

A Theory of Relativity

by Jacquelyn Mitchard

Chapter One Excerpt

They died instantly.

Or close enough.

Gordon, of course, knew that "instantly," in this context, didn't mean what it seemed to suggest: Several minutes would have passed inside the car after the impact, while the final tick and swoosh of Ray's and Georgia's heart-sent blood swept a pointless circuit, while muscles contracted loyally at the behest of a last volley of neurological commands. But there would have been no awareness, or only a few twilight seconds -- and no memory.

Most of the others in Tall Trees, the McKenna family and their friends, didn't know as much about the biology involved or care to. Small town people, they were accustomed to having something to be grateful for, even death no more physically complex than a power failure. It seemed to many a source of comfort. And as the months unfurled, comfort of any sort was in short supply.

Even Gordon had to admit he was relieved. Couldn't it have been worse, much, much worse?

It could have been. This, Gordon decided, in those few breathless, shocky moments as he prepared to leave his school classroom and drive to the scene of the accident at Lost Tribe Creek, would be his mantra. He would not yowl and quake at this abrupt conclusion to the year of living catastrophically. He would not let himself come unglued. Dread tapped at his gut, like an unwelcome salesman tapping insistently at the window -- *Your sister is dead; your sister really is dead!* But Gordon breathed in and out, spoke to himself of focus.

He would be the one who remained analytical. Looking at the facts straight on was both his nature and his calling. He could do that best of anyone in his family. It would be the way he would protect himself and his parents.

He was, of course, frightened. All the signs. The trembling legs. The fluttering pulse. It had begun the moment he heard Sheriff Larsen's voice.

"Gordon," said the sheriff, "what are you doing, son?"

What was he *doing*?

An old friend of his father's calling him in the middle of a weekday, at school, though by rights he should not even have been there, the term having ended for summer break two weeks earlier, asking him what he was doing? Something was up,

something bad; he could not imagine what; everything bad had already happened.

Gordon felt a burning the size of a pinprick deep in his abdomen.

"I'm cleaning, um, my classroom," he'd answered finally, uneasily. "Throwing out the moldy agar dishes. Reading all the love letters the kids left in the lab trays. Science teacher fun."

"Good," Sheriff Larsen said. "Good." His voice had always reminded Gordon of Ronald Reagan's. "So...so, you alone there?"

Gordon had been alone and relishing the solitude. The days when Georgia went to the University of Minnesota for her chemotherapy were the only times the McKennas felt they had permission to do ordinary tasks -- get haircuts, return library books -- things that felt shameful and selfish when Georgia was home and miserable. He had almost not answered the phone. For it would surely have been his mother with another bulletin about the afternoon's accomplishments of his year-old niece, Keefer: -- She'd held her own spoon! She'd said "Moo!" Gordon loved Keefer and thought her exceedingly bright, but this was becoming like *CNN Headline News*.

"What's up?" he'd asked Dale Larsen.

And as the older man spoke -- an accident, a very bad accident, no survivors, should he cruise by there and pick Gordon up -- the level of shock built until Gordon's chest seemed to have room to contain his heart or his lungs, but not both. This was normal, was probably a kind of hypotensive shock. Fear, he reminded himself, was, like anything else, only a thought. Hadn't he mastered that a year ago, when they'd learned that Georgia, Gordon's only sister, just twenty-six years old, a triumphant wife and exultant new mother, had cancer, stage four, Do-Not-Pass-Go cancer? Hadn't he watched her suffer an endless year of days, mourned and mopped and propped and wished for her release and flogged himself for the wishing?

It was over. She had been released.

And Ray, Georgia's husband, Gordon's longtime friend, his sweet-souled frat buddy from Jupiter, Florida, a lumbering athlete with a physicist's brain and the heart of a child.... Ray was dead, too. Gordon had to recalibrate. Ray had told Gordon more than once during the illness, *Bo, I can't live without her*. Gordon had sensed it had been more than just a manner of speaking. So perhaps Ray had felt gratitude, too, in the last conscious instant of his life. The mind was capable of firing off dozens of impressions in fractions of seconds.

And so it had proved with his own mind. Gordon decided he would not call his mother. He would give her these few last moments of innocent play with Keefer. Nor would he call his Aunt Nora. She was as brave as a bear, but for all her homespun daffiness Gordon could never quite believe that the same twentieth century that had produced his own parents had also produced Aunt Nora. Nora had told Gordon not long ago she didn't need to know all the whys and wherefores, that she would ask Georgia about it someday, in heaven.

But heaven, Gordon thought, as he carefully parked his car a prudent distance up on the dry shoulder of the road, had been only a concept when Nora made that statement. Now, that kingdom had come. Nora would be shattered.

It would be he, he realized, at twenty-four the youngest but one of his cousins, who would have to provide the strong shoulder, the steadying hand.

But everything he saw looked odd, looked unsettling.

For everything looked like any other day...