

PROLOGUE

With fifteen minutes left before visiting hours are over, Collins barrels through the door to catch an elevator, nearly knocking a nurse over. “Sorry,” she says.

“It’s alright, honey,” the heavysset nurse says. “You must be in a bigger hurry than me.”

“I want to see my brother before they stop visiting hours. Assuming he’s still awake.”

“Which floor is he on, baby?”

“Tenth.” Her eyes register a light of awareness when Collins mentions Anderson’s floor. She presses the button with the number ten on it and pulls her plump hand away. “You’re going to the same floor?”

“No, baby, but you got yourself somebody who needs you more than they need me on my floor.” She presses her hand against Collins’ hand and steps a little closer. A burst of mint gum slaps against her nostrils. “My shift doesn’t start for another fifteen minutes. I’ll go back down to the seventh floor after you get off.”

“Thank you.”

“Anytime, baby. He’s lucky to have a big sister like you. Get on in there and visit with your precious angel.”

The elevator bings, and the door slides open. Collins slides out in the blink of an eye, waving goodbye to the kind nurse.

“Is he still awake?” she asks one of Anderson’s nurses.

“I think so. I just read him a story,” she says. “I wasn’t sure if you were going to make it tonight or not.”

“Sorry, Angela. I had to finish moving my stuff into the dorm.” A pang of guilt bangs hard against Collins. “Sword and the Stone?”

“Of course.”

“How is he?”

“It was a rough day for him today. Chemo is kicking his butt, but you know him. Always a beautiful smile on his face.”

“I better get in there,” Collins says. Once she rounds the corner, she sees the glow of his bedroom light. “Guess who!”

“Collins,” Anderson says. “You made it. Mom and Dad said you might not make it tonight.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen.”

“Good.”

“I have something for you.”

His eyes widen as she reaches behind her back. “What is it?”

She tilts her head and taps a finger against her cheek. “I need a kiss first.” Since she’s his sister and not icky like most girls, Anderson plants his chapped lips against her skin. “Here.” A ball cap appears from behind her back like a rabbit from a magician’s hat.

Anderson tilts his little head for her to put it on him. The baby blue University of North Carolina hat swallows up his little bald head. “Awesome.” A smile inches across his face. “Can I see?”

“Of course.” She grabs a mirror, and once he sees himself, his beautiful smile stretches all the way out like a caterpillar in the afternoon sun.

“I love it. Thanks, Collins.”

“How are you feeling today?”

“Better than yesterday. Not as great as tomorrow.”

She reaches down and gives him a hug and a kiss. He's nothing more than skin and bones. Paleness creeps into his face and darkness tinges his skin just under his eyes. "That's great, buddy. One day at a time. You'll have this thing beat and be back on your feet in no time." It kills her to watch him struggle day after day. He's tough though. It's not his first time through chemo, and it won't be his last.

"I know." His breathing slows and his eyes sag.

"Nurse Angela told me she read to you tonight?"

"Yeah, she's nice."

"Sorry I'm late."

"It's okay." He lays his tiny hand in hers. "Did you get moved in?"

"Finally."

"Mom and Dad said you had a little more to get unboxed."

"I'm all good now. But I need to decorate this weekend."

He coughs. Collins' hand tightens softly around his. "See my new poster?"

He can't lift his hand, but his eyes move to the far wall of his room. "Nice. Did Mom and Dad bring it tonight?"

"Yeah."

She has no clue about the padded player hanging on his wall, but she knows beyond a shadow of a doubt Anderson does. Anderson is the definition of a sports junkie. For an eight year old kid, he knows more about sports than most adults. He gets it from their dad. "You've got to love them Panthers," she says.

"I do."

"Okay, buddy. I'm going to let you get your rest now."

“Collins.” Her name barely floats to her ear, the softer side of a whisper. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She plants a kiss against his forehead. A tear edges from her eye, but Anderson doesn’t see her wipe it, because his eyes are sealed shut. He’ll be asleep before she leaves the room. A nasty combination of Chemo and his medication wipe him out. Thank goodness he’s only going through one round this time.

Collins makes her way across campus to her dorm, thoughts of Anderson buzzing in her mind like a torrent of wasps. UNC isn’t her first choice. It’s not even her fifth choice. But it’s her only choice. After finding out about his cancer years ago, there was only one choice she could make. Attend the school closest to him. Little does she know, her decision to stay will bring her to the love of her life, Dusty Slaughter.

When she arrives back at the dorm, her new roommate is nowhere in sight. She slaps on her pajamas and crawls into bed. Thoughts of Anderson and UCLA battle in her mind. She shoves her selfishness aside, Anderson wins without another challenge. For better or worse, UNC solidifies its place in her life. She’s a Tar Heel just like her Dad. Just like Anderson hopes he’ll be one day.

Chapter One

I wring my hands as I wait for my counselor to return. She walked out a few minutes ago without telling me why she called me into her office in the first place. A couple of diplomas in dust covered frames hang on the wall behind her desk.

A bowl of candy rests on the corner of her desk, so I reach over and grab a peppermint. When I pull my hand away, my sleeve catches on the side of the odd shaped bowl. It slides to the edge of her desk and threatens to jump to the floor and shatter into a million pieces. I catch it just in time, allowing it to live one more day.

“That was a close call,” my counselor says as she walks into the office.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“It’s okay, Dusty,” she says. “But it’s a good thing you saved it. My daughter made it for me in art class.”

That explains why the clay bowl possesses such an odd and ugly shape. “It’s an interesting candy dish.” I slide it back to its resting spot.

“I’m not sure what she had in mind, but what you see there is the masterpiece of a first grader.”

She slides into her leather chair and lays a piece of paper on the desk in front of me. Seeing the name Dustin Slaughter staring back at me almost seems like the name of a stranger, since most people call me Slaughter. It’s been that way for as long as I’ve played football.

“Right now, Dusty,” she says, “your chances of getting into a division one university are quite slim.”

“Why?” I ask. “I’ve never failed any classes.”

“True, but you’re not exactly lighting them up either.” She runs her finger down the list of grades, stopping and counting every C. There are a handful of B’s scattered throughout and a rare A here and there.

“What kind of grades does it take to get into college?”

This sudden awareness forces my stomach to churn. I need to get out of this place and make something of myself.

“You’d need a B average at a minimum,” she says. “You can always get into a junior college.”

“But I don’t want to go to a junior college,” I say. I’ve seen too many people around this town settle for junior college. It’s not for me.

“College is a competitive place, Dusty.” She swivels around in her chair and clicks buttons on her keyboard. “Hang on. I have an idea.”

The endless series of Cs staring back at me mock me and make me wish I’d paid better attention in school.

“You’re a football player, aren’t you?”

“I am,” I say.

“It says here if you can get into college on a partial scholarship or higher, they’ll adjust the GPA necessary. A perk of being a student-athlete.”

“But I don’t have anyone knocking down my door offering me any scholarships,” I say. “It’s not like they just hand them out.”

She scratches her head. “Y’all play Walker High tomorrow night, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say.

“I think they’re supposed to have some scouts here from UNC tomorrow night.”

“For Sully?”

“No,” she says. “They’re coming to scout the other team. I’m pretty sure I heard your coach tell Principal Adams. You may want to check with him.”

“I will at practice today.”

“Do you think you can get your grades up just in case?” She picks up my transcript and looks it over. “You’re not too far from a B average, Dusty, but you have to earn nothing but A's and B's this year. Mostly As.”

“Not sure,” I say. “I’ve got a chemistry test today. I think I’m doing okay in there. And I’ve got a paper due tomorrow for English class.”

“That’s a start.” She stands up and walks to the door. My hint to get out of her office and go back to class.

“I’ll do my best,” I say as I walk out.

If scouts are coming out tomorrow, I have to be ready.