

Chapter 1

The day had finally arrived and James Holiday couldn't have been more thrilled. He had been saving money for this day by working overtime at his job and by cutting back on cigarettes. The date was Saturday, October 21st, and the occasion was the 2006 World Series opener featuring the Detroit Tigers and the St. Louis Cardinals. Sure, James was a huge Detroit fan and had been all his life, but this was a very special day for another reason. Today was the day that was going to change his life forever, because this was the day that he was going to erase the mistakes that he had made as a father. Today was the day that he was going to forgive his father for being such a lousy dad. This was the day that James was going to take his son, Evan, to his first Major League Baseball game.

Evan was a handsome, outgoing sixth grader with a passion for all athletics--especially baseball. He really should have been in the fifth grade, but his birthday was on September 14th, which was the day before the kindergarten cutoff date in his school district. James and his wife Sophia had been given a choice as to which school year they would prefer to enroll Evan. However, it was not a difficult decision given that James and Sophia had met while finishing up their doctoral studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Education was important to the both of them and the 'sooner the better' was their thinking when it came to Evan.

"Come on son. We are going to be late," James screamed with emotion.

But it wasn't out of panic or frustration. Rather, the abrupt and poetic plead for urgency had come out of complete and complex excitement. Evan knew that his dad had a tendency to do such, and this level of excitement only came out when something really big was going to happen. This confused Evan because he was told that they were going to pick up some lawn fertilizer for their dwindling turf in the backyard.

"This had better be some super fertilizer, Dad. You are going to make us miss the first ball of the World Series," Evan moaned in a sarcastic tone.

He really would have been disappointed to miss the first pitch, but as long as he was going somewhere with his Dad, he was going to be all right. So Evan gave his signature father/son smile to James and they were out the door.

"Don't worry," James said as he put his arm around Evan. "I promise that you will not miss the first pitch."

James was a good father and a good husband. He always made Sophia and Evan laugh, he always called when he was going to be late, and he never put his needs in front of the needs of his family.

James did make his fair share of mistakes, but it was a learning process for him. He grew up in a household with little love for anything, much less another child. He had once overheard his mom and dad arguing about his little sister. His mom wanted to give her up for adoption and his dad wanted to sell her somewhere overseas.

“Why would we throw away good money?” his father protested. “Don’t you know that the Chinese will pay top dollar for American children—especially the girls!”

“I think it’s the other way around, stupid. The Chinese are smart people. Why would they want some dumb American girl stinkin’ up the house?” his mother replied with her best impression of a confident answer.

That day, James made a vow to himself to never be like his father. Today was going to be a big step in that direction, and everything was going perfectly to this point. The courier had just hand delivered the tickets to James, courtesy of his boss at the automotive plant, and not a moment too soon. He had to pull some strings and agree to some additional hours but it was well worth it. He was going to love his son and support him in all of his endeavors.

Baseball was definitely an endeavor of Evan’s and a great one at that. His little league team were conference champs, and Evan had been voted by his teammates as the Most Valuable Player. If he wasn’t playing baseball he was watching baseball, and if he wasn’t watching baseball he was daydreaming about playing for the Detroit Tigers. Evan was still very much unsuspecting of his father’s big surprise, but James was not going to be able to hold it in for much longer.

James and Evan hopped in the truck and started off to the game/fertilizer store.

“When are we going to get a new car, Dad?” laughed Evan.

“What’s wrong with Bella?” James said with a playfully defensive tone.

“What’s wrong with it is wondering if we are going to get stuck one of these days while we are making a last minute trip to Lowe’s before the biggest game of the season. Then we’ll end up walking to the nearest dealership and you know they will take advantage of our situation—assuming that the salesperson will see us walking and not driving onto the car lot. Could we then at least get a car with a TV so we can catch the seventh inning stretch?” replied Evan.

Evan was quite witty to only be eleven years old, and the sarcasm never did irritate James because it was always so entertaining and never distasteful. Plus, most of time he was telling the truth.

“Keep it up and the only TV that you will ever see in a car will be the one that your mother and I buy for your little sister.” Evan wasn’t the only one in the house that had snappy comebacks. James enjoyed always getting the last word in with Evan.

“You’ll never think as fast as your old man,” James would often say as he was joking around with Evan. “That is, of course, until someday when you get really famous and you can tell everyone how I taught you everything you know.”

By the time Evan suggested anything out of the ordinary, the two of them had been traveling for about 5 miles in the opposite direction of the home improvement store.

“Where are we going Dad?”

“What do you mean Son?”

James half answered the question and half smiled as he reached under the passenger seat where Evan was sitting and pulled out an old Detroit Tigers home jersey with the number “9” on the back. Above the number nine was the name Jennings. Now Evan knew the Tigers roster backwards and forwards, and he was positive that there were not any ‘Jennings’ on the team. And as far as he knew, there was never anyone that he could think of with that name in recent Tiger history. But he didn’t care either way. This was going to be his favorite shirt from this day forward.

While Evan’s mouth was still open from the pure shock of seeing the jersey, James pulled the two tickets from the inside pocket of his old high school varsity jacket.

“Happy Birthday, Son.”

“Awe cool! Are those Tiger tickets? Are we going to the game? Are you serious, Dad? Is this really happening? Thanks Dad, you’re the best. But it’s not my birthday.” Evan exclaimed with a puzzled look of excitement.

“I know, but I couldn’t get you what you wanted last year and you have been getting pretty good grades these past couple of years. So we’ll say it’s a birthday gift for now and depending on how my hours at work are looking around Christmas time, it might be a Christmas gift too.”

They both laughed as Evan reached over to turn on the radio to catch all the pre-game commentary. They were just in time to hear everything that was going on at the stadium prior to the onset of the game.

“Good evening everyone and welcome to Comerica Park in beautiful downtown Detroit, Michigan.” The announcer was accustomed to giving his usual salutation as he did with every home game but of course this was different—this was the World Series.

“I wonder if we’ll be able to catch a home run. I have always wanted to catch a ball during the Tigers game and get on Sports Center. Dad, do you think we’ll catch a home run?” Evan said as he turned his entire body to face his Dad with great anticipation.

“We definitely won’t be catching any home runs because we are sitting in Section 134, right behind the Tigers’ dugout!” James said with an overwhelming feeling of pride and relief.

He had been holding it in for so long. James could still not believe that he managed to get two seats just inches away from Evan’s dream. At this point, there was very little significance involved in the actual game as far as James was concerned. His dream was to provide this dream for his son and be there to see the look on his face.

“We’re sitting behind the dugout!” Evan screeched. “No way, Dad.”

“Yes way, Son.”

“I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, Son. And don’t worry, because if any foul balls come within 20 feet of us I promise I will catch it for you.”

“I know you will Dad,” Evan said as he gave his father a playful punch to the arm to show that he acknowledged who his hero was.

As James was finishing his pledge to Evan, they arrived at the ballpark and the two of them leaped from the car and raced each other to the closest entrance. They still had a few minutes before the game was set to start, so James took Evan to get a foot-long hot dog, super nachos, popcorn, peanuts, and a soda. He didn’t want Evan to ever look back at this game and remember it as anything but perfect.

Minutes later the two of them arrived at their picture-perfect seats. Evan had so many snacks and candy that it took what felt like an hour to shimmy their way into position.

“I hope you don’t have to go to the bathroom Evan, because you might be out of luck.” James said.

“If I have to go to the bathroom in my seat I think we will all be out of luck,” replied Evan.

Then the two of them began to laugh profusely until they were politely silenced by their neighbors behind them as everyone stood for the National Anthem. Ordinarily, James took great pride in singing along with any and everyone that took part in singing the anthem. But this time James couldn’t help allowing his mind to wander into the future.

James saw himself fifteen years down the road at the birth of Evan's first son. The entire family was at the hospital because Evan's wife had gone into labor while James and Sophia were hosting a nice Christmas Eve dinner at their house.

James's mind forwarded to the waiting room where he and Evan sat and shared some surprisingly decent hospital coffee and a candy bar that Evan had fished out of his wife's purse. He got stuck holding it from the time they had arrived at the hospital.

Then James listened in on the conversation between him and Evan, which filled his heart with joy and gladness.

"I'm nervous, Dad. What if I'm not a good father for my son?" asked Evan.

"Of course you will be, Evan. All great sons grow up to be great dads," responded James.

"I can't wait until I can take my son to his first Tigers game," said Evan. "I'll never forget the feeling that I had when we left the stadium that night. You made me feel like you were really proud that I was your son, and that always made me want to do better for my son. Well, today is the day, and it is only right that you are here by my side. Thank you for always being there. Thank you for never letting me down. I think we'll name him after you, dad."

"Dad," said Evan.

"Dad!"

"Dad!"

"They're getting ready to throw out the first pitch Dad," Evan said as he gave his Dad a nudge to snap him back from wherever his mind had taken him.

James had hardly noticed but a small tear had formed in the corner of his left eye. Evan didn't notice it either because he was too busy trying to tackle his mountain of food before the game started.

"Slow down, Son. You don't want to fall out before the game starts and have to get carted away in front of all these people," said James.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I just want to free my hands up so I can catch a foul ball if any come our way," replied Evan.

"Don't worry, Son," responded James. "You just take your time and I'll catch everything in the meantime, deal?"

“Deal,” promised Evan as he steadied his pace.

The first player up to bat for the Cardinals was Randy Olin. He was a lefty with a .295 batting average and lightning quick feet. He had already broken the single season record for stolen bases and had done so with ease.

“Strike one!” The umpire yelled as he motioned outwardly with his right hand to show that he was in command of this game.

The next pitch was a fastball right at the hands of Olin, which forced him to shift his feet and alter his swing just enough for him to miss the ball completely.

“Strike two!” screamed the umpire after verifying with the third base umpire that Olin had indeed come all the way around with his bat.

“Get this guy outta here, Wheel!” yelled James.

James was referring to the Tigers’ best pitcher Sean Wheeler. He had earned the nickname Wheel for his unorthodox pitching motion that brought the ball around in a circular motion at a rate that most professionals could not hit. That, and of course, his last name was Wheeler. It just seemed like a pretty natural nickname.

The next pitch by Wheeler came every bit as hard as the first two pitches except this one was up around the shoulders of Olin in hopes that he would bite on the rising fastball. He did. And he made enough contact with the ball to send it almost straight in the air and in the direction of third base. This ball had to have been a mile in the air as far as Evan was concerned and continued to ascend for several more seconds before altering its course and sailing just out of bounds into the hands of some unsuspecting St. Louis fan.

“Did you see that Dad? That could have been us!” shouted Evan with excitement.

“Don’t worry, Son. We didn’t want that one anyway.” James had a way of talking to Evan that made everything seem all right.

“I’m almost done with my hot dog and then I’ll show you how it’s done, Dad,” Evan said with confidence.

Wheeler proceeded to get Olin out on strikes, and the following batter, Johnson, hit a line drive at the second baseman. Steven Govel, the second baseman, quickly snatched the ball out of the air and sent it once around the horn as he signaled the second out to his fellow infielders.

“One more out, Dad, and then we’re up to bat!” shouted Evan.

“That’s right, Son. Let’s cheer them on so we can get out of the first inning with no runs,” replied James.

Simultaneously, as James and Evan continued to excite one another with talks of the Tigers scoring runs, Curt Blair was on his way up to bat. Blair was typically a very good hitter but he had been having his problems throughout October, and all the Tiger fans knew it.

“Blair’s scared! Blair’s scared! Blair’s scared!” shouted what seemed like every person in Comerica Park as the future Hall of Famer made his way to the plate.

“Watch this, Son,” James urged as he and most of the fans around him stood to their feet for what they were hoping to be the last out.

“I’m almost done with my nachos, but I can see the jumbo screen great from my seat,” Evan said as he gave his dad a cheesy, messy smile.

“Ball!” Shouted the umpire as the crowd showed their displeasure with the first call that was made.

“Blair’s scared! Blair’s scared! Blair’s scared...” continued the home crowd as Blair approached the plate for his second pitch.

“Crack!”

Blair had made pretty good contact with the second pitch sending the ball far into the air—except this time it looked like it might be going in the direction of James and his son Evan.

“Where is it, Dad?” asked Evan.

“I think it might be coming over this way,” James responded with nervous anticipation. “Yeah, yeah it is definitely coming this way.”

Then James repositioned his hand inside of his old high school baseball glove and began to make his way to where he thought the ball was going to land. Luckily, it didn’t look like he was going to have to go far and he took his arm and started to reach it as far as he could in the air so that no one around could make a play on his foul ball.

This was the icing on the cake! Not only did James pull off taking his son to see a Major League baseball game, he was taking him to see his favorite team. Not only was he bonding with his son, he was building memories that would last a lifetime for the both of them. And if all of that was not enough, now James was getting ready to give his son the one thing that could make a dream evening even more so. James was about to catch this ball for his son and nothing was going to stop him.

James saw the ball heading straight for his glove and he raised his hand even higher so he would be sure to be the first one to the ball. James reached and reached until finally he felt like he was in the perfect position, and then he watched as the ball came down just beyond his outstretched arm.

James had missed the ball. He couldn't believe it, but he had actually missed the ball. Opportunities like this do not come around more than once in a lifetime, especially not twice in the same game. James had blown the one chance at making this day the perfect day for him and his son.

“Sorry son. There is no way that I should have missed that one.” James said shamefully as he kept his back to Evan until he could hear some words of encouragement.

But no words came. In fact, no one around him was saying anything until he was turning back to his seat. The couple behind them began to scream. And when James turned around completely, he saw why. The ball that James missed had hit Evan in the head killing him instantly. Evan had been sitting throughout the entire ordeal and James' body shielded him from ever seeing what was happening. James grew numb instantly. His hands and feet began to tremble uncontrollably until his body was overtaken with seizures and convulsions. He then began to claw and scratch at his throat as he was begging and gasping for air—but no air came. He grabbed his son and commanded him to come back to life,

“Wake up Son! Evan! Evan! Wake up! Wake up! I'll catch it next time, Evan! Give me a chance God, give me another chance! I'll catch it for you Son. I told you that I'll catch it!”

“Why didn't I catch it?” screamed James as he held Evan against his chest as if to share his heartbeat with his only son. “My baby! My baby! My baby!” repeated James until his voice lost all ability to push through the pain. He felt completely alone in the middle of a crowd; drowning in tears; covered in blood. A pain came over his body—a pain that entered his heart with the forces of gravity. It was a pain greater than any other to be experienced on earth. The pain struck James suddenly and left just as quickly as it had come—with it left all desire to live. James' heart continued to beat, but never again would it beat for a purpose.

James knew that his son was dead and he knew that it was his fault. The day that started out as the best day of his life ended up being the day that claimed his son.

Today had ended as it had begun—memorable and unforgettable. This was the day that changed his life forever.

James fell with his face to the sky and cried as loud as anyone has ever cried,

“Oh Lord, My God! Forgive me for my sins!
My favor is no more,
my fall from grace is now.
Mercy high, mercy low, mercy so, mercy be,
Is there no salvation for a sinner like me?”