Tyler Ames. Your feet are fine. You gotta fight this.*

He held his breath as he forced himself to stand. A few shuffling steps and he used his good arm to open his bed- room window. Sunny and warm, breezy and beautiful. The weather was a complete betrayal of the reality of Tyler's situation.

A pounding came from his burning arm, as if his heart had relocated to the place where his shoulder used to be.

He got dressed using only his left hand. Three times he moved in a way that shot knives through his shoulder. Finally he slid his wallet in his jeans pocket and grabbed his keys. How could this have happened? He was supposed to be in Cincinnati right now, talking with management and working out with the pitching coach. Making plans for how he would help the Reds through the post-season.

Tyler moved back to his window and leaned on the frame. He flexed the muscles in his lower body. Where did the pain start and where did it stop? His feet and legs didn't hurt. His right hand felt pretty good. But if he moved too fast, his right shoulder sent a stabbing pain down his arm, through his torso, and up into his neck.

Maybe food would help. He hadn't eaten anything since yesterday afternoon. Tyler rummaged through his snack box and found a protein bar. He used his teeth and left hand to rip off the wrapper and finished it off too fast to taste it. Next he downed another bottle of water, but nothing helped.

The pain consumed him.

Tyler couldn't think of a single job he could do without the use of his right arm and while he was in this much pain. His parents' faces crossed his mind. They had said this would happen. That if he didn't go to college his life would fall apart.

For now, he needed to get his car and his pain meds. William Trapnell, his catcher, would be here any minute. *My former catcher*, he corrected himself. His new existence was more than he could comprehend all at one time. Tyler stayed by the window until he saw his friend pull up. Never mind the fact that his legs were fine. He practically limped from his room out the front door.

"Ames." William slipped his hands in his jeans pockets. "Man, I'm so sorry."

"I'll be okay." He fist-pumped his friend with his left hand. "A lot of pain, that's all."

Of course, that was hardly all. William seemed awkward, like maybe he didn't know what to say or how to say it. The whole team had to know by now that Tyler had been cut. He had a blown-out shoulder, so the Blue Wahoos didn't want him. He was out of work and running out of options.

They climbed into William's truck and started down the main road toward the stadium. "I can't believe they cut you."

He glanced at Tyler and then kept his eyes on the road. "You're one of the best pitchers I've ever worked with. And the other night . . . you were crazy good."

"I'll be back." The pain made every word difficult, but that didn't matter. Tyler was a competitor, and if there was one thing he wanted his former teammate to know it was this: he wasn't done pitching. "Doctor says I'll be back."

The unasked questions hung heavy in the car. Tyler tried to deal with them one at a time. "I'll get the surgery. I know people."

"Definitely." William nodded. "Of course."

Tyler stared at his good hand. What was he talking about? He didn't know anyone who could help put his shoulder back together. Not here or back home in California or anywhere else. This morning he should be getting in to see a surgeon. Instead he had to think about giving notice and moving.

Tyler breathed in sharp through his nose, steadying himself against the constant assault of pain. "Should be nice to-night. For the game." He wondered how long it would be before he didn't know or care about the Blue Wahoo schedule.

"Another packed house." William turned into the stadium parking lot and drove to Tyler's car. "Hey, man. If there's any-thing I can do." He kept his car running. Didn't even put it in park.

"Yeah. Sure." Tyler wanted to shout at him. Why was his buddy treating him this way? He had a bad shoulder, but he wasn't contagious. For a long moment he stared at him until a realization hit. Without baseball, he and William had nothing in common. Nothing to talk about.

Holding his right arm against his body, Tyler climbed out and shut the door behind him. He leaned in through the open window. "Thanks for the ride."

"No problem." William nodded. "Take care of yourself."

With the ocean breeze blowing at his back, Tyler watched his friend drive away. If someone had asked him three days ago whether he had friends, Tyler would've rattled off a list of names. All teammates. Now that he no longer belonged to the Blue Wahoos, he was not only unemployed, he had no team-mates. No friends.

He turned toward the stadium and read the words stretched across the front: Bayfront Stadium. Home of the Blue Wahoos. How many times had Tyler parked in this spot and walked through the player entrance of that building? Each time he had told himself the same thing: This was a chapter in his story, a steppingstone to the Big Show. Better than Dayton but still not where he expected to be six years after the draft.

His shoulder felt like flames were coming from it. Tyler gripped his right elbow and wondered if doctors ever did shoulder surgeries out of the goodness of their heart. He pulled his keys from his pocket and clicked open the door of his Dodge Charger. The car still turned heads, the wheels still among the nicest on the road.

Lot of good that did him now.

Tyler slid behind the wheel carefully, but even still he bumped his right elbow and cried out, "I can't do this!" He froze in place, squeezing his eyes shut and waiting for the white-hot pain to let up. Even a little. How was he supposed to drive without his right arm? Slowly he sank back against the leather seat and pulled his phone from his pocket. He called up Safari and searched *Cost of Shoulder Surgery*. Several figures appeared in the results. The average seemed to be around twelve thousand dollars.

The amount he made a year with the Blue Wahoos.

He stared at the steering wheel. *Okay, Tyler, you can do this. You can drive to the store and get your pills. Come on.*

All his life he had driven with his right hand. Now he felt awkward if not unsafe as he made his way to the drugstore. He paid \$39.71 for the prescription of Oxycodone. In a hurry, he struggled back to his car, found another water bottle, and downed two pills. *There.* He couldn't drive once the meds took effect, but he needed them now. In a careful move, he shut his car door and rested against the vehicle. He closed his eyes and turned his face toward the sun. How fast would the medication help? *Work fast . . . please work.* His entire body trembled from the battering effect of his shattered shoulder.

A few minutes passed and he opened his eyes. He couldn't stay here. People walking by were starting to give him strange looks. He directed his attention to the back of the store. Boxes. That's what he needed. Clutching his right elbow to his body, Tyler lumbered toward the dumpster, grabbed half a dozen empty boxes, and managed to get them into his trunk. He had no idea what tomorrow held, but he knew he had to figure out his living situation fast. Before he ran out of money.

Back at home, he shoved the pain pills in his pocket and carried the boxes up to his room. Tyler's landlady was a woman in her fifties. She and her husband lived on the main level of the small two-story 1970s house. Tyler had the up- stairs. The ceilings weren't high and both walls slanted in along the roofline. Tyler was six feet, two inches tall, so as long as he stayed in the middle of the room he had plenty of clearance. His window faced due south, toward the ocean, with a view of trees and blue sky.

The room had been home since Tyler moved to Pensacola.

He found Mrs. Cook in the front room reading. She looked up when he walked in. "Tyler, you look better than you did yesterday." She stood and moved a stack of magazines off the sofa so Tyler could sit down. "I read in the paper about your shoulder. I'm sorry."

Again he thought about praying. He needed a miracle. *If You're there, God, I could use a little help.* He steadied himself, aware of the pain pills in his left pocket as he sat down. "The Blue Wahoos . . . they cut me." Tyler looked at her, hoping for kindness.

“I don’t have insurance.” A sad laugh came from somewhere inside his heart. “I need surgery, so yeah. Not sure what I’m going to do.”

Mrs. Cook let that set in for a long moment. She lowered her brow, concerned. “That’s terrible.”

“I’ll figure it out.” He hated this, hated feeling like a victim. “Anyway, I need to talk to you about the room.”

“Tyler . . .” Mrs. Cook’s expression darkened. “I need rent money.”

“I’m paid up through Friday. But after that . . .” He shrugged his good shoulder. What could he say? “I need to find a job. I could maybe . . . pay half the rent and then the other half after I find something?”

“I’m very sorry, Tyler.” She shook her head and looked out the window for a moment. “Mr. Cook and I count on that money. We use it to pay the mortgage.” She looked back at him. “We usually get four hundred for the room. You know that.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The pain pills weren’t working. “I’m just not sure what to do.”

“Me, either.” Her expression filled with remorse. “I’m awful sorry.”

Tyler waited, expecting some sort of compromise. He hadn’t been late on rent once. But none came. “So that’s it?”

“Stay till the end of the week, of course.” She managed a weak smile. “No need to leave today.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He stood and returned to his room. By then his entire body was shaking, desperate for a way around the pain. Maybe he could take three pills. One more than before. Certainly that couldn’t hurt. He dropped to his chair and used his knees to brace a water bottle. Then he ripped off the top. The bottle of pain medication was tougher. He had to use his right hand to brace the lid while he twisted with his left. The effort killed, but one additional pill and a swig of water and he could at least know relief was on the way.

The next two days passed in a haze of medicated pain and restlessness. The pills became his only friends, but even when they were working he couldn’t get good sleep. Only when he was sitting up, when his shoulder didn’t feel detached from his body. His mind was another problem. Much as he quickly came to love the pain pills, he was clear-headed only in the morning—when the medication had worn off. That’s when he would drive to Chick-Fil-A for a breakfast wrap and a couple regular chicken sandwiches. Lunch and dinner for later in the day. Then he’d head back to his room. A few of the guys had called or texted. Jep had stopped by to check on him. But the team was busy with games.

Finally it was Friday, and as he walked into the house with his bag of food, Mrs. Cook was waiting. “Today’s your last day, then?”

Tyler regretted not spending more time with the woman. Maybe if she’d known him better she would’ve been willing to help. But it was too late for any of that. “Yes, ma’am. Packing up.”

She smiled, nervous. “The new tenant is a baseball player, too. Another pitcher. Just got into town.”

He stared at her. What was he supposed to say to that? His heart fell to his feet and he managed a quick nod before moving past her and up the stairs to his room. His heart pounded in his aching shoulder as he sat down. Was she serious? Did she really think he would want to know that sort of information? The Blue Wahoos were bringing

in a new pitcher and he was going to sleep in Tyler's old room?

So this was God's idea of a little help?

He ate his breakfast and took the pain pills. Three of them again. The only thing he had to look forward to now. As he washed them down, he stared into the bottle. Already it was half gone. He put the lid back on and set the bottle carefully on his nightstand. Couldn't let anything happen to the pills.

He stared at the empty boxes still in the middle of his floor. It was time to pack.

Tyler started in the corner of the room where a bookcase held his trophies. Whenever he moved, they were the first things he packed. Especially the big one. The single item that mattered most to him. The two-foot-tall trophy engraved with the words that used to define him.

*Little League World Series Most Valuable Player, 2002.*

Proof that at one time he had been more than a homeless, washed-up baseball player.

He had been a champion.

