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*a thousand tomorrows*

A NOVEL

## Chapter One

Mary Williams never saw it coming.

She became Mike Gunner's wife the summer of 1972, back when love was all the world needed, big enough to solve any problem. So big no one imagined it might end or die or drop off suddenly the way the muddy Mississippi River did ten yards out.

The wedding was small, held on a hillside in Oxford not far from Ole Miss, a stone's throw from the grassy football field where Mike had been king. Marriage, they told themselves, wouldn't mean losing their independence. They were just adding another layer to their relationship, something more diverse, more complex. As a reminder, during the ceremony they each held something that symbolized themselves—Mary, a book of poetry; Mike, a football.

A football.

Looking back that should've been a sign, because football was Mike's first love, and what sort of man could be married to two lovers? But at the time—with half the guests in flowing tie-dyed gowns and flower wreaths—holding a football and a book of poetry seemed hip and new, a spit in the face of tradition and marital bondage. No three-piece suits and starched aprons for Mike and Mary.

Mike had an NFL contract with the Atlanta Falcons, and a pretty new house a few miles from the stadium. Mary was a runaway, so leaving Biloxi meant cutting ties that were already frayed. They would live as one, him in a Falcons uniform, her with a pen and paper, ready to capture the deep phrases and rhymes that grew in the soil of her heart.

Babies? They would wait five years at least. Maybe ten. She was only nineteen, a child herself. Marriage would mean finding new and heightened ways to love each other. Sundays cheering from the stands while her husband blazed a trail down the football field, and lazy Tuesdays, barefoot and sipping coffee while she recited to him her latest creation.

That was the plan, anyway.

But God didn't get the memo, because Mary was pregnant three months later and gave birth to a baby boy shortly before their first anniversary. Cody William Gunner, they called him. Little Codester. Mary put away the pen and paper and bought a rocking chair. She spent her days and most nights walking a crying baby, heating up bottles, and changing diapers.

"Sorry I'm not around more," Mike told her. He wasn't used to babies. Besides, if he wanted to keep up, he needed more time at the field house, more reps with the weights, more hours on the track.

Mary told him she didn't mind, and the funny thing was, she really didn't. Life was good at home. Mike was happy about being a father, because Cody was all boy from the moment he was born. His first word was *ball*, and Mike bought him a pair of running shoes months before he could walk.

The years that followed were a blur of vibrant reds and happy yellows. Mike was coming

into his own, each season showing him faster, more proficient at catching the long bomb. There had been no warning, no sign that life was about to fall apart.

In the spring of 1978, when Cody was nearly five, Mary learned she was expecting again. Still, it wasn't the coming baby, but a bad catch one October Sunday that changed everything. Mike was all alone, ten yards away from the nearest defender, when he reached for the sky, grabbed the ball and came down at an angle that buckled his knees.

A torn anterior ligament, the hospital report showed. Surgery was scheduled; crutches were ordered. "You'll miss a season," the doctor told him. "To be honest, I'm not sure you'll ever run the same again."

Six weeks later Mary gave birth to Carl Joseph.

From the beginning, Carl was different. He didn't cry the way Cody had, and he slept more than usual. His fussiest moments were during feeding time, when milk from the bottle would leak out his nose while he was eating, causing him to choke and sputter and cough.

Mike would look at him and get nervous. "Why's he doing that?"

"I'm not sure." Mary kept a burp rag close by, dabbing at the baby's nose and convincing herself nothing was wrong. "At least he isn't crying."

Either way, Mike wanted to be gone. As soon as he could, he got back in the training room, working harder than ever to make the knee well again. By the next fall, he was cleared to play, but he was more than a second slower in the forty.

"We'll try you at special teams, Gunner," the coach told him. "You've got to get your times down if you want your spot back."

His future suddenly as shaky as his left knee, Mike began staying out with the guys after games, drinking and coming home with a strange, distant look in his eyes. By the time Carl Joseph was two, Mike was cut from the Falcons. Cut without so much as a thank you or a good-luck card.

By then they knew the truth about Carl Joseph.

Their second son had Down syndrome. His condition came with a host of problems, feeding issues, developmental and speech delays. One morning Mary sat Mike down at the breakfast table.

"You never talk about Carl Joseph." She put her hands on her hips. "You act like he has the flu or something."

Mike shrugged. "We'll get him therapy; he'll be fine."

"He won't be fine, Mike." She heard a crack in her voice. "He'll be this way forever. He'll *live* with us forever."

It was that last part that caught Mike's attention. He said nothing significant at the time, nothing Mary could remember. But that summer, he was gone more than he was home. Always his story was the same. He was traveling the country looking for a tryout, getting a few weeks' look in one city and then another, working out with a handful of teams, trying to convince coaches he hadn't lost a step, hadn't done anything but get stronger

since his injury.

But one weekend morning, when Mike was still asleep in their bedroom, Mary found a Polaroid picture in his duffle bag. It was of him in a bar surrounded by three girls, one on each knee, one draped over his shoulder.

When Mike woke up, Mary was in the kitchen ready to confront him. He would have to stop traveling, stop believing his next contract was a tryout away. Bars would be a thing of the past, because she needed him at home, helping out with the boys. Money was running out. If football had nothing more to offer, he needed to find a job, some other way to support them. She had her speech memorized, but it was all for nothing.

He took control of the conversation from the moment he found her at the kitchen table.

“This . . .” He tossed his hands and let them fall limp at his sides. His eyes were bloodshot. “This isn’t what I want anymore.”

“What?” She held up the Polaroid. “You mean this?”

Anger flashed in his eyes. He snatched the picture from her, crumpled it, and slammed it into the trash can. The look he gave her was cold, indifferent. He gritted his teeth. “What I do outside this house is my business.”

She opened her mouth, but before she could tell him he was wrong, he slid his wedding ring from his left hand and dropped it on the table between them.

“It’s over, Mary. I don’t love you anymore.”

Carl’s cry sounded from upstairs. Slow and monotone, the cry of a child who would always be different. Mary looked up, following the sound. Then she found Mike’s eyes again. “This isn’t about me.” She kept her tone calm, gentle. “It’s about you.”

A loud breath escaped his lips. “It’s not about me.”

“It is.” She sat back, her eyes never leaving his. “You were on top of the world before you got hurt; now you’re out of work and afraid.” Compassion found a place in her voice. “Let’s pull together, Mike.” She stood, picked up his ring, and held it out to him. “Let me help you.”

Carl’s crying grew louder.

Mike closed his eyes. “I can’t . . .” His words were a tortured whisper. “I can’t stay here. I can’t be a father to him, Mary. Every time I look at him, I . . . I can’t do it.”

Mary felt the blood drain from her face and the cheap linoleum turn liquid beneath her feet. What had he said? This was about Carl Joseph? Precious Carl, who never did anything but smile at Mike and long to be held by him?

Mary’s scalp tingled, and the hairs on her arms stood straight up. “You’re saying you can’t stay married to me because of . . . because of Carl Joseph?”

“Don’t say it like that.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and hung his head.

Carl’s crying grew still louder.

“But that’s it, right?” The truth was exploding within her, spraying shrapnel at her heart and soul and leaving scars that would stay forever. “You want out because you can’t be a

father to Carl Joseph. Or because you're embarrassed by him. Because he's not perfect."

"I'm already packed, Mary. I called a cab; I'm flying to California and starting over. You can have the house; I'll send money when I get a job."

In a small, less important part of her mind, Mary wondered where Cody was, why he was so quiet. But she couldn't act on her curiosity. She was too busy reminding herself to breathe. "You're leaving because your son has Down syndrome? Do you hear yourself, Mike?"

But he was already headed back up the stairs.

When he left the house ten minutes later, he mumbled a single good-bye to no one in particular. Cody came tearing into the entryway from the living room, his eyes wide, forehead creased with worry.

"Dad, wait!" Cody ran out the door, his untied tennis shoes flopping with every step.

Carl Joseph in tow, Mary followed, horrified at the scene playing out. The cab waited out front, and without turning back, Mike helped the driver load both his suitcases into the trunk.

Cody stopped a few feet away, chest heaving. "Dad, where are you going?"

Mike hesitated, his eyes on Cody. "Never mind."

"But Dad—" Cody took a step closer. "When're you coming home?"

"I'm not." He looked at Mary and back at Cody. "This is it, son." Mike moved toward the passenger door. "Be good for your mama, you hear?"

"But Dad . . . I got a baseball game Friday; you promised you'd be there!" The boy was frantic, his words breathless and clipped. "Dad, don't go!"

Mike opened the door of the cab.

"Wait!" Mary stormed barefoot across the damp grass toward the cab. Carl Joseph stayed behind, rooted in one spot, watching, his thumb in his mouth. Mary jabbed her finger in the air. "You can't leave now, Mike. Your son's talking to you."

"Don't do this, Mary." Mike shot her a warning look. He lowered himself a few inches toward the passenger seat. "I have nothing to say."

"Dad!" Cody looked from Mike to Mary and back again. "What's happening; where're you going?"

Mike bit his lip and gave a curt nod to Cody. "Good-bye, son."

"Fine!" Mary screamed the word, her voice shrill and panicked. "Leave, then." She bent over, her knees shaking. Tears ran in rivers down her face. "Go ahead and leave. But if you go now, don't come back. Not ever!"

"What?" Cody looked desperate and sick, his world spinning out of control. He glared at his mother. "Don't say that, Mom. Don't tell him not to come back!"

Mary's eyes never left Mike's face. "Stay out of this, Cody. If he doesn't want us, he can go." She raised her voice again. "Do you hear me, Mike? Don't come back!"

What happened next would be a part of all their lives as long as morning followed night. Cody's father looked once more at the three of them standing on the lawn, then he climbed into the backseat, shut the door, and the cab pulled away.

"Dad!" Cody screamed his name and took off running.

The sound frightened Carl Joseph. He buried his face in his hands and fell onto his knees, rocking forward and calling out, "Mama . . . Mama . . . Mama."

Mary went to him. "Shhh. It's okay." She rubbed his back. Why was this happening? And why hadn't there been any warning? She was dizzy with shock, sick to her stomach and barely able to stand as she watched Cody chase after his father's cab.

Never did the cab slow even a little, but all the while Cody kept running. "Dad! Dad, wait!" Five houses down, seven, ten. "Don't go, Dad! Please!"

Each word hit Mary like a Mack truck. When she couldn't take another minute, she screamed after him, "Cody, get back here!"

But he wouldn't come, wouldn't stop running. All the way to the end of the block, with a speed he'd gotten from his father, he ran until the cab was long gone from sight. Then, for ten minutes, he stood there. A dark-haired eight-year-old boy, standing on the corner staring after a cab that wasn't ever coming back.

In some small way, Mary was almost glad Mike was gone.

Sure, a few hours earlier she'd been willing to fight for their marriage. But that was when she thought things were simpler. She could understand his confusion, what with his football career in limbo.

But to be embarrassed by Carl Joseph?

Carl was her son, a part of her. Because of his disability, he'd never be capable of the kind of low, mean-spirited act his father had just committed. No, Carl would always have a kind, simple heart, but Mike would miss that—the same way he'd missed everything about Carl Joseph since the day he was diagnosed.

Even as she stood there, willing Cody to turn around and come home, not quite believing her marriage was over, she felt her resolve building. There was no loving a man who didn't love his own son. If Mike didn't want to be a father to Carl Joseph, she'd love the boy enough for both of them. She would survive, even if she never heard from Mike Gunner again.

She focused on Cody once more, his little-boy shoulders slumped forward as he waited, facing the empty spot where the cab had disappeared. He was crying, no doubt. She could almost see his smudged, tearstained cheeks and the slack-jawed look on his face. Was he feeling the way she felt? Abandoned? Overcome with despair?

A strange thought hit her, and suddenly fear had the upper hand.

Because the thought was something she hadn't considered until that moment. Yes, she would survive, and certainly Carl Joseph would be okay without Mike. But Cody adored his father; he always had. And if the boy's slumped shoulders were any indication, Cody might not bounce back the way she and Carl would.

Rather, he might never be the same again.