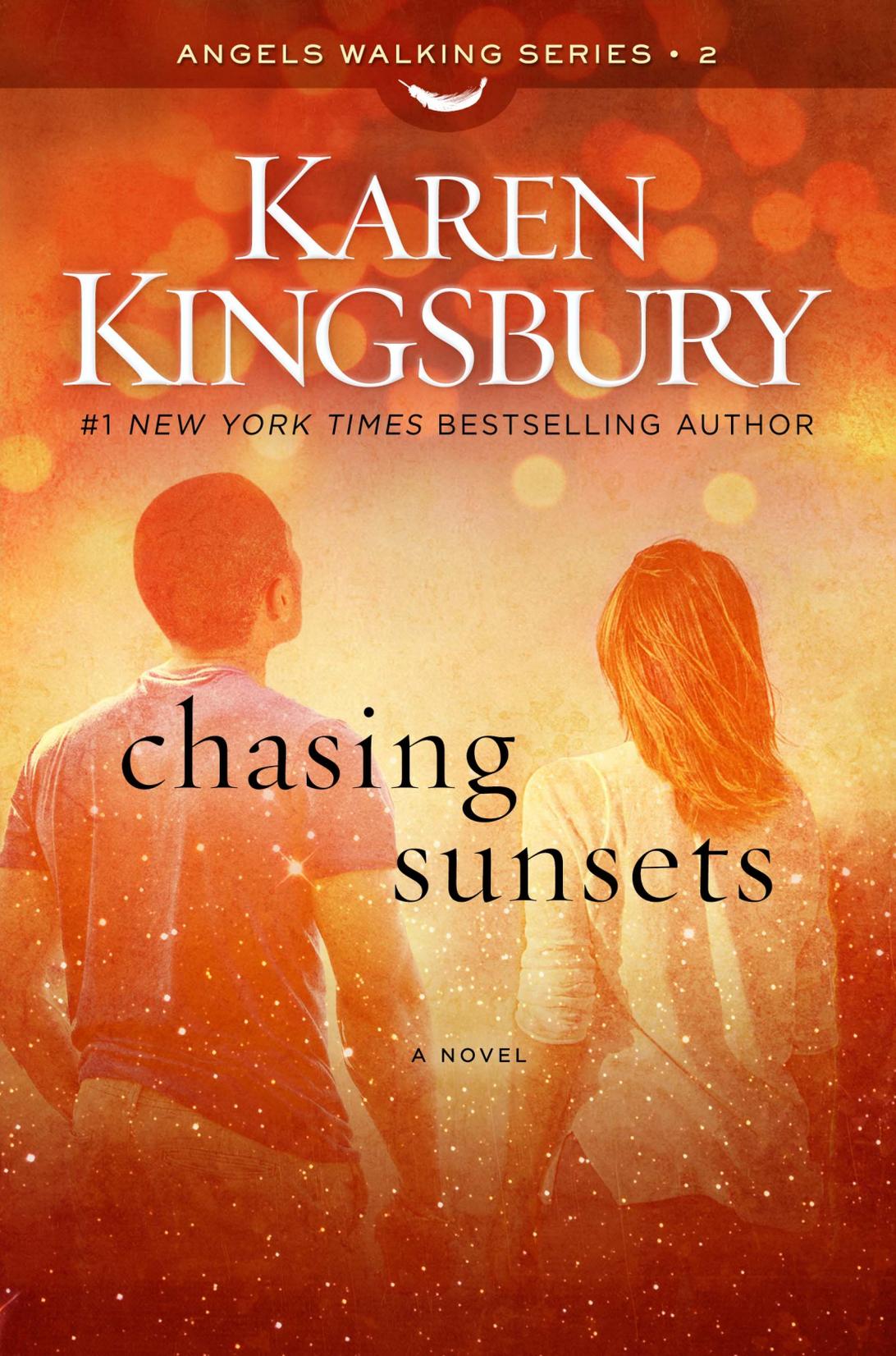


ANGELS WALKING SERIES • 2



KAREN KINGSBURY

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR



chasing
sunsets

A NOVEL



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Prologue



Town Meeting—Heaven

JAG 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



THE 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.