

CHAPTER 1



It is such a unique sound, the crunch of gravel under tires. That's the sound Mike Keller heard, and he didn't like it much.

It wouldn't have been so bad except that it was his driveway. His new driveway. The driveway to the house he wished he wasn't moving into. Born and raised in Chicago, he had no desire to live in Texas—but here he was, the newest resident of East Creek, Texas, about an hour outside of Dallas. To him, it might as well have been an hour out of Podunk.

What in the world am I doing here? he thought as he and his son Billy drove down the short driveway to the three-bedroom rambler he'd rented sight unseen. The one thing he did like about the house was that it was cheap, cheap, cheap. Especially compared to what housing cost in Chicago.

As the car rolled to a stop, Mike and Billy took in the scene. The paint was chipping, and one of

the window screens was falling out. The screen door on the front entrance was swinging back and forth in the wind. The front yard didn't have a shred of green left in the grass. *Yep, this is Texas in August, all right.*

"Well son, here we are."

"Yep. . . . Here we are."

Billy's resignation was obvious. The kid had been no more pleased than you could expect about being pulled away from his friends in high school, but he'd been a good sport about it, sticking by his choice to live with his father when his parents split up. Mike and Billy had been baching it for the last year or so, ever since Mike's wife, Kristy, had announced that she wanted a separation.

Maybe the distance will do us all some good, Mike thought. He and Kristy had been trying for a reconciliation but talking different languages, and Mike's job at Markston Machine Corporation had been going poorly on top of it. The stress had been so bad, anything might be an improvement. Mike opened the car door and stood up, feeling like he'd stepped into an oven. "Let's leave the stuff in the car for now, son, and get the lay of the land in the

house first.” The movers would be there the next day, but Mike and Billy had brought down a carload of things to make the place barely habitable.

“Okay,” Billy replied.

They hurried up the cracked walkway. Mike stuck the key in and opened the door. “Our new domain,” he said.

It was musty inside. Very hot. Cobwebs in the corners. They tried the window air conditioner, but it just sputtered, making about twice as much noise as cold air.

“I’ll open some windows,” Billy said. “It’s worse in here than outside.”

“Good idea.” *I’ll have to buy an air conditioner*, Mike thought. *Or three.*

The two of them just stood there in the middle of the empty living room, dripping sweat. “I know this is tough, son,” Mike said as he pulled Billy into a hug. “We’ll make it, though. Everything happens for a reason, and we just have to figure out what the lesson is here.”

“I know.”

“You know, there is an old quote I like. When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. Let’s be ready for what we are supposed to learn here.”

“What do you suppose it is, Dad?”

“I have no idea, son, no idea whatsoever.”
Mike was feeling as lost as he ever had. Wondering how to save his marriage, how to recoup his failing career, how to be what he had always hoped he would be.

It had been a month since Tom Markston, the third-generation CEO of Markston Machine, had called Mike into his office. The conversation was a blur. Mike figured out quickly it wasn't good and only caught bits and pieces of it:

Things aren't working out here . . .

We thought you would be better prepared . . .

The fast-track option to leadership isn't going to happen here . . .

We think you need to relearn a few things . . .

You will be reassigned to the plant in . . . East Creek, Texas. . . .

Next thing they knew, Mike and Billy were in Texas. Mike had been demoted to the East Creek plant. It had been in the company for forty years, doing a lot of machine work that got distributed throughout the country. It was a small but integral part of the overall mission of MMC, but Mike knew

being sent down to take over the plant was a demotion nonetheless.

The plant had about twelve hundred workers, making it a big fish in a town of fifteen thousand. But as a VP in Chicago, Mike had had more than four thousand people under him. Tom Markston had told Mike that the top team thought he needed to learn to become a better leader, so they were sending him to learn from the twelve hundred folks in East Creek that would now call him “Boss.”

Mike thought it would have been a better idea to send him to an executive leadership program at Wharton or someplace else, but Tom said what he needed was hands-on work. He’d been pushed ahead too quickly, and now he needed to go backward before he could go forward again.

And that’s how he and Billy ended up that summer, roasting in East Creek, Texas.

