

Chapter One

It was me who gave him the nickname Slammin' Sammy. At Camp Arrowhead, the summer we were twelve—what turned out to be my last summer there. The next year our family went to Israel for my bar mitzvah, and the year after that my father died unexpectedly and uninsured, and we fell out of the middle class like skydivers. We moved from our house to a cramped apartment, and there was no more summer camp for the Geller boys, at least not out of the city.

Sammy Adler was without doubt the least coordinated, least athletic person, male or female, in the camp. Tall, gangly, flat-assed, he ran like Frankenstein's monster, knees knocking together, ankles weak, his feet slapping the ground like a bird headed for extinction. His height made him of occasional use in basketball or volleyball, but on the softball diamond he was what we then called a spaz. And still would. A glove on his hand was like a metal pan ready to clank. Balls hit or thrown to him caromed off his shins or bounced through his legs cleanly. To say he threw like a girl would be an insult to most girls in the camp. There was nowhere to hide him in the field, unless you needed a guy to turn and watch a ball sail over his head while everyone else yelled *Go!* And at the plate, he'd stand flatfooted with the bat on his shoulder, and swipe at the ball, stiff as a turnstile, usually after it had crossed the plate. His strikeouts or accidental grounders elicited groans, forehead slaps and sometimes thrown hats. If he came to the plate with two out, his teammates went to find their gloves. The rally killer was up. The automatic out.

The counsellors, who were supposed to be our coaches, were no help. Natural athletes themselves, they didn't have the patience or know-how to break his swing down and rebuild it. They just barked a stream of the usual stuff at him: *Bend your knees. Draw that bat back. Keep an eye on it. Don't be afraid to swing away. A walk's as good as a hit. Swing! Not at that. That's eye level. There—why didn't you swing at that one?*

Sammy needed someone else to help him, and he needed it soon. Colour War had just been announced: an intense three-day competition when the campers split into two teams, blue and white, and took each other on in all sports, land and water. The winner was always declared by means of fireworks set off on a floating dock in the lake, either a burst of blue stars launching and slowly showering down, or of white. Cheers from the winning side, cries from the other. Hugs here; over there a few boys trying to overconsole teary-eyed girls.

I was on the blue team, as was Sammy. Going into the third and final day, the teams were neck and neck. White was killing us in land sports but we were winning everything on the lake, mainly because we had Victor Blum, the future Olympic qualifier, and he could do everything in water but walk on it juggling chainsaws. There was a good chance it would all come down to Sunday's final event—softball—and our age group, twelve and up, would play last.

After dinner Saturday, I grabbed Sammy by the elbow and steered him out to the ball field. The piney smell of the woods crowded in on us; the mosquitoes came out for blood. The equipment was all locked away in a shed behind the backstop but one kid, Teddy Packer, had his own eighteen-ounce aluminum bat that he kept under his bed. I'd brought it with us and as the sky grew darker, I stood Sammy at the plate and worked with him for a solid hour.

I was all about sports then. It was the one area where I was much better than my brother, the scholar and future lawyer. I couldn't outstudy him, outperform him at school, or outdo him at potential fulfilled, but I was a natural athlete--and baseball was my game. Our game, my Dad's and mine. The mid-Eighties was a great time to be a Blue Jays fan. They were a rising power in the American League East, sudden contenders with their great core of young players: Bell, Moseby, Barfield, Stieb, Fernandez. My Dad and I would go to games when they still played at Exhibition Stadium, sitting in the cheap seats in left, on soft August nights with the lights of the midway flashing over the centre-field wall, the two of us screaming ourselves hoarse as the Jays kept pace with the Yankees, Tigers and Orioles—then the beasts of the East. He was proud, my Dad, of what I could do with a glove and a bat. I wasn't big but I could drive the ball on a line to any field and catch anything hit my way.

For an hour that night, until darkness was full and the mosquitoes had bled us dry, I worked with Sammy on his swing, drawing on my extremely limited knowledge of physics to explain weight shifts. I wasn't expecting miracles. I didn't think I'd suddenly unleash a swing like George Bell's. But good things happened when you made contact in softball. Defences were suspect. Balls got overthrown.

I started by standing at home plate with the bat, swinging easily through imaginary pitches, moving my weight back foot to front, thinking of how I could explain it to him.

"Have you ever played tennis?" I asked.

“My mother got me lessons a couple of years ago.”

“So it’s like that,” I said. “Just like a backhand. You’re meeting the ball as it crosses the plate, your front arm moves through the ball and ends up behind you.”

“Jonah,” he said. “It’s not like I got it then either.”

“You’ll get it.”

I showed him where to stand: a foot away from the plate, feet square and shoulder width apart. Then I stood just in front of him, my back to the mound, my glove held straight out.

“Use your front arm only,” I said. “Move from your back foot to your front and use one hand to swing through like a tennis backhand. Here comes the pitch,” I said. “Are you ready? Is your weight on your back foot? Okay, it’s coming.”

I moved my glove closer. “Start the bat slowly. Come on, bring it through.”

As it crossed the plate I moved my glove in to meet it and said, “Stop.” No yelling at him like the counsellors did, always barking everything twice. *Swing away, Sammy. Swing away. Or Walks as good as a run, Sam. Waaaaalks as good as a run.* Softly I spoke, the Sammy Whisperer. I had him bend his knees, draw the bat back and step through his swing again, letting it smack my glove.

“Back foot to front foot. Back foot to front. That’s it, Sammy. That’s where you hit the ball. You watch it come in and only start your swing when it’s here. Got it?”

He smiled for the first time. “I actually think I do.” He stood square to the plate, at my prompting, and swung through with some perceptible level of coordination.

I had him choke up, shorten his swing. Got him to keep his head down. I tried to break that stiffness in his body with a hand here, a touch there, make his swing less mechanical and more fluid. He listened well. With no one shouting at him, no pressure heaped on his bony shoulders, he started striding into his swing more, looking better with each try. Finally I took a ball to the mound and lobbed him an easy one. He put a pretty good swing on it, shifting his weight, head down, driving the bat head through the zone. And missed it by a good foot.

I had an idea, watching him swing late on the pitch.

“Sammy,” I said, “what I told you before about stepping straight ahead with your front foot? Forget that.”

I knew that if he made contact, a ball up the right side could get through. As long as it got past the pitcher, there’d be no play at first. Even Sammy, with his awkward gait, could beat one out—if he made contact.

“When you swing, Sammy, step toward first. Not the pitcher, ’kay? First base.”

“How?”

“Like this.” I took the bat, got into the box, and got him to walk in on me with the glove like I had for him.

“You’ve watched me hit, right?”

“Sure.”

“What do I do?”

“Hit it a mile to left. Most of the time, anyway. Which is funny ’cause you’re way smaller than a lot of the kids but I guess it’s physics, not size.”

“How I do it,” I said, “is I wait until a pitch comes inside and I step toward third. I hit it early, and all my weight answers the pitch.”

“And changes its direction at a greater velocity.”

“That too. But you swing late. You can’t come around on an inside pitch. So what you’re going to do, Sammy, is look for a pitch on the outside part of the plate and put that late swing on it right. . . here.” I put the glove on the outer part of the strike zone near the back of the plate.

“You put a late swing on that, you won’t miss it,” I said. Not by a foot anyway.

Sammy always batted ninth. His first time up Sunday was in the second inning, no one on and two out.

Most of our team got their gloves on. *Surprise them, Sammy*, I thought. Show them what we did last night. Because by the time we left, sticky with sweat and bloody bites, Sammy had found a swing. I won’t say his swing, because he didn’t own it yet; that would take months of practice. But if he choked up and watched the ball come in on him like we practised, he could push the ball up the right side between second and first. It was limited but effective. The last ten pitches I lobbed him, at least four would have been base hits.

Hall of Fame average, right?

But nowhere to be seen that first time up. He watched two good pitches come right in for strikes, the bat on his shoulder, then swung stiffly at an eye-high pitch for strike three.

He did no better in the fourth or fifth. Not the end of the world: each time up the bases were empty. No runners for him to strand. But he was leaving me wondering why we'd worked so hard last night, given all that blood, if he wasn't going to do what I'd showed him.

Camp softball games went seven innings. When Sammy came up in the seventh, there was an actual rally for him to kill. We were down a run but had men on first and third, one out. I was the runner on third after a lead-off double.

He came to the plate and squared up to the plate with the bat on his shoulder. His knees weren't bent like they should have been. He looked stiff as a flamingo. Luckily the first pitch was inside for a ball, so his inaction did no harm. But the second was a strike and he watched that too. I clapped my hands and yelled, "*Come on, Sammy!*" These were underhand lobs, not country fastballs. They weren't that hard to hit. Another came in for a strike, maybe inside but the ump called it anyway. Sammy's bat stayed inert and silent.

It was only when he had two strikes on him that he made eye contact with me and raised the corners of his lips in the slightest grin. He bent his knees, shortened his grip on the bat and shifted his weight back and forth. With two outs and two strikes I got ready to run, wishing for a wild pitch or hit batter, even though neither ever happened in lob ball.

I can still see that last pitch coming in fat as a harvest moon, Sammy waiting, his front foot shifting toward first base and the bat moving off his shoulder late. As I toe the bag at third I see his head staying down and the sweet part of the red metal bat moving across the plate, meeting the ball, lashing it up the right side just as we'd planned. Better. It doesn't even hit the ground. It's a true line drive, a frozen rope—both us runners take off—and it goes straight into the first baseman's glove. He makes sure he has it, then steps on first to double off the runner there.

Ball game over. In a flash of leather.

Colour war over. White fireworks will dazzle the sky tonight.

It was all over so fast, it took me a minute to process what Sammy had done. He had played the other team all game, coming up in meaningless situations and letting them think he still had nothing going. Then with two strikes, all the pressure on, he had delivered. He'd hit what should have been the game-winner. I started clapping my hands and chanting Sam-my, Sam-my, until the others joined in and everyone high-fived him, even the counsellors, all of us chanting his name. By the end of the night, I had them all calling him Slammin' Sammy and it stuck through the end of the summer.

That was the last time I had seen him, probably the last time I'd heard his name until yesterday, when his grandfather had called to say he was dead. Murdered. Beaten to death in Montreal three weeks ago. A Star of David carved in his chest.