

**SPLIT TO
SPLINTERS**

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AN ELI SHARPE NOVEL



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To Harry Huck and Libby. Thanks.



Chapter 1

AS THE BASEBALL WHIZZED toward his head, Eli dropped the thirty-ounce Louisville Slugger and ducked. Heart galloping, he dusted himself off, straightened to his full height of six foot one, and stepped out of the batter's box. He wagged his finger at the pitcher and glanced around the otherwise empty baseball diamond, the prettiest part of Jim Honeycutt's forty acre ranch nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains outside of Asheville, North Carolina. Foul lines drawn with lime chalk. Brand new bases. John Deer green grass in the outfield. It was a Chamber of Commerce morning in mid-March—almost time for Spring Training—and Eli Sharpe, once a promising young prospect himself, missed the game of baseball. He missed the *game*.

But this wasn't a game.

This was a job.

Well, not exactly. This was the possibility of a job, a try-out of sorts. According to Ernest Carpenter, the owner of DMSI Investigations and the man Eli apprenticed under before securing his own private investigator's license, Jim Honeycutt had a "private family matter" that required a swift resolution.

No police. No press. In an effort to stay sober-ish and shake off the memory of the Gato case, Eli had spent the winter working, which meant traveling, and he wanted this job, whatever it was, if for no other reason than to work close to home. He also wanted to work for *the* Jim Honeycutt, a Hall of Fame pitcher who threw seventy-one shutouts (most in the Live Ball Era) and eight no-hitters (most ever). Aside from being revered by sports reporters and players alike, Jim was a prominent real estate investor and worth close to \$15 million.

But first, a tryout.

Eli removed his seersucker jacket, folded it neatly, and hung it on the backstop behind home plate. He rolled his shirtsleeves up to the elbow, picked up the bat, and planted both feet firmly in the batter's box.

From the pitcher's mound, Jim Honeycutt said, "A real man never loses his grip."

"You throw hard for a geriatric," Eli countered.

"Geriatric, my ass! That mansion across the way is my second home. My permanent address is Cooperstown. Walter Johnson and Ty Cobb are my neighbors."

"My neighbors make hemp jewelry," Eli said, pointing the head of the bat at Jim. "They clear about a grand a month on eBay. Not bad for reformed hippies."

"Carpenter warned me you were a smartass."

"Only when provoked."

"Son, if I wanted to provoke you, you'd be on the ground right now."

Eli lowered his chin, bowed like a servant. "My apologies for the sarcasm. I haven't swung a bat in a while. Chalk it up to nerves."

"A real man never apologizes. Or gets nervous."

"Words of wisdom, sir." Eli took a practice swing, heard something pop in his shoulder. He winced.

"Rub some dirt on it," said Jim, "and quit being a pussy."

"My old man gave me similar advice. But while I heal maybe

you could tell me a bit about your private family matter.”

“I’d rather talk about you first. I’ve heard things.”

“From whom, may I ask?”

“Your man with a mustache and Hawaiian shirt. Smokes cigars?”

“Ernest Carpenter.”

“Yeah, your man Carpenter said ball teams hire you to investigate their players. Make sure they’re sound investments before big money contracts are offered. Said you track down missing persons, too. I read all about the Gato case last year. Even saw you on TV.”

Eli winced at the TV remark. A bad memory. The day in question, he’d been interviewed on *A Crime to Remember*. After downing half a fifth of George Dickel, he refused to wear any makeup, or change out of his favorite blue-striped seersucker jacket, which the director said was stained and didn’t show up well on camera anyway. Because of the tight scheduling and budgetary constraints, the show was forced to use a portion of Eli’s rambling, incoherent answers. The forty-six seconds of footage had over 800,000 views on YouTube so far.

“That case,” Eli said, “was my fifteen minutes. For better or worse. And it’s pronounced Gah-toe.”

“Gato, right. Your boss also said you were the best investigator at DMSI. Said he tried to adopt you.”

“Carpenter isn’t my boss. He’s my best friend. Sometimes he refers clients to me. I’m freelance.” Eli took another swing. Only a twinge of pain. Nothing a splash of George Dickel wouldn’t take care of. He aimed the head of the bat at Jim, wondering if it would be unprofessional to ask for an autograph and a picture. The Texas Terror, as Jim Honeycutt was once known, stood on the pitcher’s mound like a general surveying a battleground he’d recently conquered. Only this general wasn’t wearing armor. He was wearing a white-collared golf shirt with the Honeycutt Properties LLC logo on the breast, pleated khakis, and black dress shoes with tassels. He held five baseballs in one hand as

strands of his wavy gray hair blew in the crisp morning breeze. At fifty-eight, he was built as solid as a California Redwood. He went six-three, two-thirty easy, had a barrel chest and thick forearms. But it wasn't just his size that commanded respect, for he had a presence, an air of vitality that when coupled with his booming baritone voice and rugged good looks made Eli eager to please—but also, like a rebellious teenager, desperate to defy.

Eli said: “Remind me what I have to do to get this job?”

“You were a ballplayer once. Had a cup of coffee with the Devil Rays?”

“I had a cup of coffee. I wasn't there long enough to ask for cream.”

“Don't bullshit me, son. I did my homework. You were a top prospect. Had some damn good years in the minors.”

Eli couldn't help but smile. Did he really just receive a compliment from a living legend, from a boyhood hero of his? He said, “One and a half good years to be exact. And the key word there is ‘minors.’ As in minor leagues.”

Jim threw one of the baseballs, and Eli ducked, laughed it off. “False modesty makes my ass twitch, son. Now, here's the rub. I'll give you three pitches to get a hit off me. Do that and I'll tell you more about the job. No promises, though.”

“And if I don't get a hit, what happens then?”

Jim laughed, deep and guttural. “Then at least you'll have a good story to tell your kids. That is if you ever marry one of your six fiancées.”

Actually, it was *five* ex-fiancées, but Eli didn't bother correcting him. Nor did he tell him that he'd been invited to four of their weddings, and that Savannah, ex-fiancée number three, had a daughter Eli tutored in English.

“Sir,” said Eli, “are we gonna play ball or gab all morning?”

“Batter up. And the name's Jim, not sir.” Jim dropped all but one of the baseballs from his pitching hand and dug a heel into the mound, sending fine red clay flying.

The wind picked up, chilling the sweat on Eli's forehead. He gripped the bat, which suddenly felt heavy and foreign in his hands. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a pretty young blonde girl sitting in the wooden bleachers on the first base side. Wearing black leggings and a pink tank top with holes in it, she was way too scantily dressed for her skinny body to stay warm this chilly Monday morning. When she noticed Eli noticing her, she snapped on a pair of white Ray Ban sunglasses and brandished a radar gun. A teenaged blonde with a radar gun? That was a first.

"Strike him out," she yelled, her voice carrying across the field.

Eli dug into the batter's box.

Jim's smile disappeared, and the set of his features projected concentration that bordered on malice. His brow furrowed, his jaw locked. His eyes looked like hollow point bullets dipped in motor oil. Eli knew this look, had seen it on TV when the Texas Terror mowed down Big League batters, one after another, year after year. Eli steadied his breathing and visualized the ball making clean contact with the bat—an old trick a sports psychologist taught him years ago.

Jim rocked back into his windup, turned his shoulder, did his trademark high leg kick, and fired. *Whoosh*.

Eli swung, but the ball had already zipped by.

The girl with the radar gun called out: "Eighty-four miles per hour. Strike one."

Jim picked up a new ball, shook out his pitching arm.

Eli spat on his hands, cursed all right-handed pitchers. As a righty, Eli ate up southpaws. He bent his knees twice and tapped home plate four times, which was a sacred ritual from his playing days. Superstitious? Absolutely. But what ballplayer didn't cling to his superstitions? Especially a Never-Has-Been attempting to face down a man with seven Cy Young Awards on his shelf.

Eli imagined the *crack* of bat on ball, visualized a line

drive slowly rising above the field and disappearing into the mountains beyond.

Jim wound up and fired.

Eli swung, foul-tipping the pitch against the backstop, his shoulder smarting from the effort.

“Eighty-six miles per hour. Strike two. Finish him off, Daddy.”

Jim waved as if from a parade.

The girl blew him a kiss, waved back. She typed a text on her iPhone and aimed the radar toward home plate. With her free hand, she shot Eli the bird and giggled.

Anger bubbled in Eli’s stomach. The competitive spirit? Pure male ego? Fear of humiliation? Unsure of the source of his ire, he stepped his left foot out of the batter’s box while keeping his right foot planted. He breathed and looked toward the custom-built mansion “across the way.” A woman was standing on the wraparound porch, holding an iPhone up to the sunlight. Jim’s wife, no doubt. Asheville being a small town filled with rich, loose-lipped people, Eli had heard rumors about Jim’s wife and daughters. He’d heard rumors about his money. The scuttlebutt was that the family had a problem with the patriarch’s last will and testament. Eli wondered if that had anything to do with the “private family matter” he’d been called to discuss.

But first, a tryout.

Eli planted both feet back in the batter’s box and pointed the head of the bat at Jim, needling the old man a bit. Eli grinned and a long-forgotten feeling washed over him, a mixture of fear and arrogance. This was a truly hybrid emotion. His insides churned, but his mind was calm, alert. In a flash he remembered all those times he’d caught a baseball on the sweet spot of the barrel—how it felt better than drinking expensive whiskey, making love to a beautiful woman, or solving a tough case. He remembered the feeling—“Sweet Thunder,” the old timers used to call it. He wanted—no, needed—to feel it again. Even if that meant taunting one of his childhood heroes.

Eli winked at Jim and said, “You call that a fastball, old man?”

Jim’s look of concentration morphed slowly into a murderous scowl. He spat. He kicked the rubber. He wound up, grunted like a bear awoken from a nap, and fired. Eli swung and caught the ball on the sweet spot, smacking a line drive back up the middle that damn near took the head off of the great Jim Honeycutt.

The ball stopped rolling some six hundred feet away—there was no fence around the field—and Eli turned to the girl with the radar gun.

“How fast was that last pitch?” he asked.

She spiked the radar gun on the ground, breaking it into three different pieces, and then walked toward the house, her iPhone pressed to her ear.

Eli dropped the bat and trotted out to the mound. He helped the Hall of Famer to his feet, an impressive feat for the tall but wiry detective. Jim ran a hand through his hair.

“That was a fucking rope.”

“I got lucky,” said Eli and brushed a spot of red clay dust off Jim’s collar. “Closed my eyes and swung. Pure luck.”

Jim grunted. “Real men don’t need luck.”

“Perhaps not, but it can’t hurt.”

Leaving the baseballs and the bat behind, Jim stormed off the mound, stopping long enough to give first base a swift kick. He yelled for Eli to follow, and Eli retrieved his jacket and caught up, trying hard to control his giddiness at having hit the great Texas Terror.

As they drew near the house, the adrenaline wore off, and Eli realized Jim’s description was not hyperbole. The house “across the way” was, indeed, a mansion—a custom-built new construction home complete with a wraparound porch, lots of large windows, and a weathervane atop the chimney. Eli figured it was ten, maybe twelve thousand square feet at least. There was even a pool with an outdoor kitchen around back.

“Nice shack,” Eli said. “Decent view. Feels like you can touch the mountains from here.”

Muttering under his breath, Jim stomped onto the porch, and a handsome blonde woman in a green turtleneck sweater and white jeans put her arms around him and squeezed. She winked at Eli while Jim's back was turned and said, "Look at it this way, husband, at least you won't need a haircut for a while."

"I left the ball over the fat part of the plate. A goddamn—"

"James Honeycutt!"

Jim lowered his eyes, chastised by the sound of his own name. "He's nothing special, Tessy. A little leaguer could've given that pitch a ride."

"Could a little leaguer hit a ninety-one mile per hour fastball? Heather told me the results of your little tryout."

Still grumbling, Jim kissed her cheek, followed the porch around the side of the house, and disappeared.

The handsome blonde woman extended a bejeweled hand, and Eli took it. "Tess Honeycutt," she said. "I'm the grouch's wife."

"Eli Sharpe. Pleased to meet you." If not for the liver spots on her hands, Eli would have sworn she wasn't a day over forty. She had faint parentheses around her mouth, but otherwise her face was smooth and unlined, her eyes bright blue and youthful. She gave Eli's hand a final squeeze, and her hostess's smile shifted into a look of wifely concern, one he'd seen often during the course of his eight years on the job.

"Please forgive my husband," she said. "Unlike us mortals, he's not acquainted with the sorrows of losing."

"I got lucky."

"Liar," she said swatting away his remark. "I heard what you said to my husband. You antagonized a narcissist. You saw a weakness and you exploited it. Good for you."

"No, Mrs. Honeycutt, I antagonized a childhood hero of mine."

"You boys and your games." The hostess's smile reappeared. She removed an iPhone from the pocket of her jeans, held it in front of Eli's face, and snapped a picture. "Say 'Cheese.' You

don't mind, do you? My daughters are available."

"I'm not husband material, Mrs. Honeycutt."

"Call me Tess. My daughters—god bless them—are not exactly ideal candidates for wives. Too spoiled. Too self-involved." She laughed, free and easy, and then patted his head. "You're a tall drink of water, Eli. You have a full set of teeth and a thick head of hair. You checked my husband's ego. You'd make a fine son-in-law. Just consider it."

"You're going to make me blush."

"You don't seem like the type to go red-faced when a girl pays you a compliment." Putting the iPhone away, she leaned forward, her eyes sparkling. "A secret? He was going to hire you whether you got a hit or not. He has a thing for detectives. Now, you better shoo. My husband abhors waiting."

Eli peered down the end of the porch, and there was Jim with his hands in his pockets, scowling. Jim jerked his head to the side, and Eli followed him around the side of the porch. They entered the house through French doors.

Jim's office had dark hardwood floors and a tray ceiling. There was a distressed brown leather couch and loveseat and a massive Walnut desk near the entrance to the interior hallway. On the wall were four framed posters of Jane Mansfield in various stages of undress, one of them autographed by the blonde bombshell herself. But the other poster caught Eli's eye. Mansfield on a bearskin rug, wearing a white bikini, her lips red as rubies, her breasts like torpedoes. He pried his eyes away from the Hollywood starlet and spied a large wooden clock on the wall above Jim's desk. One side of the clock kept time with brass hands and oversized brass numbers while the other side was a portrait of James Honeycutt in a Houston Astros uniform, circa 1983.

"My wife had that made. There's a clock in every room of this house."

Jim slumped into the leatherback chair behind the Walnut desk. He pointed to a chair fit for a dwarf, and Eli sat, his

knees almost touching his chest. Jim yelled, "Tessy!" and Mrs. Honeycutt entered and placed a coffee mug that said TOP DOG on the desk. She whispered something in his ear, and his jaw locked, his cheeks reddened. She kissed him on the lips and headed for the door without offering Eli a cup.

"Shut the door behind you," Jim barked.

She pulled the door halfway shut. Eli could have sworn he heard giggling in the hallway. The couple seemed to be putting on a show, one Eli had seen his own parents perform a couple hundred times to disastrous effect.

Jim opened a drawer, poured a generous amount of Maker's Mark into his coffee, and took a gulp.

Eli walked to the far end of the office, retrieved a director's chair with the words TEXAS TERROR written on it, and sat it beside the tiny chair. "Now that we're at eye level, can you tell me what this private family matter is?"

Jim poured more whiskey and drank. He opened a different desk drawer, removed a manila folder, glanced at it, grunted, and then slid it across the desk. Inside was a piece of plain white paper with the words LOOK AT DAUGHTERS, FIND YOUR BALL written in black magic marker across the middle of the page.

"One of your game balls was stolen?"

Jim nodded. "From my three-hundredth career win. June, '89. Five-hit shutout against Cincinnati."

"Where did you keep the ball?"

"In my desk here. Bottom drawer on the right."

Eli looked up from the folder, frowning. "Why not a safe or a strongbox? Something that locks?"

"No one has ever stolen anything from me before," he said with more pride than anger, "especially my family."

Eli glanced back at the note. "This says LOOK AT DAUGHTERS. Do you suspect one of them is responsible, or could the thief be playing a game?"

"Beats me. That's your job to figure out."

“Why would one of your daughters take the ball?”

“Money. Spite. Take your pick. Don’t care either way. I just want it back.”

“My job is mostly about asking questions and taking notes.”

“Ask whatever you want, son.”

They stared at each other half a minute. Eli blinked first. “What I’m saying is the more you tell me up front the quicker this thing goes.”

Jim pointed at a framed picture sitting on the desk. Eli recognized Jim, Tess, and Heather. The other three women—one heavysset, one pale-skinned, and one curvy—he figured were the daughters Honeycutt. All three favored either Jim or Tess. But the picture also included an old man in a frayed cardigan and a busty redhead.

“I’ve lived too long as the hero,” Jim said. “I suppose it’s my turn to be the villain.”

Eli thought about the words: LOOK AT DAUGHTERS, FIND YOUR BALL. The thief used the pronoun “your,” which meant the message was directed at Jim himself, so why say “daughters” instead of “your daughters”? An oversight? Or something more? Whatever the reason, the message was a taunt, like someone was looking to even a score. There was also the money angle to consider. Although selling a stolen ball at auction was out of the question, Jim Honeycutt’s three-hundredth career win game ball would fetch a hefty fee if sold to a private collector. In 2006 Barry Bonds hit his 715th home run, breaking Hank Aaron’s record, and that ball sold for \$220,000. And Bonds was nowhere near as popular and well-loved as Jim Honeycutt. So the missing game ball could be worth even more. Whatever the motive—this stolen ball, the note—this was personal. Didn’t take a private detective to figure that much out.

Jim made a cage of his large hands. “Listen, son, I want you to bring me the ball and the thief. I’ll give you \$5,022. A dollar for every strikeout I ever threw. Plus expenses. Now, you’re on

the clock, so tell me what you're thinking."

Eli held up the note and tilted his head. He put the note back down. "I think this is a game. And the first rule of any game is to know you're playing one."

"What about fingerprints?"

"No point in dusting the desk or the note. Waste of time. Besides, fingerprints aren't the case-cracking clues cop shows on TV make them out to be. Whoever stole the ball was probably smart enough to wear gloves."

"So you know my daughters?"

"You're not the only one who did his homework."

Jim crossed his arms.

Another tryout. Eli sat up straight and played along. "You have four daughters. Magnolia, thirty-six. April, thirty-one. Robin, twenty-eight. Heather, fifteen. Magnolia and April work for Honeycutt Properties LLC. Maggie is a lawyer, and April keeps the books. They both live here on your estate, even though Maggie is engaged and April is divorced."

"April's separated. The man's a prick. As for Maggie's groom in waiting, she's been stringing him along for years. I've never met the man, but I hear he's none too bright. Probably why Maggie keeps him around. She's always wanted a pet." He stopped abruptly as if he'd said too much. Sipping his coffee spiked with whiskey, he asked, "What do you know about Robin and Heather?"

"Robin lives in one of your rental houses on Macon Avenue. Teaches ninth grade English at Asheville Prep, the same private school Heather attends. Heather is an honors student and recently published an essay on personal responsibility in the *Blue Ridge Gazette*. I appreciated her style of prose, but disagreed with her conclusions."

"Watch your tongue. Heather's my favorite. The rest of them know she's my favorite."

At one time, Eli had been his mother's favorite, too. She taught him how to pick locks, talk to women, scam a free hotel

room for the night, and most importantly, how to take his old man's punches. Useful life skills. Especially in Eli's line of work.

Jim sloshed whiskey into a Houston Astros cup and passed it over the desk. Eli drank. "There's something you should know. Might help with the investigation, but I can't have it getting around town."

"I've heard rumors about your last will and testament." Eli got out his leather-bound notebook and silver fountain pen.

"Those are just rumors. Here are the facts: in January, I drew up a new will. Set up trusts—modest trusts—for my wife and daughters."

"Does anyone in your family know about it?"

"It's public record. I registered it with the county, but my girls don't know the details. No one except me and my lawyer know."

"What can you tell me about these trusts?"

"Nothing. Squat. Zip."

Eli capped and uncapped his fountain pen several times, thinking. "Tell me this. If your wife and daughters discovered the details of this new will, how would they react?"

"My girls are spoiled. All of them. Always have been. They bicker and nag and hold grudges and gossip. Now some of that's my fault, but I'm putting a stop to it."

"With your new will?"

"It's time for my girls to work for what they get. Just like I did."

Eli wrote the words MONEY and MOTIVE at the top of the page. He looked at the picture of Honeycutt's brood. They were all smiling, showing teeth and wrinkling up their faces in enjoyment, but their eyes refused to participate in the lie. It was a façade. Rich families, in Eli's experience, were different than the rest. Every word and every deed was scrutinized, and normal sibling rivalries were taken to the nth degree when large sums of money were at stake. And Jim Honeycutt was worth more than some small countries.

Eli pointed at the picture frame. “The buxom redhead. Who is she?”

“Linda Rogers.”

“And where might I find her in case I need to talk?”

Jim pounded on the desk. “Goddamn it, you’re wasting time. Every morning I sit down at this desk, open the bottom drawer, and look at that game ball. Do you know why?”

“Nostalgia.”

“I was being rhetorical, son. I look at that ball to remind myself of the only true thing in this world. No one gives it to you. You have to take it. That ball is a symbol of my hard work. I scratched and clawed, and now I have all this. I made something of myself. Me, the son of a drunken pool hall hustler from Waco, Texas. The good lord blessed my right arm, but I’ve worked every day of my life for what I got. And no one, not even my own flesh and blood, is gonna steal from me and get away with it. You follow me?”

Eli looked at the framed picture. It made sense why Jim surrounded himself with family, why he insisted that grown women live under the same roof as him. As in agrarian times when men produced children by the dozen, Jim Honeycutt looked at his daughters and wife as assets in the ledger of life. His daughters were lovely, to boot. Even the heavysset one Eli found appealing. Eli pointed at the old man in the picture and Jim’s face softened.

“That’s Earl Boykins, the journalist. Ever hear of him?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

Jim flashed disappointment. “We’re working on my autobiography. He lives here, too. Bunks down in the basement.”

Eli asked how many people lived on the estate and wrote down the answer: Maggie and April lived upstairs, Tess, Jim and Heather occupied the main floor, and Earl lived in the basement. Quite an eccentric household. Even in a mansion with ten bedrooms, it was bound to feel crowded.

“I like having my girls close by,” said Jim as if he had access to Eli’s thoughts.

"I'll need to talk to everyone. Today."

"April and Maggie are at work. My office is on Charlotte Street. I own the building."

"I'll also need to look around your house, take some pictures. Starting with the desk drawer where you kept the ball."

"Whatever you need. Just get to the bottom of this. And quick."

"It's unlikely the thief left the ball lying around this house, but I might find something to go on."

"I don't allow locked doors in my house."

Eli smiled at the irony. Had Jim locked his office door, perhaps none of this would have happened. Eli folded the thief's note and slipped it inside his notebook.

"I'll have Carpenter send over a standard contract later this afternoon. But first I need to know the exact time you last saw the ball and the exact time you noticed it was missing."

"Today's Monday. I last saw it around nine a.m. on Saturday. I noticed it was missing at eleven a.m. Sunday."

"Did you see the ball anytime between nine a.m. Saturday and eleven a.m. Sunday?"

"Yeah, say four or five on Saturday. I came in here to grab my checkbook. The ball was still there."

Finished writing, Eli slipped his fountain pen and notebook into his jacket pocket. He removed his iPhone from his pocket and walked around the desk. Jim opened the bottom drawer, and Eli snapped half a dozen pictures from various angles. Nothing but a box of checks, three reams of printer paper, and a little brass baseball glove where the ball once sat. Eli shut the drawer.

"I'll keep the note with me. I want to see reactions when I show it."

"I need to be there," Jim said. "I want to hear what they have to say for themselves."

"No, you don't. That's my job." Eli snapped several pictures of the office—entrance, exit, walls, posters, and furniture—and

pocketed the phone. “Anyway, you’re a villain now, remember? It’s my turn to play the hero.”

Jim poked Eli in the chest. It hurt.

“Carpenter warned me you were a smartass.”

“He also said I was his best detective.”