

# *Brush of Wings*

*Book 3 in the Angels Walking Series*

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# Prologue



## *Angel Town Meeting—Heaven*

ORLON'S MIND WAS MADE UP. There would not be a new team of angels, not for this final stage of the mission. Earth had suffered much heartache in the past year. The angels on his team specialized in desperate matters of the heart. They were needed now more than ever.

In places around the globe.

Orlon took his place at the front of the room and felt an assurance come over him. He was leader of this group of angels, and he'd made the right decision. He was sure of it. Ember and Beck. Jag and Aspyn. In the coming season, the four would face intense struggles and challenges, greater than any they'd encountered before. But they were the right angels for the terrible times ahead.

Orlon was sure of that.

He breathed deeply. *Stay strong*, he told himself. *These*

*four must believe the mission is possible. Even now.* A heavenly peace filled him. The room was empty, the angels still a few minutes from gathering. Orlon turned toward the window, toward the bright light that streamed through the opaque glass and filled the room.

He closed his eyes. *Help us, Father. You know my concerns.* Using the same teams of angels would present difficulties. A greater chance of being discovered. For humans to recognize an angel meant interrupting events that needed to play out. Events that must play out. Orlon sighed. *But You know all this, God. Give us wisdom. Go before us. In Jesus' name, amen.*

The first angels entered the room. They arrived in twos and threes. A few spoke in whispered voices, but many were quiet. Somber. They didn't fully know the challenges ahead, but they knew this much:

The stakes had never been higher.

Ember and Beck, Jag and Aspyn sat near the front. They were among the first to arrive, and of course, their hearts were already deeply invested in the mission. When the rest of the angels were seated, Orlon waited a few silent moments. *Thank You, God, for this team.* What would Earth be without them?

Orlon straightened himself. "You know why you're here. I've been alerted by Michael that the Father is ready for the final stage of this great mission—the one involving Tyler Ames and Sami Dawson, Mary Catherine Clark and Marcus Dillinger."

A few of the angels nodded. The four already involved leaned closer, completely focused.

"You remember that ultimately a baby's life is at stake, a

baby who will grow up to be a very great teacher. His name will be Dallas Garner, and he will turn the hearts of the people in the United States back to God, the Father.” Orlon paused. He needed to be clear. “This baby will be an evangelist, a great teacher. A modern-day C. S. Lewis or Billy Graham. He will stand firm on the Word of God.” Orlon hesitated. “His teachings will capture the attention of the world—but particularly Americans.”

Orlon paced a few steps toward the window, toward heaven’s crystal blue sky. He turned and faced the angels again. “There was a time when Christ’s followers in the United States were an example of love and truth for all the world.” He felt the heaviness of the mission ahead. “Today people have strayed from the truth. Dallas Garner will help return a generation back to God’s word.” He paused. “If . . . he is born at all.”

The weight of Orlon’s words seemed to settle on the shoulders of every angel in the room.

Orlon explained that all four humans must stay alive, and together. In friendship and relationship. Despite the enemy’s attempts to tear them apart. Otherwise the mission would fail. And this stage of the mission involved life and death—but not like the last time.

He returned to the podium and checked his notes. “Previously, Jag and Aspyn faced gang violence and murderous attempts on the humans. This time the threats will be random and deadly. Accidents aimed at these four. And the greatest danger will come from within Mary Catherine. Her heart.”

The very great problem, Orlon explained, was that Mary Catherine still planned to leave for Africa. “There, she will face every kind of danger.”

A restless anticipation came over the room. The angels wanted to take action. It was how they were wired. Orlon stepped out from behind the podium, his voice determined. "I have already decided which Angels Walking team will be sent."

A few of the angels blinked, looking about the room, surprised. Usually the angels volunteered for a given mission. This would be different.

Orlon turned to the angels at the front of the room. "Ember and Beck, Jag and Aspyn. You know the humans well, you've studied them and prayed for them, followed alongside them and intervened for them. You've wept over them."

The expressions on each of their faces shifted from shock to holy determination. They sat a little taller in their seats, their attention fixed on Orlon.

"All four of you will work this final part of the mission. You will meet together often and decide which angel is best for each situation."

Jag looked at his three peers and each of them nodded in agreement. "We are willing. And we are ready."

Orlon glanced around the room at the others. "We will no longer stay here in heaven, planning and praying about what happens next." He took a few steps closer to the group. "The people of Earth suffer more each day. Every team in this room will be on an Angels Walking mission by the end of the week."

Several angels exchanged looks. This was definitely different.

Orlon took a quick breath. It was time to get to work. "Let's pray."

Around the room the angels closed their eyes and bowed

their heads. Some raised their hands toward the Father, and others lifted their faces to the light. After the prayer, Orlon walked with Beck and Ember, Jag and Aspyn to the back door. “This will be your most difficult assignment yet.” He looked each of them in the eyes. “Pray constantly. Believe.”

The four angels looked set, determined. As they left the room, Orlon silently begged God that although the mission seemed doomed to fail, the four angels might succeed. He prayed also for Dallas Garner, the baby whose life hung in the balance.

And for a generation who might never find redemption otherwise.



**FOUR EMPTY CHAIRS** faced each other at the center of the adjacent room.

Jag took the lead as they entered the space and shut the door behind them. Windows lined the walls, flooding the place with light and peace.

When they were seated, Jag studied his peers. “Are you surprised?”

Beck leaned back. Rays of sunshine streamed through the windows and flashed in his green eyes. He breathed deep, clearly bewildered. “Shocked.”

“It’s true, we know the humans better.” Ember ran her hand over her long, golden-red hair. Concern knit itself into her expression. “But if they suspect us, it could alter their choices. We must be so very discreet.”

Jag nodded. “Discretion will be key.” He planted his el-

bows on his knees, leaning closer to the others. “We’ll need a strategy.”

“For every minute.” Aspyn crossed her arms. She had the most street sense of anyone in the room. “I want this mission. But it’s risky.” She looked at Ember and then at Jag and Beck. “I’m concerned.”

Aspyn sighed. “It won’t be easy.”

“Remember what Orlon said.” Beck narrowed his eyes. “The baby has only a two percent chance of being born. The odds of failing are high.”

Silence like dense fog hung over the room for more than a minute. Then Jag rose to his full towering height. “If the odds are against us, then we will better prepare ourselves this time, more than for any of the missions before.” He felt his determination build. “We will commit to pray and we will always have each other’s backs.”

Jag sat down again, intensity filling his soul. “Here’s what we’ll do.” He could see the mission coming into view. “Let’s start with Mary Catherine . . .”

An hour later they had a plan. There were great risks, of course. Jag had never taken an Angels Walking mission without them. But this one would be even more dangerous. They would leave heaven later that afternoon and begin the assignment first thing in the morning. Jag was grateful about the immediacy of their actions.

Every hour could mean the difference—not only for the mission.

But for all mankind.

# 1



**B**ECK CROSSED OCEAN AVENUE, the sea behind him.

Determination welled up in his heart. The team had chosen him to make the first move, and Beck was ready. Anxious. He walked east along Santa Monica Boulevard toward a brilliant Southern California sunrise. It was several blocks to Mary Catherine's apartment.

Beck stayed in the shadows.

He wore board shorts and a tank top, flip-flops and sunglasses. Over one shoulder he carried a faded black backpack. *Take it slow*, he told himself. *You're just any other surfer headed off the beach for breakfast.*

Beck caught a glimpse of his reflection in the front window of a seafood restaurant. His brown arms looked fit, athletic. Like he spent his days conquering waves. No one would suspect he was an angel.

After a few minutes he reached her apartment. Immedi-

ately he spotted her car—an old Hyundai. Beck glanced down the street. Several drifter types sat huddled on park benches or tucked up against the buildings. None of them seemed to notice Beck.

He stopped, lowered the backpack, and pulled a tire gauge from it. This first part of the plan was brilliant. Frustrating for Mary Catherine, maybe. But necessary. The gauge slipped easily into the tire stem of the Hyundai's right rear tire. A hissing sound signaled the release of air. When the back tire was obviously flat, Beck moved to the front of the car.

As he did, a couple of police officers turned the corner and headed his way. Beck felt his heartbeat quicken. *Come on, Jag. You gotta help me.* He stood, not sure whether the officers had seen him. At the same time another officer, tall and blond, built like a gladiator, stepped out from a doorway and approached the first two.

Jag.

Beck felt himself relax. He could hear Jag's voice—friendly and confident—as he talked to the officers. The words of their conversation weren't clear, but that didn't matter. Jag would hold them off until Beck finished the job.

He worked quickly and in less than a minute both right tires were completely flat. That should do it. She wouldn't have two spares. Beck tucked the tire gauge away, slid the backpack onto his shoulder, and turned toward the beach. At the bike path that bordered the sand, he slipped around a busy bicycle shop and disappeared.



MARY CATHERINE WOKE UP early for one reason—she wanted to feel the ocean against her skin, and she was nearly out of time.

In two weeks she would leave for Africa—no matter what anyone thought. Once she reached Uganda, there would be no beautiful spring mornings for riding waves. No chance to walk along the beach.

Today was perfect. It was early March and not a stitch of fog hung over Santa Monica. Nothing but sunny skies and the cool ocean breeze. Last night her roommate Sami had wanted to stay up and talk, but Mary Catherine had turned in early. All so she could drive to the ocean this morning. Lately, she didn't have the energy to walk, not since her heart had gotten worse.

Sami couldn't join her. She'd already left for an early breakfast meeting at the Chairos Youth Center. Which was okay with Mary Catherine. The more time she had alone out on the beach, the better. She had much to say to God, much to think about.

She could hardly wait to feel the sand beneath her feet.

Mary Catherine slipped on her wetsuit, grabbed her beach bag and towel, and hurried through the apartment. She pulled her boogie board from the front closet and headed out the door for her car.

The moment she was outside, she stopped. The tires on her Hyundai were completely flat.

"No!" A groan slipped from her lips as she walked closer. "Come on!" She scanned the roadway. No broken glass, no pieces of metal. Why in the world would this happen?

Without her car she'd have to pass on the beach. Which

was frustrating because she had the morning off. Once a week everyone at her office came into work late. And this was that day. She would have only one more like it—and only if she didn't need the time to finish her final projects.

She took her things back into her apartment and dropped them on the floor. Disappointment darkened her mood. If only she didn't tire so easily, she could walk there. But she couldn't take the risk on a work day. Maybe she could get to the beach later this week. In the afternoon. Once her tires were fixed.

Mary Catherine called a tow truck company, found her journal from beside her bed, and made a cup of decaf tea. She situated herself at the small kitchen table and stared at the weak-tasting hot drink. Coffee was another of her losses. Caffeine would speed the demise of her heart.

Mary Catherine closed her eyes.

She hesitated and then looked at the journal. The book was one of her closest friends. She opened it and found what she'd written yesterday. As far back as Mary Catherine could remember she had kept a journal. Not an accounting of her days, but a record of her dreams and goals. The very specific things she was learning in the Bible, wisdom she'd gleaned from quiet moments with God.

But lately her journal entries had taken a turn. She tended to write more about things she'd never see, the wedding she'd never have. Children she'd never hold. She wrote about her feelings, too. Her fear and excitement over what lay ahead in Uganda and the way she missed Marcus Dillinger.

These things consumed her.

In all likelihood she would never see Marcus again. He

still emailed her and texted her from spring training in Phoenix. Sometimes she replied. Usually on days when she could still feel his kiss, still remember the touch of his embrace.

Mary Catherine took a sip of her tea. The days ahead would be easier if she could forget him. But forgetting Marcus Dillinger was like forgetting how to breathe. Impossible, no matter how hard she tried.

Even if all she gained by remembering him was the assurance that—for the briefest moment—she had known what it felt like to be in love.

Something she would never know again.

Mary Catherine started at the top of the next page and wrote, *Things I Need to Do Before Africa*. Beneath that she scribbled a brief list.

*Get shots and extra heart medicine. Call Mom and Dad. Buy school supplies for the kids at the orphanage.*

She paused.

This wasn't how she wanted to spend her morning. She didn't need a list to know what she had to do before leaving for Africa. She turned the page and poised her pen at the first line. Her heart overflowed with dreams and hopes, doubts and fears. She didn't have time for lists.

And like that every thought of her heart began pouring onto the page.

*Sometimes I close my eyes and I'm there again, I can feel the creaking boards beneath my feet, dancing on that back deck with Marcus. He holds me in his arms,*

*and his quiet laughter fills my soul. The stars hang in the night sky and I can feel his breath against my skin, his lips against mine. And I do everything I can to hold on to the moment, to etch it into my heart in a place where I can relive it whenever I want. The truth is, I'm lonely and afraid. Marcus is gone, and I'll never see him again. And the scant days ahead are slipping through my fingers.*

Mary Catherine closed her eyes. Maybe God would allow her to keep the memory alive—even till her dying day. And since that could be sometime this year, she was even more determined to find a way to hold on to the brightest and most beautiful moments of her life.

Like the one she should've had this morning out on the beach.

Never mind that her doctor didn't want her in the ocean. Too much exertion. Too much adrenaline. She had been taking medication to prepare her for a heart transplant, but it could be years before a donor heart became available. She had to take care of herself, give herself the greatest chance at living long enough to get a heart. If Mary Catherine ran her heart into the ground before a donor could be identified, then . . . well, then she would go home to heaven and she'd spend every morning at the beach.

Forever.

But she would never have another chance to see Marcus.

Mary Catherine read what she'd written. Why was she running off to Africa, anyway? Maybe she should go to Phoenix. Walk up to Marcus at a break in his practice and tell him

she was wrong to send him away without a bit of hope, wrong to believe they could never have anything between them.

As soon as the crazy idea landed on her, she dismissed it. The reason then was the reason now. She was dying. It'd be different if she and Marcus had been dating when the news came. If that were the case, she couldn't deny him the chance to ride out this season with her if that's what he wanted.

But they weren't dating. Marcus was just finding a relationship with God, just realizing what was important in life. He needed a love who could walk that journey of faith at his side. Someone who would be there for him through the years.

Not someone who needed a new heart.

She began to write again.

*Love isn't God's plan for my life. It never was. I wasn't that girl with the long line of guys trying to get my attention. Real guys . . . guys who loved Jesus . . . they weren't at my school and they weren't around at college.*

She thought for a moment. Sure she had dated a little bit, but no guy had ever turned her head.

Until Marcus Dillinger.

Star pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Of all people. She put his face out of her mind and moved her pen across the page once more. *Your love is enough. It is. Thank You, Lord, for that.*

A smile lifted the corners of Mary Catherine's mouth. She breathed in and felt the presence of God in the most real way possible. *Look at all the things I've done, Lord . . . all because*

*You let me live. Really live.* She closed her eyes again and she could see herself, skydiving over a field near Castaic Lake, and riding her bike down Ocean Avenue and across hundreds of miles of paths that ran along the beach from Will Rogers to Redondo. She had known what it was to have the sea breeze against her face, the sunshine in her long hair.

She had swum with the dolphins and looked long at the horizon. She had taught second-graders at church and sat bedside with elderly people at the Santa Monica Summer Hospice Home. She had walked foreign soil in a number of countries to tell people about the hope of Jesus.

Yes, God had already allowed her so much life. Mary Catherine could never complain about the fact that she was running out of time. No matter how sad the next six months might be, she couldn't dwell on what she would never have. The love she would never know. She would anchor herself instead on what God had given her, the ways she had lived. Some people never had a minute of the wonderful life she'd already experienced.

She moved her pen to the bottom of the page.

*As for the dreams that will never be . . . maybe, God,  
You'll let me live them out at night when I sleep. The  
unimaginable joy of standing face-to-face with a man  
like Marcus and promising him forever. The precious  
warmth of my very own newborn in my arms and the  
journey of growing old next to the love of my life.*

*Together loving You and loving people for a  
hundred years.*

*If You'll let me live those things out when I sleep,*

*Lord, that will be enough. I promise. No tears, no complaining, no doubting. I am Yours, always. No matter how many days You give me.*

There was one more adventure just ahead, one more dream that actually would come true. Her dream of going back to Africa. The orphanage in Uganda had just opened. Already forty-three kids called the place home. Mary Catherine would organize it and make a plan for food and schooling. She would teach, and hire other teachers, and bring in caretakers for the children.

Yes, Mary Catherine would make sure the orphanage thrived. She knew exactly what needed to be done. God had given her this mission—she had no doubt.

She opened her eyes. Long ago when no guys seemed interested, when no one invited her to the prom and all of her friends were finding someone special, Mary Catherine had made a pact with God.

She could live without love, as long as she could love where she lived.

And that place—she had known from the minute she went on her first African mission trip—would be Uganda. At times she had hoped she might have years there, pouring herself into the people, helping them know the salvation of Jesus and giving them a purpose. Teaching trades and digging wells for clean water and providing education to better their chances at a future.

She moved to Los Angeles intent on making a difference and saving money before moving to Africa. But she hadn't known how little time she actually had.

A text from Sami flashed on her phone.

How was the beach?

Mary Catherine felt a ripple of guilt. That was something else. She had told Sami about her valve condition, but her friend had no idea that without a heart donor, Mary Catherine might have less than a year to live.

No one knew but the doctor. Mary Catherine hadn't even told her parents—although she needed to find a way to do that. Probably before Africa. The problem was, she didn't want her family or her best friend feeling sorry for her or worrying about her. She wanted them to believe in this trip, and to pray for a miracle. And if she didn't get one, then she wanted them to rejoice that she had lived a full life.

Regardless of how the news was perceived, Mary Catherine had promised her doctor that sometime soon she would tell Sami. Her, at least. She would make Sami promise not to tell Tyler or Marcus. Nothing good could come from them knowing how sick she was. They needed to focus on the coming baseball season.

But in case something happened in Africa, she really should have at least one friend who knew the truth, who could get word to her cardiologist in an emergency. Sami would be that friend. No matter how much Mary Catherine didn't want to tell her.

Mary Catherine closed the journal. She could still see the concern on Dr. Cohen's face when she told him she was serious about spending six months in Africa. He had tried to talk her out of it, but ultimately he had agreed. Six months, no longer. And only if she had easy access to transportation back home.

In case she became sicker.

And so with what might be the final months of her life, she would live out the one dream she could still make a reality. The dream of helping orphans. And at night, when the strange sounds of the African plains kept her awake, she would allow herself to go back. Back to Marcus Dillinger, and a love that would only ever be possible when she fell asleep.

In the quiet of her dreams.

## 2



**SAMI ONLY HEARD FROM TYLER** every few days—whenever he had a spare moment and no one needed him to run a meeting or stage a coaching conversation or help out in the dugout. Spring training in Arizona kept him constantly busy.

Sami missed him with every breath.

So when Tyler's call came that morning midway through a long meeting at the Youth Center, Sami immediately stepped into the hallway.

"Hello?" Her heart skipped a beat. "Tyler?"

"Baby." He was breathless, as if hearing her voice had given him permission to inhale. "I'm so glad you picked up."

She closed her eyes. "I miss you."

"I knew it would be a long month, but it feels like a year." He sounded so close, like he was holding her in his arms. "I need you, Sami."

She leaned against a cool wall and pictured him, Dodgers

baseball cap, shorts, and a polo shirt. "I can't wait to see you."

"Me, too." Wherever he was, the spot was quieter than usual. More intimate. "Skype tomorrow?"

"You have time?"

"I do. Finally." He sighed. "Where are you?"

"At the Youth Center. Back-to-back meetings this morning." She peered into the room. A volunteer was speaking to the group. "Things are great here, Tyler. Every program is full. And the teen mentoring class starts tonight." She smiled. "Lexy will be here. I just wish we could have Mary Catherine."

"She leaves in two weeks, right?"

"Yes." Sami glanced back at the meeting. "My friends from college are helping tonight in her place. Five of them."

Tyler laughed. "It'll take five of them to replace Mary Catherine."

"True." Sami exhaled. She would miss Mary Catherine so much.

The subject bounced back to Tyler and Marcus and spring training.

Tyler sounded subdued as the conversation ended. "Sometimes . . . I think about the past. My years in the minors. I was such a fool, Sami." He fell quiet for several seconds. "I'd give anything to have that time back. To never have left you." His sincerity rang through the phone line. "I love you."

"I love you, too." She was touched to the depths of her heart. "The past is behind us. All that matters is now."

When the call was over, for a long moment Sami could only stand there and relive the conversation. God was so good

to give her this new, faithful Tyler Ames. The conversation was proof of something that filled Sami with joy.

Nobody would ever love her the way Tyler Ames did.



THE LAST TIME IN program had always been a short-term answer to a long-term problem. Scare teens with the reality of prison and follow up with a series of counseling meetings.

But then what?

Sami and Mary Catherine had worked together when the program ended last year to come up with a next step. A place where troubled girls could find hope and faith and a future.

In the end the answer was obvious—a mentoring program for teenage girls. Another way the Chairis Youth Center could make a difference in Los Angeles.

Tonight's meeting was the first, but Sami believed it would be the start of a long-running forum where girls were given an alternative to gangs and crime. She had prayed that many girls from the Last Time In program would come tonight, and sure enough, several were among the twenty-four teens from the community who showed up for the meeting.

But Lexy Jones was not one of them.

When Sami asked about Lexy, the response from the teens was guarded. Maybe Lexy was hanging out with her new boyfriend, one girl said. The thought broke Sami's heart. She made a mental note to contact Lexy tomorrow, maybe take her for lunch.

For now, the conversation was already going deep, some-

thing else Sami had wanted. A slender, slightly graying counselor, Lauren Sandall, sat quietly in one corner of the room. The woman had trained Sami and her friends from UCLA earlier today. Mainly advising them to listen well and hold off on giving advice until the girls were ready for it.

Before the teens arrived Lauren explained that she wouldn't lead the discussion, just monitor it. In case one of the girls showed signs of abuse or criminal activity. Something that would need private follow-up.

Sami's friends were split up around the circle, so the teens could sit between them. For this first meeting, everyone stayed in the large group. In later weeks they would break off into separate areas in the Youth Center so the girls could have more talk time.

In an effort to meet the girls where they were likely struggling the most, this first conversation was about sex. What it should be . . . what it shouldn't be. God's plan for intimacy in married relationships. Sami led the discussion.

"God designed sex to be a beautiful part of a married relationship between a man and a woman." Sami was ready for push-back. "Let me be clear—this isn't *my* plan. It isn't something I made up. It's God's plan. He defined marriage that way in the Bible. So for the purpose of our group, the Bible will be our standard."

A few girls covered up quiet giggles. Some of them exchanged sarcastic looks. Sami didn't care. If she was going to help them, she had to offer them the greatest source of love available. God's word, His truth. She drew a slow breath. "Why do you think God created sex and then confined it only to marriage?"

One girl snapped her fingers, her brow raised. “Because He doesn’t want us to have any fun.”

Her remark elicited laughter from a few of the girls.

Sami’s friends looked nervous. But Sami was ready. “Okay.” She lifted her Bible off the floor and put it on her lap. She opened it to Song of Solomon, chapter 3, verse 4. “One of my favorite Scriptures is in Song of Solomon. That’s a book in the Bible. Sort of a love letter. It says, ‘I have found the one my heart loves.’”

The girls were quiet. Skeptical, but listening.

Sami set the Bible down. “In my life, I’ve found that man. Or he found me. How do I know?” She didn’t wait for them to answer. “Because he loves God more than he loves me. He’s kind. He treats me with respect. He prays for me and reads the Bible with me. He cherishes me like I’m a princess. But we’re not married yet . . .”

“You’re saying you two don’t have sex?” The question came from one of the youngest teens in the room. Probably not a day over thirteen.

“That’s right.” Sami needed to be honest and transparent. “We want to, of course. Sex is going to be wonderful. God designed it that way. But . . . He created it for marriage.”

The girl seemed shocked. “And your boo don’t get mad at you?”

“No. He doesn’t get mad. He sets boundaries for us. He reminds us when it’s time to go home, when we’ve hung out long enough. God made men to be leaders.” She looked straight into the girl’s eyes, all the way to her heart. “If the guys you’re around aren’t like that, then they’re the wrong guys.”

The thirteen-year-old tilted her head back, showing a glimpse of the tough girl she wanted to be. "Where we supposed to find guys like that?"

Sami kept her tone even. "You have to wait for them."

"Till I'm eighty." It was the first girl again, the one who liked getting a laugh. She nodded her head at Sami. "You seen the guys we got around here?"

A chorus of voices added their agreement. Another girl was more respectful. "You didn't find your man in the projects."

Sami let that settle for a moment. *Give me the words, God . . . this isn't easy.*

Her friend Megan Winters took the lead. "The truth?" She made eye contact with several of the girls. "God is enough." Megan was from Kenya and lived in the projects before getting a scholarship to UCLA. "My first boyfriend was in a gang." She hesitated, noting the looks of surprise. "It's true. I used to think I needed a guy to feel good about myself." She leaned in, her voice filled with intensity. "But then I realized something. God loves me so much, I don't need a guy. Having the Lord in my heart, by my side. That's enough." She leaned back in her chair.

Again the girls were listening.

"There's another reason I'm okay with being single." Megan looked around the circle again. "I sure don't want to be with the wrong guy when the right one comes along."

Sami remembered her relationship with Arnie. How it had almost been the reason she and Tyler never found their way back together. Megan's advice was dead-on.

The first girl's expression softened. "What if we don't want to be single forever?"

“Don’t worry about being single. Always looking for the right guy.” Megan was on a roll. “Worry about yourself. Spend time becoming that special girl, the one the right guy would want.” She looked at Sami. “Right?”

“Yes.” She leaned over her knees. “The right guy will love God first. He will be honest and hardworking and kind. He will treat you with respect and lead your relationship so that both of you stay pure.” She paused. “Pure means not having sex before you’re married. Or making a decision right here . . . tonight . . . to stop having sex until then.”

A few of the girls nodded, curious.

One of them let out a single defeated laugh. “Girl, I lost my purity when I was twelve. And every weekend after that.” She laughed again. “Ain’t nothing I can do about that. And ain’t no Prince Charming gonna want me now.”

“I’ll be honest.” Sami took a breath. Tyler had told her to share his story if it would help. “Tyler—my boyfriend—had sex before. With different girls.” She waited, measuring their surprise. “He walked away from God and his life became miserable. But now . . . now he’s committed to being pure. We won’t have sex until and unless we get married.” She looked straight at the girl who had just spoken. “With God, you can start again. He’ll help you.”

“Not everything can be forgiven.” The girl’s eyes filled with tears. “Some things are too bad.”

“That’s not true.” Sami slid to the edge of her chair, her tone more passionate than before. “Jesus died on the cross to forgive us from *all* our sins.” She motioned at the circle of girls. “All of us. Everything we’ve ever done.” Her eyes met the

girl who asked the question. “No matter how many times you’ve done it.”

Sami went on to explain that next week they would talk about Jesus. Who He was and who He is, why He came to Earth and what it meant that He died on the cross. “You can have a certainty—because of Jesus—that you’ll go to heaven when you die. But more than that, you can be sure you’re forgiven.” She hesitated. “Purity can be part of your life again . . . because Jesus is the God of second chances.”

A few of the girls nodded. Others still looked skeptical.

When the hour was up, Sami closed by reading one of her favorite verses. “In the Bible, in Jeremiah, chapter twenty-nine, verse eleven, it says, ‘For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans to give you a hope and a future and not to harm you.’” The verse was personal for Sami. “A hope and a future.” She allowed a long pause for the words to sink in. “Let’s think about that until we meet next week.”

A few of the girls thanked Sami and her friends before they left. Three neighborhood moms had shown up, and they lingered when the meeting was over. Each of them made their way to Sami and thanked her for the meeting. “This could change my baby’s life,” one of them said. Tears glistened in her eyes. “Thank you.”

As her friends drove away, Sami peered at the starless sky and smiled. *Thanks, God . . . tonight was perfect.* Her heart felt suddenly heavy again. *But Lord, wherever Lexy is, please get her attention. She needs this.*

There was no quiet whisper, no audible response. Only a certainty that Sami needed to call Lexy tomorrow. Sami

stepped back inside the center and found her things. Good changes were happening . . . she could feel them. Tonight didn't hold all the answers.

But it was a beginning.



WHEN SAMI GOT HOME, Mary Catherine was sitting at the kitchen table. She seemed quiet. Distracted. Sami looked at the baked chicken and broccoli on the counter. "Smells amazing."

"Have some. I already ate." It looked like she'd been crying. "Tell me about the meeting."

Sami served her plate and sat down. She studied Mary Catherine. "Something's wrong."

"I'm fine. I've been going through my closet." A smile lifted Mary Catherine's lips. "Just a lot on my mind." She leaned her forearms on the table. "Come on. I want to know everything."

Sami was still hesitant about whatever seemed to be troubling Mary Catherine, but since her friend wanted to know the details, Sami told her. "Okay . . . so it went better than I ever thought . . ."

When she was finished she paused. "Except one thing . . . Lexy wasn't there."

Mary Catherine's shoulders sank. "I'm worried about her."

"I know." Sami set her fork down. "She hasn't been by the center at all."

For a moment Mary Catherine stared at her hands. "Sometimes I think I should skip Africa and help kids here."

Kids like Lexy.” She lifted her eyes to Sami. “It’d be a lot easier.”

“Then do that.” Sami felt a glimmer of hope. She hated seeing Mary Catherine leave for so long. Especially with her heart condition. Sami was concerned about something else, too: that once Mary Catherine got settled in Africa and started working with orphans, she might never come back.

Mary Catherine made herself a cup of green tea. She swirled the hot liquid and stared at it. “I have to go. I promised myself.”

“Hmmm.” Sami took a bite of her chicken and set her fork down. She looked at her friend. “What about your heart? The valve replacement?”

Mary Catherine shrugged. Her answer came a little too quickly. “My doctor said I could go.”

“All right.” Sami didn’t want to push. If Mary Catherine’s doctor was okay with her going, then the trip must be okay. “And God? What does He say about you going?”

A surprised look lifted Mary Catherine’s eyes. “He wants me to go. Of course. I mean, who do *those* kids have?” She looked distant, distracted. “Besides, I’ve always dreamed about going back.”

Sami cleared her dishes and washed the chicken pan, letting a little space settle between them. Something was definitely bothering Mary Catherine. When she was finished she dried her hands and turned to her friend again. “Have you talked to Marcus?”

“He calls.” Mary Catherine kept her eyes on her cup of tea. “We don’t talk long. There’s no point.”

The two of them had been over this. “I still disagree.”

Sami crossed her arms and kept her tone kind. “You and Marcus had something special. I was there, remember?”

Mary Catherine lifted her eyes to Sami. “It’s over. You know that.” She stood and joined Sami in the kitchen. “How are you and Tyler?”

The message was clear—conversation closed. Sami understood. She breathed in, thinking back to her phone call earlier with Tyler, how much he missed her. “We’re great. We’re Skyping tomorrow night.”

“Good.” Mary Catherine smiled. “You two are perfect.”

Sami would miss this, her time with Mary Catherine. “Thanks.” She hugged her. “You’re a great friend.”

“You, too.” Mary Catherine pulled back. Her smile remained, but Sami could see the hint of tears in her eyes.

As Sami fell asleep that night she figured she understood why Mary Catherine was more emotional tonight. In just a few weeks she would be leaving everything behind. Not only that, but her friend had worked too hard making it clear she wasn’t interested in Marcus. If Sami had to guess, she’d say her friend was missing him. Maybe more than even Mary Catherine herself expected.

If she wasn’t so stubborn, she and Marcus could have a beautiful love. One as great as Sami and Tyler’s. A love that—as Mary Catherine said—wasn’t only beautiful.

It was perfect.



THE SITUATION WITH Mary Catherine was getting critical.

Aspyn and Ember had been there tonight—invisible—in

the apartment when Sami came home from the Youth Center. They had hoped Mary Catherine would tell Sami the truth. About her need for a heart transplant. If Sami knew, then she would encourage Mary Catherine to immediately fly home from Africa when her symptoms grew worse. Or better, convince her to stay in Los Angeles.

If Mary Catherine didn't make it back from Africa in time, she would die. In which case, the mission would fail.

Earlier in the day, Ember had arranged for an extra project to land on Mary Catherine's desk. Because of that she left work late and didn't make a trip to the ocean. A victory for Aspyn and Ember. They had to keep Mary Catherine away from the beach. Even a few hours of exertion on her already damaged heart could take days off her life.

Days she didn't have.

The angels had done everything right. But still Mary Catherine had avoided the conversation about her heart. Now Aspyn and Ember were headed once more to Camelback Ranch for another idea, one that involved Marcus Dillinger.

If only Mary Catherine would cooperate.

# 3



MARY CATHERINE HAD BEEN dreading this appointment for weeks.

A few days ago she'd gone into Dr. Cohen's office for another round of tests. Today he would give her the results. The nurse called her name minutes after she arrived.

The floor shifted as she stood, and spots clouded her vision. *Calm down*, she told herself. *Don't be afraid. Breathe.* Whatever was happening inside her chest, God already knew. He had a plan for her life—a good plan. Mary Catherine believed that completely. But somehow her heart felt tight as she followed the nurse down the hallway to an exam room.

Mary Catherine slipped into a paper gown and crossed her legs. Outside temperatures were in the mid-eighties. Warm for Los Angeles in early March. But here on the exam table, Mary Catherine's teeth chattered. Her fingers were freezing.