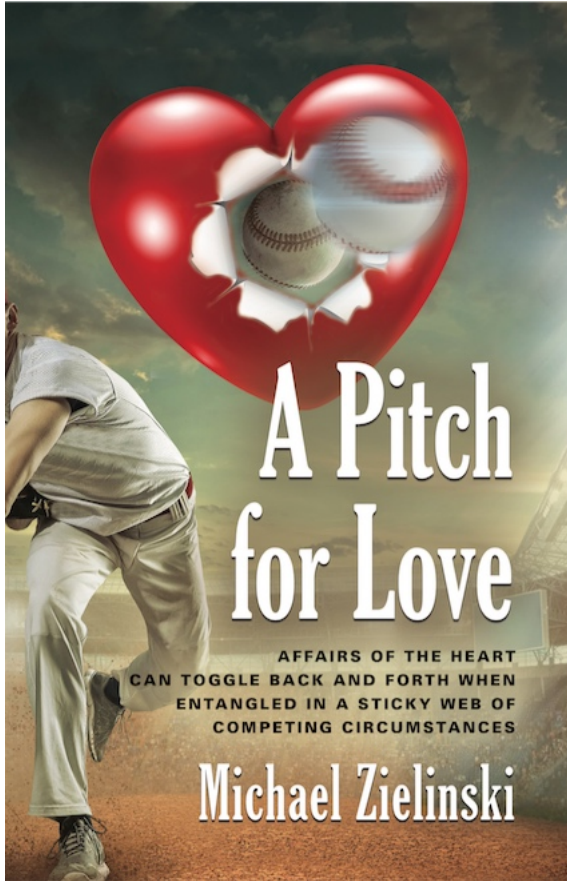




A Pitch for Love

**AFFAIRS OF THE HEART
CAN TOGGLE BACK AND FORTH WHEN
ENTANGLED IN A STICKY WEB OF
COMPETING CIRCUMSTANCES**

Michael Zielinski



Affairs of the heart can toggle back and forth when entangled in a sticky web of competing and compelling circumstances.

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Chapter One

Matt Meredith sat at his desk, staring at his PC screen. The words on his screen stared back at him. He didn't like what he saw. There was no way of knowing, of course, what those words -- his words -- thought of him. But had they been words of the female gender, they would have thought quite well of him. Thoughts spiced with hot sauce.

Matt Meredith was a catch for any woman. The star columnist for the *Braxton Bugle*, a medium-sized Pennsylvania newspaper in a city 70 miles west of Philadelphia, Meredith was as appealing as his prose. A writer who could turn a phrase with a delicious blend of passion, sensitivity, imagery and humor, he could turn heads just by walking into a room. He was 35 years old and his handsome face could pass for 25. He had flowing blond locks and, at 6-2 and an athletic, long-legged 180 pounds, he was broad at the shoulders and narrow at the waist. Although he was a chiseled block of manhood, perhaps his best physical attribute was his smile, which was brighter than fireworks in a catacomb. And with his charismatic personality and playful nature, he gave his smile more frequent workouts than he did his sculpted pecs and biceps.

However, Matt Meredith wasn't smiling at the moment. He was trying to finish this particular column with a poignant flourish, and the words, which usually gushed from his fertile mind and facile fingertips, suddenly had dried up. He wrote four columns a week on anything and everything and was so prolific he always had six columns in the can just in case the muse suddenly left him. He never wanted to miss a deadline and he never had. And when the muse did leave him, as it did all writers, it never left for long. All he had to do was narrow

his focus, squeeze out all distractions, and words popped from his brain to the screen. But on this particular day, he was having trouble focusing. After all, this was a big day in his life. He was coaching his first Little League practice, and he found his mind wandering from his column on a woman's valiant fight with breast cancer to what baseball fundamentals he should expose his 10- to 12-year-olds to on the first day.

Matt loved kids and related to them, considering that he, in many ways, had never grown up himself. A former star pitcher and quarterback at Braxton High School and Temple University, he figured coaching Little League would be a perfect way for him to have some fun and teach kids how to play ball. And since he was a bachelor and had no children of his own, he thought it would fill a void in his life.

Not that it was a gaping void, mind you. Matt's life was way too full to have time for deep voids. As the star columnist for the *Bugle*, he was quite the man about town. He attended all sorts of functions and dinners. Plus, he also hosted his own weekly cable talk show. It spotlighted local issues and personalities and Comcast telecasted it throughout the Braxton and Miller County area. Work, however, wasn't the only thing that kept Matt busy. He played plenty of basketball and golf, jogged daily and lifted weights every other day. Matt had a hyperactive social life. He frequently was seen in area restaurants and bars with a variety of attractive and charming women. He had had several serious relationships over the years but never had made the right connection. He didn't know why. The women he dated usually were upscale professionals who mixed intelligence and charm with their good looks. Now that he was 35, Matt was subtly hoping that he would meet that certain someone who would ignite the cockles of his heart. In the meantime, he was going with the flow of having fun and basking in his

virility. And coaching Little League figured to be fun, if the parents weren't too psycho on him. Because as Matt and everybody who had ever played organized youth sports knew, some parents totally lose perspective when it comes to their children and athletics. Matt secretly was hoping that all his players were orphans.

But for now, Matt decided to get his game face on. And getting his game face on meant finishing his column and filing it so he could clear the decks in his mind and move onto baseball practice. Like a true journalist, Matt craved closure when it came to assignments. Deadlines defined his psyche. So, he gave himself a quick pep talk: Lose the baseball mindset for now and close the show on his column. Through sheer will, he re-channeled his thoughts on the breast cancer survivor and successfully generated the verbiage that he knew would pluck the heartstrings of his readers. That burst of creative energy had refreshed his spirits. Indeed, Matt often thought that -- next to sex -- creative writing was the most satisfying element of his life. And God knows, there were times when he felt that writing a particularly good column was even better than sex. He smiled as sent his column to his editor. It was time to play ball.

It was a beautiful late spring afternoon, just perfect for baseball. As Matt drove up to the field where his team, the Sorbonne Township Cubs, would practice, he noticed that several kids and their parents already were on the scene. When he exited his car and walked to his small trunk to retrieve some baseball bats and balls he had somehow found room for in there, he could feel the eyes of the kids and their parents checking him out. Being a Little League coach can make one a marked man. His players (and their parents) don't want their dreams of major league stardom hijacked at the start by some dolt of a coach. They look upon Little League

as the first depot on a long glory ride to the big leagues, and they don't want their first coach to be blind to their astonishing abilities. After all, nobody wants their hopes derailed before the engine even leaves the station. After that first practice, Matt thought it highly unlikely that any of his young charges would likely wind up in the Baseball Hall of Fame. But he had a lot of fun working with 18 boys ranging in age from 10 to 12. He put the boys through infield fielding drills to see if they could catch a ground ball without risking their teeth. He hit fly balls to them in the outfield to see if they could catch a pop fly without risking life, limb and cranium. And he pitched batting practice to them to see if, by sheer coincidence, they could put a bat on a ball every now and then. Generally, he was encouraged. And the workout had infused him with an adrenaline rush of youthful vitality.

However, there was a moment when Matt didn't feel as bouncy and breezy as a young calf during the practice. Mikey Lane had a ground ball take a bad hop and hit him in the chin, drawing blood.

"Are you all right, son?" Matt yelled as he sprinted to the boy at third base.

Mikey was trying to hold back his tears, but he didn't succeed.

"I'll be OK, Coach," the boy sniffled, dabbing at the blood on his chin.

"You'll be fine, a tough guy like you," Matt said, encouragingly.

"He'll be fine, Coach," cooed his mother, who had appeared suddenly at Matt's shoulder as if she were an apparition.

Natalie Lane did dab some of her son's blood with a Kleenex, but she seemed to be focusing on Matt, not Mikey. Matt certainly focused on Natalie once he got a glimpse of

her because she definitely was worth the sacrifice of making eye contact. A saucy, sexy divorcee in her early 30s, Natalie Lane had lots of brown curls and enough curves to make for a breathtaking road course. She was flashy and she was brassy. She wasn't exactly Matt's type, but any man with a pulse certainly would give her a good, hard look. She, meanwhile, was giving Matt a good, hard look. Considering the context of their meeting, with her son kneeling in front of them, bleeding from the chin, Matt thought her smoky look was a bit inappropriate and uncomfortable. Plus, he knew the other parents were watching them and probably wondering why they weren't tending to her son.

"Come on, Mikey, let Mom clean you up," Matt quickly interjected. "If you're OK, you can field another ground ball. Nothing like getting back on the horse right away."

The analogy escaped young Mikey, who stood and allowed his mother to wipe away some more blood. While Natalie was looking to see if her son needed stitches, she couldn't resist picking up on Matt's analogy.

"You'll be good as new, Mikey," she purred. "No stitches needed. And there's nothing like getting right back in the saddle. Right, coach?"

She shot Matt a provocative glance. Natalie certainly had swung for the fences in letting her son's coach know that she was hoping to reach home with him.

As Natalie and her son walked off the field, a flustered Matt decided to get back to the business of baseball. He had heard that Little League parents could be a problem, but he hadn't anticipated having a Little League mother like Natalie Lane to deal with. But thoughts of her vanished as he started pitching another round of batting practice. He wanted to vary his drills during practice because boys at that age have

notoriously short attention spans. And this time, some of the kids were stinging the ball during batting practice.

Especially Timmy Baxter. He already had impressed Matt with his athleticism, reflexes, range, speed and hand-eye coordination while catching grounders and fly balls. Plus, the kid had good size and a strong, accurate arm. He was born to play shortstop, Matt noted. And now Timmy Baxter was crushing line drives. He had excellent bat control, a fluid swing and power. When that first practice ended, Matt knew he had made the right decision to coach this team.

Especially when he got a glimpse of Timmy Baxter's mother and saw that she wasn't wearing a wedding ring. Matt thought she was the most wholesome-looking/sexiest-looking woman — an enticing blend of vice and virtue with her killer body and sweet face -- he had ever seen. He found her to be utterly striking and captivating, juicier than a summer peach, an ideal lady to bed and wed.

“Damn, getting involved with one of my players' mothers probably isn't too smart,” Matt said to himself. “But look at her. Look at the smile, that face, that body. I've got to get to know her.”

Chapter Two

Robbyn Baxter was having a bad day. And it started before she even woke up. A young widow, who had closed her mind and heart to even the possibility of another relationship, dreamt she found a new love. A dream that left her conflicted, horny and totally freaked out when she awoke.

Still disturbed and distracted by her dream, her normally agreeable disposition was now being severely tested by Chad, a cranky and temperamental designer she worked with at Missonis Advertising.

Chad was a repressed homosexual trapped in a marriage with an overbearing woman who somehow bore him a daughter and then proceeded to drain his bank account on a seemingly daily basis. His chronic unhappiness made him particularly irritable. And Robbyn's pleasant demeanor at times rubbed him as raw as the wind swirling around Braxton's landmark fire tower high above the city on Mount Park.

"Too damn many words in this copy," Chad spouted, with a pout. "Robbyn, how many times do we go through this? Keep your copy tight. Excess verbiage clashes with my visual concepts."

Chad was overstating the case. Robbyn knew perfectly well that a copywriter shouldn't be verbose. And she really wasn't. But to Chad, any print ad with more than three words had two words too many. But Robbyn was less confrontational than the other two copywriters in the office. Therefore, she bore the brunt of his attitude.

Still, on rare occasions, Robbyn flexed some of the steel in her spine. When pressed, she could be ballsy.

“I don’t want to hear it,” she fired back at Chad. “There aren’t too many words. This ad needs some explanation. I’m not cutting the copy. Make it work!”

Chad threw a short, hissy fit and angrily retreated. Robbyn didn’t care. She knew that he would get over it. And she had grown weary of trying not to provoke him.

Life experiences had put some sour moments into her sweet temperament. The sweet and sour combined to give her an inner strength she wouldn’t have thought possible before “it” happened.

The “it” in Robbyn’s life was the car accident that claimed the life of her husband four years earlier. Her husband’s car hit a piece of black ice while driving to work early one morning. He lost control of the car and spun off the East Shore bypass. His car crashed into a tree, killing him instantly. The accident left Robbyn, a petite but buxom, beautiful brunette with brown doe eyes, a widow at 30 years of age. And it left her with two adorable boys, Timmy, then 8 years old, and Billy, then 6. Bob Baxter’s death had devastated Robbyn. They had an ideal marriage, one spiked with ample amounts of playfulness, romance and passion. The best part of their relationship was that they were the best of friends. Bob had a marvelous sense of humor and loved to make Robbyn laugh. Robbyn, in turn, had a playful side that Bob adored. Having children only enhanced their relationship. They loved being parents. They doted on their boys without spoiling them -- a tricky balancing act few parents achieve.

After her husband’s death, Robbyn was nearly frozen in bitterness. She would have been almost paralyzed with grief had she not borne the heavy responsibility of being a single parent. Gradually, her bitterness thawed, but the massive void in heart still gave her chest pains occasionally. There were

times deep in the night when she found it difficult to sleep, to close her eyes without tears trickling from them. And when she did close her eyes, images of Bob would flicker on the backs of her eyelids. In her waking hours, she found plenty of emotional support and comfort in her boys. She tried to be both a mother and a father to her sons, and having been a high school athlete herself, she found it fun and bonding to “jock it up” with them. Every now and then, she had a fleeting thought about what it might be like to remarry and provide her sons with a role model. But such thoughts were transient and focused merely on the beneficial aspects such a relationship would have on her boys.

As for herself, she was not ready to have a relationship with any man. She dearly loved her husband and didn’t think anyone could ever replace him. In fact, she never gave it much thought, as if even thinking about it would be an act of betrayal to her late husband’s memory. Her striking looks and infectious smile had made her the target of numerous male advances in the last four years, but her total lack of interest had quickly snuffed any chance of a future alliance.

Robbyn hadn’t worked after she had the boys ... until she became a widow. She had worked as an advertising copywriter before her first child but had no need to work thereafter. Her husband had been a sporting goods buyer for Benton’s, a department store chain based in Braxton, and she had no economic incentive to work. After his death, even though he had provided reasonably well for his family, she found it necessary to work. Except for her hectic schedule as a single parent, she enjoyed working. She loved being creative, turning a phrase just a certain way to capture the message she was trying to convey in an ad. She specialized in copy that was creative as well as poignant.

When she got immersed in writing ads, the rest of the world didn't exist. Her workdays often were a blur of creative energy, leaving her energized, not drained, when the business day ended and the domestic night began.

She was determined to be there for her boys, so she always made sure she was there to ferry them to practice and to their social events. She made it a point to spend quality time with them each evening. They had entertaining, delightful dinners talking about sports, school, nonsense, even their dad.

"Do you think Dad watches us from heaven?" young Billy had asked one night.

"Of course, he does," replied Robbyn, smiling gently.

Timmy, quickly putting his fork down on the table even though it still had a piece of roast beef dangling from it, jumped right into the conversation.

"That's good, when I'm being good," he said. "But I don't want him seeing me when I'm bad."

"Well, just don't misbehave then," said Robbyn, punctuating her words with a chuckle.

"Like that's gonna happen," responded Timmy.

"You're a good kid, Mr. Macho," said Robbyn.

"He's mean to me!" chirped Billy.

"That's because you're a nerd!" snapped Timmy.

"See, I told you he was bad," counter-punched Billy.

"OK, boys, time for homework," interrupted Robbyn, once again playing the role of referee.

"Stupid homework," complained Timmy. "If it hadn't rained tonight, we'd be at baseball practice."

"You really love baseball, don't you?" asked Robbyn.

"Especially this year," Timmy said, excitedly. "Coach Matt is cool. He's so nice and he's fun, too. He told us he

pitched for Temple University and had a tryout with the Phillies. Did you know that, Mom?”

“No, I didn’t,” said Robbyn. “That’s nice. But I do know that he writes a column for the *Braxton Bugle*. He’s a pretty good writer.”

“He writes about sports?” Timmy asked.

“No, he writes about other things,” said Robbyn.

“Boring things,” said Billy, laughing.

“Well, he’s not boring,” Timmy said. “He’s fun. And he knows baseball. He told me I’m gonna be the shortstop and maybe pitch a little.”

“That’s great,” said Robbyn.

The kids then were off, grudgingly, to do their homework. Robbyn, while cleaning up the dishes, wondered why Timmy seemed so enthusiastic about his coach. He rarely got that excited about a coach. It made her happy that he was looking up to a male figure. But as for any thoughts she may have had about Matt, well, she had none that involved any hint of romance. She had noticed that he was handsome, and he had the shredded musculature that was eye candy to women, but they were merely casual, detached observations. Men, as such, even after the dream that had made her temporarily horny, were not even on her radar screen. The only men she cared about were her boys. And her late husband. To Robbyn, Bob Baxter still was her husband, late or not. To her, the phrase “until death do us part” held no meaning. In her heart, Bob Baxter was very much alive -- a vibrant presence she had internalized seemingly forever. And to Robbyn, there were only two categories of men -- spouse and non-spouse.

Chapter Three

It had been quite a day for Matt on this particular Wednesday. His column that morning in the *Braxton Bugle* had been a major hit with his readers, judging by the amount of favorable emails and voicemails he had received. He obviously had struck a nerve. His column spoofed Braxton mayor Jimbo Cummings, a retired carpenter who someone had gotten elected and then proceeded to seemingly turn everything he touched into splinters. Jimbo was a likeable old coot, but extremely impulsive and in over his head. Plus, he took advice from nobody. Consequently, his administration was chaotic. His feuds with City Council bordered on the juvenile. Mayor Jimbo made for perfect column material for a talented pundit like Matt, but Cummings wasn't doing anything for a city riddled by drugs, crime and poverty. At least the mayor was a good sport. The old fool agreed to be a guest on Matt's cable television show that night even after having read Matt's morning column.

Mayor Jimbo, a portly bear of a man who was three inches taller than Matt at 6-5, sat rumped in his director's chair on the set of Matt's TV show. He was in good humor despite Matt's column that morning.

"Matt, what really upset me about your column was you wrote I had been a lousy carpenter, too," Cummings said, jocularly. "Well, that's just not true, Matthew. Yep, I may not have been perfect. May have a cut a few pieces of lumber a tad crooked. But I know only one carpenter who was perfect, and they crucified him. Like that carpenter, I've made a career change, trying to help my fellow man. And now my enemies are trying to crucify me."

“I’m not trying to crucify you, Jimbo,” Matt said, cracking a smile.

“The hell you aren’t,” barked the mayor. “You’re a regular Pontius Pilate. But you’re not tough enough to hammer nails into my hands and feet and hang me on a cross. Not a soft ladies’ man like you!”

Mayor Jimbo Cummings had a smile on his face so huge it might have been bigger than one of his crumbling Braxton Parking Authority garages. Matt’s column had alleged that the mayor’s petty politics were ruining the management of the downtown parking garage complex.

The mayor’s jab may have flustered another man. But not Matt. He was smooth, glib and sure of himself. So, he adroitly counter-punched.

“Your Honor, I wouldn’t want to be a hard man because hard men are hard-headed,” Matt said calmly. “And I’m not even dating anyone at the moment because I’ve been too busy checking into your mistakes. The least you could do would be to set me up with one of your cute secretaries.”

Perhaps the mayor and Matt could start their own comedy team. After all, the days of Abbott and Costello, Martin and Lewis, Gleason and Carney, Rowan and Martin, and the Smothers Brothers were long gone.

“Yeah, right,” bellowed Jimbo. “Wouldn’t you just love that! Get one of my honeys in the sack and grill ‘em for the dirt on me. Pillow talk sinks ships!”

Matt, chuckling with just the right pitch and volume, corrected the mayor: “Loose lips sink ships, your honor, not pillow talk. Unless, of course, you were chummier with your fellow sailors than we thought. Are you giving me and our viewers an exclusive about your days in the Navy?”

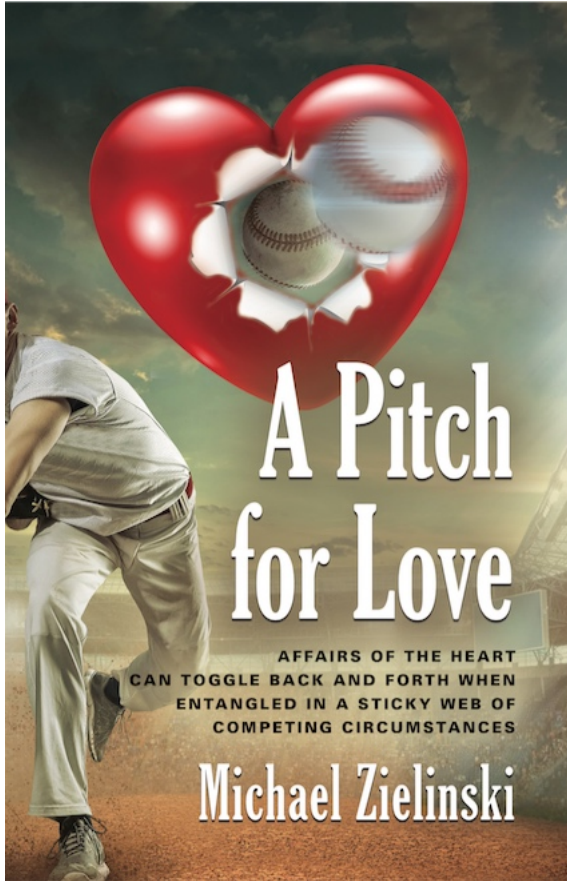
The mayor screamed an obscene response, which got on the air. The budget on Matt's cable show didn't include having a seven-second delay.

The mayor then jumped out of his chair and stomped off the set. But not before he tripped over his chair and almost stumbled to the floor.

"I could point out that the mayor evidently is even clumsier than his politics," Matt said to his viewing audience. "But that would be a cheap shot, now wouldn't it?"

After the show, Matt's director, Ellen Stephens, told him that the closing sequence with the mayor had been the best two minutes of live television in the history of Miller County. And the town had had a long list of live cable talk shows for over 40 years.

Robbyn, at Timmy's insistence, had watched Matt's TV show that night with her two boys. Of course, the boys had no interest in city politics. Actually, neither did Robbyn. But Timmy wanted to see his TV star/coach on the air. The boys and Robbyn had been, for the most part, bored with the show. But she did notice that Matt did have a certain on-air charisma. And when they watched his closing confrontation with the mayor, the boys howled with laughter, although some of the sexual references went over their heads. Robbyn thought it was funny as well and was very impressed with how Matt handled the buffoon who was mayor. But for some strange reason, she found it somewhat disconcerting that the mayor had called Matt a ladies' man. If that was true, she wondered whether Matt Meredith was a proper role model for Timmy and Billy. After all, she didn't want her boys looking up to some notorious womanizer. Still, at the same time, she could tell why many women would find Matt's looks and charm to be electrifying attractive.



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