

Chapter 1

Greg Naylor was pitching balls to his buddy. Tommy Wilkins was at bat. Twilight was quickly turning into darkness. Tommy could barely see the ball. But Greg tried to practice his pitching every chance he got.

Greg had graduated from Evergreen High School four years ago. Now he worked as an electrician for a local contractor. He made good money. It was a decent job. But he had never completely given up on his dream of playing professional baseball. He fantasized about open tryouts. Surely he'd be offered a contract once everyone saw his talent.

“You’re nuts, dude,” Tommy said, laughing. “Baseball players today get picked young. They’re right out of high school or

college. There are so many talented players. A latecomer like you doesn't stand a chance!"

Greg laughed. "You don't know what you're talking about. I'll be making megabucks in the majors. And you're going to need a lot of mayo to help you eat your words!" Greg wasn't bitter about missing out on the baseball draft. An ankle injury had sidelined him during his senior year. He had led the Evergreen Raiders to two championships before the injury.

Greg was twenty-two now. He thought he still had a fair chance to join a farm club. There he could prove he had the right stuff. He could still make his way to the majors. His high school coach said he had great hand-eye coordination.

"Just watch my smoke. I'm not over-the-hill yet, dude," Greg said.

"Maybe not, but you can see the hill," Tommy teased.

Just then Greg noticed a man standing

at the fence. The man watched him pitch. Then Greg made eye contact with the stranger. The man turned away and got into a car parked nearby.

“Hey, Tommy, know what’s weird? See that guy in that classic car? I’ve seen him watching me before. Lots of times when I’m practicing. The guy stands over there and looks through the fence. Does he look like somebody you know? He looks familiar to me. But I can’t place him,” Greg said.

“Yeah? Probably remembering the good old days when he used to play ball,” Tommy said. “Maybe he just likes baseball.”

“Maybe. But it makes me feel weird. The dude is just standing there staring at me,” Greg said. He shook his head. The boys started toward the apartment complex where they both lived. Tommy had left home. He now lived with one of his friends. But Greg still lived at home with his parents and two younger brothers.

“Who do you think that guy is?” Tommy asked as they walked.

“You got me,” Greg said. “Who knows? Maybe he’s a baseball scout. He heard about how good I was at Evergreen. He’s probably wondering if I still have the arm.”

Tommy punched him playfully. “Dream on, dude, dream on,” he said.

It was crowded in Greg’s apartment. But he saved money living at home with his family. His girlfriend, Julie Ponce, was finishing a cosmetology course. The two planned to get married. Then they would find a place of their own.

Greg turned in the direction of his apartment. Tommy headed down the path to his unit. They worked for the same employer. It was called Beverly Construction. He would see Tommy again in the morning.

“Hi, Greg,” Mom said when he came in the door. “Have a good day, honey?”

“Yeah, after work I got in some pitching practice. Tommy and I went down to the school’s field,” he said.

“Practice? What for?” his mom asked with a little frown. “That train pulled out of the station a long time ago.”

“Sometimes they have open tryouts, Mom. If you’re great, they send you to a farm club. Then you can prove you’re ready for the majors. Teams need midseason replacements. Maybe a club is hurting for solid pitching. Then it might call up a kid from the minors,” he said.

He really wasn’t counting on something like that happening, of course. But he figured he had a chance. It was a better shot than winning the lottery.

Grandma sat in her favorite chair, sewing. “Oh, don’t waste your time on dreams. You’re a good electrician. That’s where your future is. Do the best job you

can there. You'll always make a good living. It costs a lot to support a family these days. What this world needs is people who understand how to make practical things work," she said.

Greg glanced out the apartment window. He was surprised to see a car he recognized parked across the street. He could've sworn it was the same classic car that was parked at Evergreen High.

"Hey, Mom, some older guy's been watching me practice pitching. I think he's parked across the street right now," Greg said with excitement. "Maybe he's a baseball scout."

Mom joined Greg at the window. "Honey, I seriously doubt it. Baseball scouts don't hang around all day gawking at apartment complexes. If he was a scout, then he'd come pounding on the door. Look, he's driving away now. He's probably just some salesman taking a break."

“Yeah,” Greg said. But he couldn’t get past the feeling that he knew the guy. His square-shaped face looked familiar.

Later, Greg went to bed. But he still kept thinking about the man who had watched him pitch.

Then, around eleven, Greg sat up in bed. “Vic Hunter!” he said. “That’s the guy! It’s Vic Hunter!”

“Huh?” mumbled Layne. He was Greg’s sixteen-year-old brother. “Hey, I’m trying to get some sleep here, dude. What are you talking about?”

“The man who’s been watching me playing ball at school. The man who parked across the street. I finally figured out who it is. I knew I’d seen him before. The guy’s name is Vic Hunter. He broke into our house about ten years ago. Remember? Mom and you and Roy came home from the movies. And there he was, taking stuff from the dresser!” Greg exclaimed.

His voice was breathless with excitement. He knew the mysterious stranger's name.

Layne sat up in his bed. "You mean that burglar is back?" he cried.

"Yeah," Greg said. "You were just six then. Roy was about three. But I was twelve. I remember we ran from the house screaming. That was when the cops caught him. He was convicted of burglary. Seems like he was a real bad guy. He'd been breaking into houses all over town. As I remember, they sent him to prison for a long time. Now he's out. Oh my God, he's shadowing me!"

Greg settled his brother. Then he got out his cell phone. He searched online for images of Vic Hunter. But he didn't find anything recent. That made sense since the man had been in prison.