

CHAPTER 1

I never could hit the curveball. A scrawny teenager named Tate Gillum once ruined my life with that lousy pitch. Twenty years later, as I watched my kid's Little League game, I had no idea God was lacing up his spikes and preparing to deliver another devastating, knee-buckling curve. The hook. The deuce. Uncle Charlie.

"Get off the phone," Melanie said, lightly punching me on the arm. "It's Kellen's last game."

I covered the mouthpiece. "Just talking to Scott," I said. "He's going all Chicken Little on me. Back in a minute." I scooted off the shiny, aluminum bleachers filled with doting parents and found quiet behind the third base dugout.

"I'm back," I said into the phone. "Now explain again why our proposal needs work."

Scott's voice was drowned out by the crowd, and I looked toward the field, where clueless Little Leaguers engaged in an animated rendition of *Where do I throw this?* My view of the action was partially obscured by dugout clutter—metal bats leaning haphazardly and a half-dozen helmets hanging from pegs—and by the flailing arms of Kellen's coach. I watched our pitcher lob a throw over the third baseman, then shook my head as two runners from the opposing team scored.

Scott's voice cleared through the noise, and I replied, "Yeah, I'll help you work on the document. But you owe me."

A chant of "Dee-fense" rose from our stands, and I turned to see Melanie sitting cross-armed, staring at me. She mouthed the word *Now*. I nodded and waved apologetically. "Gotta go," I told Scott. "Mel's giving me the evil eye."

I clambered along the top row of bleacher seats, my shoes crunching the broken shells of roasted peanuts and the empty hulls of sunflower seeds. "See you at three," I said into the cell phone, flipped it closed, and stuffed it in my pocket. Sliding on my finest salesman smile and hoping my eyes said *Trust me, I won't disappoint you*, I turned to face my better half.

Melanie's bottle-blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and a visor shaded her eyes from the June sun. Understated makeup and gold earrings highlighted her flawless face. She could have pursued a career in modeling or acting; instead, Melanie elected to remain a kid-cheering, school-volunteering, bunco-playing stay-at-home mom in our upscale Houston suburb. Sugar Land, "the sweetest city in Texas" as the motto went, was a world apart from the central Texas farm I once called home.

A batter blooped a hit over the second baseman's head and then tripped over first base. Melanie chuckled when the kid stood and turned, revealing a chalk line that ran from his chest to the bill of his cap and dotted his nose white. When the laughter subsided, her head whipped around. "Don't tell me you have to work again. It's not enough that you stay late every night, now you have to ruin our weekend? Thanks a lot, Jack."

"Sorry, babe. Scott needs the help. You know I do this for our family."

Melanie stiffened. "I want you to spend time *with* your family."

"I know. But I won't be gone long." I inched closer and wrapped my arm around her

waist. “Forgive me?”

She glared at me and I screwed up my face into a cheesy grin. Her eyes softened and she sighed, “I always do.” Then she reached out and tousled my thinning brown hair with both hands. I lifted my arms to block her, and she moved lower, poking me in the ribs. “Sorry,” she teased. “Forgive me?”

“I get it,” I said, smiling broadly. “I’m a thoughtless goofball.”

“Yep.”

My seven-year-old son sat cross-legged in the outfield, filling his glove with blades of grass and tossing the contents above his head, where they settled on his Yankees uniform like green dandruff. Kellen’s manager, Coach Bob according to the oversized letters on his extra-extra-large jersey, didn’t bother to correct him.

“Wake up, Kellen!” I hollered. “Get in the game!”

Melanie shushed me. “Don’t embarrass him. He’s having fun.”

My wife was a smart woman—I absolutely adored her—but she didn’t understand the first thing about sports. Baseball wasn’t about fun. She couldn’t appreciate that hard work and overcoming disappointment built character, that coddling a boy didn’t grow him into a man.

Suddenly Kellen stood and threw his cap in the air; his teammates did likewise.

“The game’s over?” I said in disbelief. “Only four innings? At least we won.”

Melanie shook her head. “Nobody won. Honestly, Jack. It’s Rookie ball. We’re not supposed to keep score.”

The rules in Kellen’s Little League were nothing like the ones I had growing up. These days, teams didn’t keep score until the players turned eight years old. What kind of wimps dreamed up these rules? Soon all the boys would play baseball in dresses. For the record,

Kellen's team won by five runs.

The Yankees stood at third base, and the White Sox lined up at first. Both teams shook hands. The kids picked up their gloves and hurried to the shade of a water oak outside the dugout. A plump woman with wisps of grey in her brown hair wheeled an ice chest full of juice boxes and Cokes to the waiting crowd. Behind her stood a Sugar Land clone, some trophy wife with short shorts and big boobs, who handed out packs of Oreos. Apparently another Little League rule was that each player must experience a post-game sugar high.

"Great game, kids," Coach Bob said to a round of parental applause. "Everybody ready for our team party? Let's do our cheer one more time."

The players circled Coach Bob, stacked hands with their teammates, and chanted, "One-two-three. Yankee Pride!"

It was all I could do to not roll my eyes.

The last kid to exit the dugout was my son, a freckled-face boy with blonde hair that curled under his cap. Kellen flung a red Louisville Slugger bag across his shoulder and slumped under its weight. No wonder. It was stuffed with two bats, including the blue and silver twenty-seven-inch Easton with a negative-eleven drop that had set us back more than a hundred bucks last Christmas. The bag also contained his fielding glove, batting gloves that were merely decorative, and a helmet with protective faceguard.

He lifted the snack bag to his face and extracted a cookie, anteater-like, with his tongue. "Did you shee me hit, Dad? Did you shee me shcore?"

"Don't stuff your mouth. And yes, I saw your hits and scores. Good job, buddy."

I lied because I understood the cardinal rule of baseball parenting: you always saw your son hit the ball, make the catch, or score the run. At least that's what you told him.

“I slid twice!” Kellen beamed.

“Proud of you, son.” I patted him on the head and brushed blades of grass from his shoulders.

Kellen may have enjoyed his first year of baseball, but he was no ballplayer, as his athletic genes had passed maternally. My kid had a rag arm, average glove, and weak stick.

Ever since the ultrasound revealed a penis, I had expected my son to follow in my footsteps. He was destined to become a star athlete like his old man, Jack “The Cannon” Kennedy, the golden boy with the ninety-plus heater, the most heavily recruited high school pitcher in Texas.

I wanted another *Cannon*, but I got a cap gun. Of course I loved my son, but I accepted the common truth: boys disappoint their fathers.

Just ask my dad.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s find your mom. We have a team party to get to.”

“Yes!” he said, punctuating the exclamation with his fist.

Melanie stood at the end of the cyclone fence dugout, dressed in a pale-yellow *Baseball Mom* t-shirt, folding a string of pennants. She broke into a huge smile when she saw us. “Super game,” she said, opening her arms.

Kellen dashed into her hug and accepted a peck on the top of his head. “I scored two runs.”

“That’s great. Kel, would you put these pennants in that box? I want to talk to your dad.”

“Sorry about having to go to work.” I kissed her forehead. “And for yelling during the game. This Little League stuff just drives me crazy.”

She rolled her eyes. “Kellen won't play again until next year, so I guess I don't have to worry about you acting like a lunatic for a while.”

I brushed my hand against her cheek. “And I really am sorry. I promise to come home early so we can spend time together.”

“I'll cook something nice for dinner. Grill some steaks. Have a little wine.” She leaned closer and whispered, “I miss you.”

“Me too.” Then I laced my fingers in hers and walked hand-in-hand through the Little League complex, feeling like the luckiest guy there.

As we made our way to the parking lot, we passed a diamond filled with players a year older than Kellen. A steel-blue pitching machine stood on the mound. “Kel, that's where you'll play next year.”

“I know. It's gonna be awesome!”

A ball flew from the machine and whizzed past the batter for a strike. Next year the pitches would be tougher. No more easy lobs from the coach. Despite his bravado, Kellen didn't know the challenges that lay ahead. Of course, neither did I.

“We need to swing by the house,” Melanie said when we reached the car. “We're bringing baked beans to the party.”

“And I need to pick up the Lexus. Scott's expecting me around three.”

Melanie sighed. “Don't remind me.”

“I'll be home this evening. We'll celebrate later. I promise.”

* * *

After a not-so-quick turnaround at the house, with Melanie loading team trophies into her Camry and me securing my cargo—a crock pot on the front seat and Kellen in back—we

zoomed through the Sugar Land boulevards, well past fashionably late for the party. The sugary-sweet aroma of baked beans that wafted from the passenger seat made me wish I'd brought a spoon. The Texas staple, its recipe perfected by my mother and duplicated by Melanie, always reminded me of simpler times: family reunions, Lutheran barbecues, and Sunday dinners at the farm.

I sped under a canopy of native pecans and perfectly spaced live oaks, leaving luxury sedans and monster SUVs in my dust. Melanie trailed behind, and we chatted on our cell phones.

"I know we're already late," she said, "but I need to stop at the pharmacy. Won't take long."

"The two of us will go ahead without you. Can't wait 'til tonight." I looked in the rearview mirror and blew her a kiss, then accelerated to fifty. Then fifty-five. Melanie matched my pace.

I gestured toward the backseat. "Hey, buddy, I want to hear more about your game."

Before he could respond, an explosion sounded from behind, snapping my eyes instinctively to the mirror. The nose of Melanie's car pointed down and to its left, like a racehorse crippled on its foreleg. A blowout.

Her car veered hard to its left, struck the curb of the median, flew airborne, then slammed into a hundred-year-old pecan tree. The sound was sickening.

I jammed my brakes into the floorboard. Kellen screamed, and the crock pot shattered against the dash. The car swerved and screeched to a stop in the middle of the road.

"Are you hurt?" I yelled, taking no time to listen for an answer. Kellen was crying in the backseat, but in one piece, fastened securely in his seatbelt. "Don't get out of this car, you

understand me? Stay here!”

I stumbled from the door, got caught in the dangling seatbelt, and fell to my knees on the pavement. Then I ran the fifty yards to what was no longer a car.

The Camry’s right-front tire spun freely two feet in the air. Plumes of smoke rose from the engine. The pecan appeared to be growing through the driver-side hood; the front grill had melted around the ancient tree.

Melanie was barely visible through the shattered driver-side window. She lay motionless in her seat, belt fastened, head slumped to the right. The deflated air bag hung flaccid out of the steering column.

“Oh my God.” I banged on the window. “Melanie! It’s me, honey.” When she didn’t respond, my knees buckled. “Oh God. Please, God.” Then I began yanking wildly on the door.

A woman rushed up. “I called 911. Is she conscious? Breathing?”

It was a cacophony of questions, and I had no answers. All I knew was that my beautiful wife was pinned in and unresponsive, trapped behind a twisted metal door that refused to yield.

A man in a t-shirt began tugging on the passenger-side door. With a jolt and a groan, the Camry’s door gave way—an automotive death rattle—and the man peered into the wreckage.

“Don’t touch her!” I yelled.

I ran to the open door and crawled inside. My fingers trembled as they found the soft skin of her face. I just wanted her to open her eyes, tell me she wasn’t hurt.

Then my fingers slid to her neck. I couldn’t find a pulse.

* * *

The firefighters arrived first. A paramedic with tattooed, muscular arms examined Melanie. “Just the driver,” he called to his partner. “Female. Thirty-something.” Looking

around, he continued, “Advise PD. We need traffic control, or we’re gonna have another wreck. We’ve got cars parked all over the street.”

Oh God. Kellen.

I turned to the woman who had placed the 911 call and pleaded, “Ma’am, you gotta help me. That lady’s my wife—”

“Sweet Jesus.” She staggered slightly.

“And my son’s in that white car. Please get him out of the street, but don’t bring him here. I can’t let him see this.”

“Anyone I should call?”

My mind sputtered, and I found it difficult to focus.

“Any family?” she repeated.

“My sister. She’s local. Kellen knows her number.”

The woman darted away and I turned back to the firefighters. “Don’t give up on her. LifeFlight her to the hospital. Anything. Please.”

The younger paramedic was an albino with wispy, colorless hair. He placed his hand on my shoulder. “We’re doing everything we can.”

“I’m her husband.” The word felt heavy.

“Oh, no. Sir, please sit down. Let me examine you.”

“I’m okay. I wasn’t in the car.” I moaned, wishing to God it had been me instead of Melanie.

The paramedic sat me down, took my vitals, and told me to control my breathing. At some point he wrapped a blanket around my shoulders.

I have no idea how much time passed. Red and blue lights from emergency vehicles

flashed around me. Uniformed police officers lit traffic flares and conducted measurements of tire markings. My pants pocket vibrated and I fished out my cell phone. I recognized the number immediately—Leah was my older sister, my only sibling.

“Jack!” she shrieked. “Some lady called and said there’s been an accident . . . and that she has Kellen . . . and that Melanie might be . . . I’m driving your way right now. Tell me what happened.”

I don’t know what I told her. My world had just crumpled around a tree.

* * *

The next day, still feeling shell-shocked, I returned to the scene of the accident and inspected the tree that took Melanie’s life. The thick pecan stood straight, as it had for years, long before Sugar Land invaded the forest with master plans, but now it bore a new wound. The impact had left a three-foot scar in its bark.

I stood in stunned silence for minutes. Eventually I crossed to my Lexus in the nearby parking lot. When I opened its door, a horrible odor struck me. Baked beans had splattered and caked on the dash and in the footwell. The hot Gulf Coast sun had turned my symbol of success into a compost bin.

I’d never forget that rotting stench of death.

CHAPTER 2

Lord, help me get through this day. Not that I expected much from the man upstairs. If God wasn't the architect of Melanie's death, He had surely allowed the devastation to happen.

After pulling on dark trousers and buttoning my white dress shirt, I stepped to my sister's bedroom dresser to knot my tie. I once took pride in how young I looked, but the puffy, dull eyes and blank expression on the face in the mirror were unfamiliar. The sad stranger stared back, and I noticed his collar was stained crimson. A drop of blood had seeped from a nick under my chin and wended its way around my Adam's apple before settling on the starched fabric.

"Dammit," I said. This was no way to dress for a funeral. I peeled off the dress shirt and blotted the stain with a handkerchief, which only made matters worse. The blotch spread to quarter-sized. "No!" I yelled.

Leah rushed into the tiny bedroom that I'd used for the past three days. "What's wrong, Jack?"

I showed her the bloodstain. "I can't wear this to the service."

"It'll be okay. Did you bring another shirt?"

"Only this one." I remembered yesterday's painful trip home to select the clothes that

Kellen and I would wear at church. Leah and my mom had flanked my movements, afraid I might shatter like a fragile vase. I'd chosen the black suit I'd worn to the company Christmas party two years ago, a fancy shindig held downtown where Melanie and I had danced until the band stopped playing.

"Don't panic," Leah said. "We'll fix it." She inspected the shirt, then moved to the closet to rummage through the hangers. "Nothing in here. Maybe Dad brought an extra." She dashed away.

If only we were at my house. There were at least a dozen freshly pressed shirts hanging in the closet. Staying with Leah and her family, although comforting in some ways, was rapidly proving unworkable.

Leah returned with a replacement. "Here. Try this."

After wiping my neck, I pulled on the shirt. Decent fit. Clean at least. The tie wouldn't cooperate, though, even after several attempts.

"Hold still." Leah wrapped my tie into a half-Windsor, tugged the knot tight, and slid it to my neck, pausing to smooth the collar. For the past few days, my big sister had been my rock. Immediately after the accident, she took charge, whisking Kellen and me to her house and single-handedly serving as chef, chauffeur, and nursemaid.

Leah Drane, four years my senior, didn't own fancy clothes. She wore a plain, black dress which would suffice for the funeral. Her mousy hair grew down to mid-back and hadn't seen a stylist's scissors in years. Two decades of marriage to a lump of humanity named Richard Drane had lined her face with worry, and her waist and hips ran together.

I turned to the window when I heard a car back out of the driveway. "Mom and Dad are going with Richard and the kids to church," she explained.

“No. Kellen should be with me.” With Melanie gone, I wanted my son more than ever.

“I told them we’d be right there. You ready?”

Is a man ever ready to bury his wife? I closed my eyes and the accident played out once again, a cruel rerun with random show times. The loud boom. Mangled metal. Frantic fear giving way to cold numbness. I took a sharp breath and slowly exhaled. “Let’s get this over with.”

Leah swung her car into the parking lot of Merciful Savior Lutheran, the same Sugar Land church where Kellen had been baptized. We entered through a set of heavy oak doors. A knot of mourners parted as we passed.

Pastor Steve greeted me with a tight smile and perfunctory hug. He stood a head shorter than me, and I couldn’t help eying his receding hairline, poorly camouflaged by a comb-over. “Kellen’s in my office with your mother,” Pastor Steve said, answering my unasked question. He gestured toward the far hall. “If you need anything . . .”

I turned to Leah. “Find your family. We’ll join you inside.”

Getting to Pastor Steve’s office required walking through the church’s narthex and navigating a multitude of people, all dressed in their black uniforms of sorrow. As I rounded the corner, the crowded room buzzed with the murmur of whispered conversations. Above the din, I heard, “Beth told me they were racing at, like, sixty miles an hour.”

I froze. Did people blame me? Melanie? It was an accident, for God’s sake. I turned away, not wanting to face the attention. The accusation.

Before I could retreat, a woman called my name. The room hushed and I felt the stares. Patsy-somebody, one of Melanie’s fellow Sunday School teachers, embraced me in a warm hug, her cheek damp against mine. “I’m so sorry,” she said in a shaky voice. “Melanie was

wonderful. Great with kids.”

“Thanks for coming,” I replied automatically, my mind reeling. The room slowly spun around me as others stepped forward to speak.

By the time I reached Pastor Steve’s office, a dozen mourners had consoled me, their faces blending together. “Thank you for coming,” was all I could say, although I wanted to scream at everyone to leave me alone. When I opened the door, I heard soft music emanating from a radio on Pastor Steve’s desk. The piano notes—almost a lullaby—washed over the room like gentle ocean waves. My mother sat on a loveseat, cradling Kellen’s head in her lap. He lay in a fetal position, and for a moment I thought my second grader was sucking his thumb.

I knelt at the sofa and stroked his hair. “I’m here, Kel. You doing okay?”

He didn’t reply, but I could see his body tremble. I turned to my mom. “How long has he been like this?”

“Since we got in the car. Says he doesn’t want to be here.”

“Everyone’s looking at me,” Kellen whispered.

I stood, then lifted Kellen underneath his arms and wrapped him a bear hug. He threw his arms around my neck. “We’ll get through this together,” I told him.

Kellen clung tightly to me as I carried him into the church. I stepped to the open casket where Melanie lay and brushed the back of my hand across her cheek. For years, this simple caress had preceded kisses, apologies, and lovemaking, but this time her flesh was unresponsive.

“I love you, Mel,” I whispered, my voice breaking. “I’m gonna miss you.”

I lowered Kellen and asked, “Do you want to tell Mommy anything?”

He shook his head, his eyes squeezed tight. I paused for another look at Melanie, then turned and moved into our designated place in the front pew. Leah and her family sat to my left;

to my right, beside the aisle, Kellen sat with his face in his hands.

“My tummy hurts, Dad.”

I leaned over and patted him on the shoulder, then cast my gaze toward the sea of somber faces in the congregation. More than three hundred people jammed the sanctuary, and scores more spilled into the narthex. Who were all these people? Besides my immediate family and a handful of friends and colleagues, I recognized no one. Did Melanie know them from church? Kellen’s private school? She had obviously endeared herself to many. Had I missed so much of her life?

Somber organ music filled the room. My eyes welled up. My breathing quickened. I wasn’t sure how long I could keep it together. And Pastor Steve hadn’t even welcomed the congregation yet.

My mother and father stood at the end of the pew, waiting for Leah’s family to clear some room. Mom looked frailer than I’d ever seen her. Dad supported her with his arm. He could have passed for an undertaker, a tall, stoic man in a dark suit. Except for the quarter-sized splotch of blood on his collar.

Kellen tapped my thigh. “I don’t feel good.”

“Need to go to the bathroom?” Kellen’s bladder conveniently shriveled on Sunday mornings. Whenever Pastor Steve delivered one of his feel-good sermons, the kind based on the prophet Oprah, Kellen often asked to slip out.

“Maybe,” he said.

“Can you hold it, buddy?” Enduring the funeral was difficult enough. Now Kellen was all fidgety.

He shifted in obvious discomfort. A teddy bear, received from a kind police officer less

than a week ago, lay between us. I picked it up and bounced its fuzzy legs on Kellen's lap, then lifted the bear to his chest. He clutched Mister Copper and snuggled deep into my side.

The only funeral I'd ever attended was that of my grandfather, Paw-Paw, back when I was sixteen. On his seventy-first birthday, lightning struck him while he tended to a pregnant cow in the middle of a rainstorm. All in all, it wasn't a bad way to meet your Maker. At Paw-Paw's funeral, I pretended his death didn't affect me.

Twenty years later, I couldn't pretend this pain away. Melanie's body lay in a mahogany casket fifteen feet in front of me. My peripheral vision shrank and my senses dulled, as I disappeared into the zone known only by those who mourn a loved one. Pastor Steve's sermon didn't register. The congregation sang "The Old Rugged Cross", Melanie's favorite hymn, and a woman across the aisle wailed.

"I gotta go to the bathroom," Kellen said urgently.

"Not now." I was barely hanging on myself, my breath shallow and skin clammy.

"Please, Dad. I don't like seeing Mommy in that box."

A gasp caught in my throat, and I realized we'd been sharing the same terrible thought. Kellen buried his head in my chest, and I held him close—I could feel his shaking arms and rapidly beating heart. I turned to Leah. "Could you take him to the restroom?"

She placed her hand on mine. "Be right back."

They shuffled out of the pew and stood in the middle aisle facing the congregation. Everyone's eyes fixed on Kellen. The boy who lost his mommy.

He turned around as if to escape. An odd look crossed his face. His hands covered his stomach and he leaned closer, as if to tell me something. Then with a shudder, he began to vomit.