

THROWN
A CURVE
a novel

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TO JAMIE AND BEN

CHAPTER 1



I sat alone in the high school principal's small office, waiting for my punishment. I leaned my elbows on the desk and covered my face with my hands. Why had I done it? What had I been thinking? How had I gotten to this low point in my life? I was a juvenile delinquent at age fourteen.

I'd never done anything wrong before. This was the first time I'd ever been inside a school principal's office. It was all my dad's fault. If he didn't hate me, if he hadn't said what he'd said, I wouldn't be here. I sighed and tried to remember better days, when my life was just about playing games, like baseball . . .



When I was seven years old, my father bought season tickets to the Yankees' home baseball games. Having lived in New York his whole life, he was a loyal fan. He purchased two seats for each game. One ticket was always for himself, and the other ticket rotated between my two brothers. Brian was four years older than me, and Danny two years younger. Dad never put me in the rotation, and I never asked him to. I thought it was just a father-son thing.

When my brother Brian tried out for Little League that year, I sat in the bleachers, eating handfuls of Swedish fish, stretching their little bodies as far as I could before gulping them down. I watched the other fathers, looking thrilled and hopeful, cheering on their sons. My dad encouraged Brian, but he looked even more intense than the other fathers.

After several hours of watching Brian try out, I wandered onto the playground, took a few rides down the slide, and considered joining some of my classmates in a round of Double Dutch. But then one of the Little Leaguers hit a ball out of the park. It flew toward the playground, hit the ground, and rolled to a stop in front of me. I stared at the baseball's stitches. Its strange pattern put me in a trance that seemed to last for days. I'd never really thrown a baseball.

"Throw it back!" a coach yelled to me.

I picked up the ball and hurled it with all my might. It sailed over the fence, over the coach, over second base, and hit the pitcher in the head. *Oops*. I ran back to the playground, hoping no one had seen me.

On the ride home, I sat on the hump in the car's backseat, squished between Brian and Danny. I kept thinking about throwing that baseball. I wondered if I could be as good as my brothers.

"Brian, you did a good job out there today," my dad said. "Let's go out for ice cream."

As we were downing our sundaes at the ice cream parlor, my younger brother Danny said, "You can throw real good, Taylor. Daddy said so."

Back then, I thought my father knew everything. If he'd seen me throw that ball and thought it was good, then he was right. He was always right. But if I was good, why hadn't he told me so himself?

Later that night, I sat by my dad's feet as he napped on the couch and watched Tom Brokaw talk about the news in the Middle East.

"Hey, Dad?" I said.

"What?"

"I think I'll play baseball this summer, too."

Looking confused, he said nothing. He hadn't said much since my mother left us. And that had been two years ago.



Only one local baseball team had been willing to take a seven-year-old girl—the Hawks. Their assistant coach was the nurse at my elementary school, and I only made the team because she'd gone on and on with the head coach about women's rights and other stuff I really hadn't understood. She promised to look out for me. Back then, I wasn't aware anyone needed to "look out for me."

I wanted to be a pitcher because Dad said I had a good arm. But the coaches put me in center field.

"You can make that long throw from center to home," Ms. Miller said, "and you're too wild on the mound."

I had a good summer playing with the Hawks. I loved play-

ing baseball. When I was out there on the field, I was so happy. It was weird how something so simple could make me feel so good.

The boys on the team hadn't cared I was a girl, but the parents had. They made comments to my father when he picked me up after games. He just waved, nodded, and blew smoke rings from his cigar.

Dad never saw any of my games because Brian's games were always at the same time on Field Seven. My brother Brian was an excellent baseball player—his batting average was .297.

I thought I could've played better baseball if my dad had come to watch me. I wished he would sit in *my* stands, even once. I always looked for him, and when he wasn't there, it was hard not to cry. I kept thinking, maybe if I became a really good pitcher, never let any batters on base, and won the championship for my team, he'd come one day.

With this in mind, I practiced every chance I got. Once, I pitched to Brian in the empty lot behind our house. He whiffed at three of my pitches in a row.

"You throw too high, Taylor!" Brian screamed.

He swung at them, I thought to myself. But he was eleven, and I was only seven, so I guessed he was right. Dad watched from the back porch, not saying anything. He just looked down, turned, and walked back into the house.



The next three summers, my dad sent me to my Aunt Maria's house in Cape May, New Jersey to help out with her bed and breakfast. Aunt Maria, my dad's sister, was widowed, and the only thing she knew about baseball was that the kids' baseball field in town was too far away, and she didn't have time to drive me there. She wanted me to take dance lessons at the nearby studio, but I hung around the beach instead.

I hadn't understood why my dad would send me away during the summer baseball season. I missed playing summer league and being home with my brothers and my dad, but I figured my aunt did need a hand. My one hope was playing fall ball when I got home.

Some nights at Cape May, I played wiffleball on the beach with different kids who were on vacation. One day, I'd seen a family playing a game with real bats and balls. I was excited when I noticed they had gloves and bases, too, and even a makeshift pitcher's mound.

"Do you need an extra player?" I asked, eager to participate.

"Sure, you can play outfield," said the man, who I assumed was the dad.

"Ugh. Outfield. What else is new?" I mumbled under my breath, frowning.

"Unless you want to be the pitcher," he said, sensing my disappointment at being directed to the outfield.

Darn right I wanted to be the pitcher. No one got a hit the first inning, or the second. By the third inning, the twins in the

outfield sat down. By the end of the fourth inning, I again was asked to play outfield.



That had been the summer before I entered fifth grade. It was also before I realized my dad hated me.

After my first day as a fifth grader, I came home and headed toward my dad's office. I was going to tell him about my boring day and ask him to drive me to fall baseball practice. I heard him on the phone, so I stopped outside the door and listened. That's when I heard it—the thing I should never have heard.

"Yeah, Charlie, uh-huh," he said. "It's just so embarrassing . . . having my daughter on the team instead of Brian . . . I'm the laughing stock of the office. The wrong kid got the right gift."

I stood frozen in the doorway. I didn't hear anything my dad said after that. Why would he have said that? *The wrong kid?* Why wasn't I the *right* kid? I felt my whole world come crashing down on me. I was like a building imploding on itself—so my life consisted only of dust and wreckage. If that was the way my father really felt about me, then I'd stop playing baseball.

More importantly, I think I stopped believing in anything.