

## CHAPTER TWO

Dear God,  
Let there be a plus sign.

Lisa had her prayer answered. Sure, a blood test awaited, but wholeness filled her heart.

She realized she had been sitting on the toilet of her office building's women's room for almost ten minutes when her schedule came back to mind. But she felt so full, so sure, so hopeful, that it wouldn't have mattered what happened during the rest of the day, even if, God help her, she took the afternoon off. Still, the confidence she felt made her want to spread the news like a good, old-fashioned Baptist preacher. The sweetness of what had happened even seemed to overcome—to compliment—the distant bitterness of losing Mom those years ago.

Lisa returned to her desk with five minutes to spare before her ten o'clock. Before sitting down, she walked over to the shadow-box containing the pink baseball bat that the Texas Rangers owner had given her just last year in honor of her mom. Lisa never forgot the owner's kindness, even after all the phone calls she personally had made to him for a check on behalf of no less than five candidates. The bat had come to symbolize both Mom and success. Lisa wondered if such a symbol were something to be grasped in this life—a grip on grace



itself. The hope for a child had been so deep for her and Bobby that the gender was a nonissue, but the slight desire for a boy to one day hold a bat like the one hanging on her office wall stirred Lisa's heart even more.

"Your ten o'clock is here, ma'am." Cara's focused if amateur voice broke Lisa's daydreaming. She turned to see Nate crowding the doorway next to Cara.

"Sure. Just a second, I'll be out," Lisa answered.

Cara immediately returned to the reception area. Nate lingered, trying to get into his boss's business. "You're not going to sit in. I'll shut the door if I have to," said Lisa.

Nate slinked back into his space.

Lisa had normally booted up her computer by now but felt okay that it was still off due to her tardiness. No morning clutter of email and browsing had kept her mind as clear as possible, given the circumstances. Right now, she needed her game face.

She took a deep breath and took comfort in the miracle growing in her womb. Whatever concerns there had been about her mate's virility had been in all likelihood erased just a few minutes ago. She got up from her desk to make her way to the reception area. There was now good reason to separate the pheromones of her ten o'clock from the natural desire to breed and all that goes with it.

"Hi, Danny," Lisa greeted.

He rose up from one of the reception chairs beneath her grandfather's portrait. A stylish khaki suit covered a blood-maroon shirt and broad chest, but the ensemble had a yesterday, almost tired look to it. The suit was wrinkled. In fact, the only real flamboyance was the pair of rattlesnake Tony Lamas that served as the pedestal for Danny's six feet four inches and fetching mane of black hair. He kept his hair cut at the crew level, like a good Republican, but it was so dense that it could not quite escape an inherent waviness. All of that man collided with her newfound grip on childbearing and forced Lisa to cut her eyes sharply away from his—orbs that were as black as primeval Texas crude.

“Momma’s gonna buy you a mockingbird,” Danny rapped. His voice was weary but had the sublime and dreamy breeziness found only in the tops of East Texas pines.

Keeping it business, Lisa cursorily escorted Danny back into her office. She deftly avoided a fleshy handshake, let alone hug, by playing the encounter casually, as if her old friend had just arrived at her dorm room and they were about to cram for a Lit final. His hands were just too enveloping, and Danny had this habit of offering women he knew his left, which only added to the confusion he blithely cultivated among the opposite sex. As the pair walked through the office suite, Lisa pointed out coffee that was available, still trying to keep the meeting cool.

“No, ma’am. I’m good,” said Danny in response to the offer.

Lisa did get a conlike sense at Danny’s use of “ma’am.”

“Sit down,” she said, now back in her office.

She happily noticed that Nate was distracted with his phone as they passed by his doorframe. She smiled at her appointment, but another shot of nausea detached her from her emotions at being in the same space with Danny. She had a moment of wavering confidence, feeling that the slightest touch of sweat may be at her hairline.

“Sorry I didn’t shake your hand, Lise,” said Danny. “Nails are dirty after changing my brake pads this weekend.” So much for thinking she was in control of the meeting.

“Jack-of-all-trades, no matter how old we get,” Lisa responded.

“Old is right. I had the worst time gettin’ up off my driveway this time. I guess I need Geritol.”

Lisa laughed. Danny’s humor was as laconic as ever, but his sad, sad eyes—which she dared to look into now that there was a desk between them—made his self-deprecation a little depressing. She felt less intimidated the more she risked studying Danny’s face. It was still perfect with its crisp, clean-shaven jaw line and risen nose, but maybe the years and all of his hardships were finally pulling his cheeks down, just below his eyes. His brow also seemed strangely battered. A girl could avoid being fooled by that massively thick

black hair, which had not moved one centimeter up that forehead since graduation, because its waviness suggested vanity. Still, one had to be careful about those black eyes—

An unknown number illuminated itself on Lisa's BlackBerry as the gizmo vibrated across her desk.

Danny gave a half-smile. "I just got one of those. I wanted one with a camera."

Fumbling nervously, Lisa hit the ignore button. The embarrassed rush of blood to her head cured Lisa of any more possible nausea.

"How's your dad?" she asked, even though she had only met him once during an A&M versus Texas football game years ago. After a few seconds, the BlackBerry vibrated again to indicate a voicemail had been left.

"He's okay. He has his airplanes." Danny suddenly spoke with a mood that matched his downcast brow.

"And what about, Angelina's her name, right?"

"That's right." Suddenly, Danny's mood became very dark, such that it gave Lisa a shudder. She unexpectedly got the chills. Not wanting to be superstitious, she credited it to the maternal changes, which were no doubt underway within her body.

After a second, Danny strangely seemed okay. He continued talking about his eleven-year-old daughter by saying, "She insists on using her full name, in fact, telling me 'Angie' was no longer acceptable now that she's finishing up the fifth grade. Hopefully, she won't join up with the UN."

"I can't believe how long it's been."

The foreboding pall suddenly rushed back over Danny's countenance. He answered, "It hasn't been long enough."

"But you don't want to hear me sing the blues," he said, the cloud instantly lifting again mysteriously. It was like a switch had been thrown, and now Danny was all business. Lisa was a little perplexed but was eager to get to work.

Danny pulled a CD from his outer suit pocket and set it on Lisa's desk. "This is Brookshire's existing donor list in Excel format.

I'll have a copy of his briefing book to you in a couple weeks. We've got some anti-business votes the opponent made while he was on the Tyler City Council, so that should get you started."

"You've wasted no time," said Lisa. "It's only been a day, since the guy announced."

"He knows he's in trouble. I don't think he's going to win."

"Who? The senator?" Lisa was taken aback by Danny's pronounced lack of confidence in his incumbent candidate, Ben Brookshire.

This was the only consultant in the entire country she knew who had a perfect winning record. Granted, he had less than a dozen races under his belt, but he only ever took on two per cycle. Lisa knew the governor, as well as the Washington people, played their game of divvying up the races among the consultant mafia, and Danny was only sent to the trouble spots; but she also guessed that her widower friend preferred to limit his clients so as to best care for his daughter.

"Yeah. You know I'm not superstitious, but if I had the gift of prophecy, I'd say I'm looking at a mark in the L-column for the first time.

"I don't really care, though. Brookshire's a scumbag."

"Wow," responded Lisa.

"He is. Cheater, philanderer. And this prostitute he married is just awful—controlling, with a new, idiot brother-in-law who's really a Democrat. He had a worthless session this past spring too.

"But both the Mansion and the Lieutenant Governor are pulling out all the stops for him. God bless incumbency."

Lisa had seen and heard this negative spirit come out of Danny before, and she hated it. The attitude made a strong man appear weak. "Tell the governor you're not going to do it."

"I need the money. Which is why you're the fundraiser for the guy. I'm for darn certain going to make sure I get paid." One thing about Danny, he never cursed beyond those words permitted by his youth pastor. Lisa smiled but wanted to talk for a second about some-

thing happier. Yet of course, it wouldn't have been right to bring up her pregnancy without telling Bobby first.

"I guess doing general consulting for a state senator in deep East Texas gives you an excuse to fly," she offered, knowing Danny's love for the skies.

"I had to sell my plane."

Lisa now felt worse. The only other way the conversation could go would be a gripe session about the state of the party, and she couldn't decide what she disliked more: negative conversation generally or hearing a once-proud, confident, and happy friend complain about life.

"How's Bobby?" Danny asked.

"He's well," answered Lisa, surprised. "He's getting to be a director for the first time on that new phase of the Court Plaza down in Uptown."

"Cool. A good man," said Danny, who truly admired Bobby, and Lisa knew it.

For all the infatuation she may have had for him, Lisa never really thought Danny felt that physically attracted to her. So compliments from him about her husband she always took as genuine, not polite jealousy.

"I'd love to office down there—even live," she said.

"Not the best place for little kids, though, when that day comes," said Danny as a smile returned to lighten his demeanor.

Lisa felt that hopeful glow return.

"Unless all that new construction down there has run off all the queers," said Danny.

Lisa always forgot that conversations with him could have a rollercoaster effect. She never approved of the lifestyles of her gay relatives, and she hated the tactics of the homosexual lobby, but she still disliked bigoted talk. The disapproval of such speech was part of her natural political instincts.

"Do you know the moment I knew we Republicans would be net losers in our republic—in the long term?" said Danny, unexpectedly eager to pontificate.

“No” said Lisa, feeling she had to be tolerant.

“It was 1992, but it wasn’t Clinton’s victory that year. Forty-one had come to town after the convention, and our church up in Yale canceled evening service so that we could all go hear him speak.

“I’ll never forget it. We walked into the Convention Center from the cemetery side—you know, where they filmed the riot scene of the vets in *Born on the Fourth of July*? Anyway, there was this eerie stillness. There were mounted cops off to the side, and at the doors, these yokels were handing out little pamphlets to those attending the speech. There was a sense that these two groups were expecting some kind of altercation.

“I took a pamphlet and went on in to hear the speech, which was a rehash of the one the president had just given in Houston at the infamous hatefest. I was nineteen—I guess—that was between our freshman and sophomore years.

“I started reading the pamphlet, which was a cheap-looking, wild, and lurid torrent of anti-gay messaging headlined by The Family Defenders or The Families United Group or some such. The paper had some typical stuff about AIDS being God’s judgment, etc., but then it went into creepy detail about homosexual behavior, such as fisting and a bunch of other crap.”

“Danny!” exclaimed Lisa.

“I have a point, just hang on. At any rate, the speech ended, and all of these big-time Dallas pastors were there. Falwell was there, too, and he begged everyone for contributions to cover the event while at the same time shouting, ‘Don’t vote your pocketbook, vote your values!’ Remember, this was Clinton’s first race when Carville was frightening everybody about their jobs.

“But as we left, exiting back out the doors by the cemetery, there were all of these chalk-drawn body outlines on the concrete, like a mass-murder crime scene. Names were written inside each one. What had happened was that during the speech, local AIDS activists had come and set up a very creative protest of 41’s funding policies. They waited until the cops, the rednecks were gone, and then

en masse quickly drew the body outlines. The names gave them a personal touch. The only signage they left behind was something like, “How many more, Mr. President?” also written in chalk on the sidewalk.

“It occurred to me at that moment that we conservatives may win some battles, but we would lose the war, because we just weren’t skilled in the pagan arts. In fact, our reliance on the written word is a fatal flaw. We are like the Pilgrims—people of the Book—who believe reason and persuasion will carry the day like evangelism itself, but when it doesn’t, the darkness gets us, and the best we can do is print gross words about our enemies. Liberals, on the other hand, are better at creating an emotional impact using symbols and art. That’s one of the reasons why they are naturally allied with visual media like film and TV.

“Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t moved by the gays’ drawings, but as a whole, I was far more disturbed by those disgusting pamphlets than I was annoyed by a bunch of chalk art. Add to that a more and more apathetic electorate, and all they have to do to us is define us as haters and they win.”

Lisa became more concerned about Danny’s negativity. He seemed really worse for the wear. She tried to weaken his attitude by flippantly saying, “Sounds like you’re letting your work get to you—”

“Lisa—” Nate interrupted, clearly upset, “I’m sorry, but you need to pick up line two right now.”

Lisa could sense the panic and picked up her phone.

“Lisa Jeffus.” She picked up her BlackBerry and noticed the number that had just come in matched the one currently displayed on her caller ID. After a moment, she broke into tears.

“What’s wrong?” Danny demanded.

“That’s Bobby’s boss ... he’s been in an accident of some kind.”