



RODNEY WALTHER



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www.rodneywalther.com

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.

"Jack, 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! 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. “I really am sorry. Promise I’ll get home early so we can spend time together.”

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

“Me too.”

She responded by nestling her head on my shoulder and lightly kissing my neck. With a sigh, she said, “I guess we oughta get going. Walk me to our car?”

Then she slipped her hand into the gnarled fingers of my right hand. A stab of pain radiated from my pinky, through my wrist, and up my forearm; I reflexively yanked it back.

“Sorry,” she said. “Didn’t mean to hurt you. Is it worse than usual?”

I flexed my wrist and wiggled my fingers, trying to shake off the pain. For twenty years, I’d lived with that injury. Sometimes it hurt more than others.

“Don’t worry about it,” I told her, and grasped her other hand with my left. I gave it a brief squeeze, then laced my fingers in hers. Then we walked hand-in-hand through the Little League complex—I felt 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 can 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." 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 hundred 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?”

I had no answers. All I knew was that my beautiful wife was 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.



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