

BETRAYED: CHAPTER 1

by, G. Thomas Hedlund (First Draft)

Where was he? He promised he'd be here. Today of all days. I couldn't believe this was the same man I loved and devoted my life to, the same man that managed to hold us together when mom left. He had changed during these past few years, but I guess we both did. That's the price of growing up, the growing apart.

Still, a promise was a promise and dad always taught me to, above everything else, keep mine. As I kicked the weights off my bat and strode to the plate with my heart reaching up and grasping at my throat, I scanned the stands one last time.

I spotted Jen and smiled at her. She clapped and then tucked her hands to her mouth, a private prayer hiding the nervousness slithering beneath her skin. I couldn't understand why she got nervous at these things; there was no pressure on her to win. I didn't even think she had the ability to grasp the gravity of the moment, but she was support and I needed all I could get. If her energy was a drink, I would have pounded it down at that moment.

I liked Jen. There was never any doubt about that, but we never had any deep, philosophical conversations during our time together. I didn't plan on it lasting much beyond graduation and I certainly never planned on marrying her. She was an accessory to go through school with on my arm. That was all.

I tended not to look in the stands for family or friends. It was another in a long list of distractions I could do without. This time, though, not finding my father among the crowd, I needed something to cling to. Then I saw Toby sitting there.

He had been my best friend for years. We did everything together but that all soured when I started dating Jen. He said that he didn't care, that he and Jen were through, but I found out the hard way that some things were unspoken truths. Never date your best friend's ex. Now it was too late, the damage was done. I was surprised to see him here today. I must have smiled because he tipped his head and gave me his signature two-fingered salute.

I reached the plate and kept my focus on the dirt and the white plate shaped like an elementary school kid's drawing of a house; a rectangle with a pointed top. I knew about pressure and this was the true definition of it. In sports, anyway. It wasn't something new or foreign to me. When you're labeled the star, the hopes and expectations naturally fall to your shoulders. I wasn't the sole reason we got here, facing a most improbable end to an impossible season, but I was an important piece of that puzzle.

As I tapped home plate and dug in, I took a bit of extra time. It became my routine to shake off the weights that hooked into my shoulders while some imaginary fisherman reeled me back, trying to drive me to the ground. 'Clear the mechanism,' my dad used to tell me, all the way back to those little league games. I grasped a deep breath, realizing the hooks had set too deep this time. I'd have to deal with the pressure a different way. I raised my head and focused on the pitcher staring at me barely sixty feet away.

It was down to this, our final at bat, our last gasp, one last shot at pulling a state championship from the pocket of the superstar gathering signs from his catcher behind me. This kid was a notorious hurler with a rocket for an arm who wasn't afraid of throwing it at a batter's head. I heard the rumors that the Braves or the Cardinals were planning on drafting him away from the ranks of collegiate sports, but all that meant nothing at the moment. I was the last one standing between him and a third straight championship for his team. Two prize fighters throwing hard punches deep into the final round; the way it should be.

I dug my cleats into the gouged grooves from a complete game of batters up and down. My teammates had managed to work their way to second and third and now with two outs, all I had to do was bring them home for the win. One to tie, two to win. This game had to end now, one way or another.

I couldn't believe he missed this game. The biggest one ever and something got in his way. There were a million possibilities why he wasn't here, but I could only think of two. Either a medical crisis came up that called him to the office or the emergency room, or he was lost in the folds of yet another dim-witted bimbo. It didn't matter now. I was facing this kid alone. One more broken promise. You'd think I would've been used to it by now.

“Strike one.” I blinked and flinched at the booming voice of the umpire. I didn’t remember even seeing that pitch.

‘Focus, focus, focus,’ I recited in my head. I looked back out at the mound as my bat wobbled instinctively before me. Why couldn’t he have just made it out to this game. It was the biggest game of my life. It wasn’t right.

Year after year dad managed to make it to all those games, watching from the stands or pacing nervously by the fences. It was just the two of us and we did alright. I don’t think I complained too much though I’m sure he would disagree. It wasn’t easy making it through life without your mother, but that was the hand I dealt with. I guess I never realized until that moment how much I relied on him to be there for me. I garnered strength from him. I stole courage from him. Courage I couldn’t find right now. I was lost against this pitcher, in over my head.

“Strike two.” I stepped back and shook my head, gazing at the plate. “Questioning my call son?” the ump said.

I narrowed my eyes at him but said nothing. Dealing with some of these high school umpires was like trolling the waters with crooked politicians. They either had enormous egos or a vested interest in the outcome of the game. It didn’t matter that this game was for the championship. There were no governing bodies or regulations. It was politics, plain and simple, and even though I was still two months from graduation, I knew about the real world. I knew how the game was played. Today I wasn’t saying a word. Besides, I never even saw that pitch.

I was in the hole. The last place I wanted to be in this last at bat. I let the better part of the moment slip away and I knew I would have a major fight against this killer to get anything good to swing at. I couldn’t focus, couldn’t clear the mechanism. More lines snagged into the porous skin pulling me down. I could almost hear the voices drifting up from around my feet, whispers tripping over themselves to my ears, each saying with a sinister glee that I belonged down there with them, that it wasn’t going to be so bad, that I would never rise up to the challenge and be a hero.

I got angry then. The hurt replaced in a flash by an emotion so often smothered in a bereft that it was frightening. Mom left and I was hurt, wondering what I did wrong, listening as my father told me time and again that it had nothing to do with me. I was barely seven at the time, but I knew even then that it had

something to do with me. I was her son, her only child, and she deserted both of us. Through all those years, it wasn't until that foreign feeling beat into me like a war drum that I never opened up and vanquished her and her cruel indifference toward me. Now, because of a stupid broken promise, I turned the wounded emotions onto the man that stood by me and never flinched, even when times got tight and the emotions turned raw. I was angry and I relished it.

I drew my mouth back, tucked my jaw out, and felt the hinges of skin on my forehead tighten and slink down. I stepped up and faced my opponent. I was cleansed. At least for the moment. Did it matter if it lasted beyond this day? I didn't care. The world drifted away on a wave of sovereignty; I belonged here, it belonged to me. My muscles and my mind loosened up. The noise, the cheering, the jeering, all faded like a stereo dumped into water.

I watched that kid read his signs and nod when the right one came to him. The smug expression gave him away. He came at me the first two pitches with heat the likes of which I'd never seen, not even when dad took me to a clinic with the Yankees' pitching staff years ago. I knew this kid liked to change his pitches, it was a defining characteristic in his arsenal. He wasn't going to go for three in a row.

He went into his windup and I watched the ball sail through the air. Time slowed down. I watched in awe as the seam spun around in an arc over the center. I knew where the pitch was heading before it even got there, like a high-definition television, every detail stuck out in plain view. The pitch slid down and away, skipping off the dirt and finding comfort in the soft cushion of the catcher's mitt. I didn't need to hear the umpire's call to know it was a ball. My attention drove right at the pitcher, right into his core. The anger held firm against the lines of my face. I needed it there.

The next pitch was the same. The clarity, the confidence, the patience, all winding around with each rotation of the ball. I was breathing every detail. The count evened up and I refused to step back from the plate to reset. Every batter I knew had that routine, and so did I, except this time. It felt right to not move. This was my zone and I wouldn't jeopardize that.

The problem with having first base open was that this kid didn't have to give me a good pitch to swing at, he could just walk

me and suffer no damage in order to face the next batter. I knew he didn't want to do that. His ego wouldn't let him. Maybe in the major leagues he'd have it beaten out of him, but this was high school where egos ruled. This kid wanted to strike me out.

The next pitch came in tight and I almost lunged back, but I held my ground while it zipped past my chin. I felt the air brush by the thin scruff of facial hair I still only had to shave once a week. The count was full which meant my teammates on base would be running with the pitch. All I had to do was make contact and send it into the outfield to win. Dad taught me early on that winning wasn't about hitting home runs. 'That's for dreamers,' he said. 'You swing for the fences and you're going to be the one going home alone. Keep it simple. Just make contact and dig it out. You do that and you'll win in the long run.'

I felt the slight chuckle slip from me. I couldn't believe it. Dad was here all along. Maybe not in the stands among the crowd, but he was here, just as he promised. He'd always been there, slinking in the shadows. Always there in the lessons that became my life.

The pitcher must have seen my laugh because I saw the doubt sneak in. I choked up on the bat. Jen and Toby and my team all behind me waited almost breathless. Both benches, both stands full of people caught in the tense moment that came down to that last pitch.

Time had picked up again and the ball slipped from his fingers and came at me in a wide-looping arc. I had to catch my swing as I was so far out in front of it that I felt stupid. The pitch was little more than a lob, an off-speed beauty that hung in the air on strings of defiance. It hung for too long, though, and I managed to rejuvenate my swing. I closed my eyes and hoped. It was all I could do.

I felt the bat make contact and when my eyes opened, I watched as it floated timelessly through the air. I held my breath as I took off for first. The entire place went silent as the ball drifted at the edge of the shortstop's glove. He dove, fully extended, and as the ball skimmed off the mitt and bounced against the plush nitrogen-rich grass of the outfield, I started jumping up and down, pumping my fists in the air. My foot barely touched down on first base when I was tackled by teammates who stormed the field.

The celebration was contagious to the stands. Jen and Toby jumped up and down and hugged each other, though they caught themselves quickly and separated. I didn't care; they had been friends once, too, just like him and me. I received more hugs, high-fives, and hands on me than in my best dreams. I didn't even notice the other team slink away into the distance. I never got the chance to shake hands or do any of those sportsman-like things winners got to do. They were on the bus and heading home long before the smile slipped from my face for the first time. I could think of them as sore losers, but I knew what it felt like to watch an opponent dance around on the field of battle. The exuberance was iodine on an open wound and when you were used to winning, like they were, you didn't know what to do with yourself when you finally did lose.

And you always lost. Someday, we always lose.