

# *Breaking Pitch*

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## *Chapter 1*

### The Error

Micah knew the throw from center field was hopeless even before he scooped up the dropped fly. The runner on third was steps from home, getting high-fives from his teammates while the Bulldogs' cut-off waited for Micah's throw. When he got it, he whipped around with the ball, saw the Cobras cheering, and sank to his knees.

"You got a hole in your glove?" the massive left-fielder shouted. "Go back to the country, farm boy!"

"I can't help it, Tommy! I lost the ball in the sun," Micah yelled back. He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists but couldn't change what had just happened. To hide his shame, he turned to walk back to the dugout.

But there was Tommy's twin, Peter. A little shorter and a lot meaner than his brother, Peter gave Micah a disgusted look and spat on the grass, inches from Micah's foot. "Did you get dropped on the head when you were a baby, or is your whole family stupid?" Peter snarled.

Micah looked toward home plate from his position in center field. The Cobras were still cheering as they danced around the player who had just scored the winning run.

Micah's team, the Bulldogs, had taken the lead earlier that inning. The game would have been over, and the Bulldogs would have won, if Micah had only caught the long fly ball. But he had missed it by inches. Tommy and Peter, who also played in the outfield, were jogging off toward the dugout now, still complaining angrily about Micah's game-losing error. Micah took off his worn old baseball glove and started after

them, wondering how many more angry insults he would have to listen to. He ran his first few steps, then began walking, his head bowed. At least his mother had been working and missed seeing him drop the fly ball.

Micah tried to get to his locker without being noticed, but it was impossible. Some of his Junior League teammates were still angry. He saw them, sitting on the wooden benches, shooting mean glances his way or turning their faces from him as they went to take their showers.

Only Darrell, the equipment manager, was his usual cheerful self. Darrell was a short, wiry kid with black-rimmed glasses that made him look smart. Unlike the other teenagers, Darrell wasn't there to play. His goal was to own a major league baseball team.

Micah wasn't sure how Darrell could do that without winning the state lottery, but he liked Darrell a lot. Darrell was the

only kid who had gone out of his way to befriend Micah when his family had moved to town only a month before.

“The stats were against you, kid,” Darrell said, placing a consoling hand on his friend’s back. Micah was at least six inches taller than Darrell, but Darrell said “kid” like he was much older and wiser.

“The batter, Brock, was way overdue. He’s a power hitter, and he hadn’t really tagged one the last couple of games.”

“Brock sure tagged one this time,” Micah grumbled, sitting on the locker room bench. “I don’t need stats, Darrell. I just need to catch the ball when it counts.”

“You’re wasting your brain on him, Darrell.” It was Tommy, wearing just a towel, on his way to the showers.

“Yeah,” chimed in Peter. “He probably can’t count past ten without taking off his shoes.”

Peter pretended to count using his



toes, and Tommy laughed.

Micah leapt to his feet, his face red and his fists clenched. He took a step toward the twins.

Peter stopped in his tracks and faced Micah, ready for a fight. It wasn't going to be a fair one. The twins were heavily muscled, from using their private gym at home. Everything the twins owned was top of the line, from the wraparound sunglasses down to their expensive baseball cleats.

Micah was no weakling, but his strength came from years of working on a farm. He looked skinny next to Tommy and Peter.

Darrell stepped in and slapped Peter on the back, grinning. "Good one, Pete! Hey, did you ever hear the joke about ..."

But Tommy interrupted him, staring coldly at Micah. "I'll tell you what *isn't* a joke. You're going to get smoked if you keep messing up, country boy."

Peter pushed Darrell's hand away and turned toward his brother. "We don't want to get the stink of country on us, do we? Maybe we should pay someone to smoke him for us."

"Yeah!" Tommy laughed. "A hit man!"

## Chapter 2

### The Hit Man

“Why don’t both of you boys go take a shower and think about the hits *you* missed?”

It was a snarl, not a question, and it came from Coach Rogers, who frowned at the outfielders like he meant business.

The twins turned and hurried off to the showers without a word. “Those boys have short memories,” said Coach.

“And short tempers,” said Darrell.

“Don’t let them get to you, Micah. If either one of them had done anything but strike out in the sixth inning, we would have had another run. And we didn’t have such a good pitching game, either. If we had a bigger bullpen it would have made a big difference.”

Coach Rogers paused for a moment,

and then said quietly, "I sure wish you had picked up a pair of sunglasses like I suggested, Micah."

Darrell cleared his throat and caught Coach's eyes. Darrell pointed at his own pocket. Micah looked at Darrell painfully, then down at the floor, embarrassed. Darrell knew something Coach didn't. Micah's family had moved to the city because they had lost their farm to foreclosure after Micah's father died in an accident.

Coach Rogers nodded in sudden understanding: Micah obviously couldn't afford a new pair of high-end sunglasses for baseball. "Well, maybe I can take care of those sunglasses," Coach announced.

He cleared his throat and sat down on the bench. "Micah, you have a strong arm, and you hit pretty well, but not when you let this zero-confidence thing get to you. Show up here tomorrow afternoon. There are some things I want

to go over with you.”

Before Micah could work up the courage to ask what was so important that they had to go over it on a Saturday, Coach Rogers went into his office and shut the door. Micah raised an eyebrow at Darrell, who shrugged and walked away.

Micah killed time cleaning the dirt off his cleats, waiting until Tommy and Peter were gone before taking his shower. By the time he came back to the locker room, all of the other players had gone, too. Micah relaxed a little bit then. As he dressed, he watched through the big glass window of Coach’s office, where Darrell and Coach Rogers were going over the charts Darrell kept on each game. Coach kept shaking his head, and Darrell kept chattering away and pointing at the charts.

Without waiting for his friend, Micah slipped out the door and headed up a flight of steps to the street. He had lots

of patience from years of raising crops. He knew, somehow, that his team could still find a way to win the championship that seemed so important to everyone in Chambersburg. He took a deep breath, hoping people would forget about today's game. And what about his upcoming meeting with Coach? Oh, brother. Then he saw a shadow on the stairs. He stopped suddenly, and looked up into the glare of the afternoon sun.

There, at the top of the steps, was a broad-bodied, tough-looking man with grayish hair, looking down at him with deep furrows in his brow. "Want to talk to you about the game, kid," growled the man in a deep voice. "You got a minute?"

## Chapter 3

### The Pro

Micah just stood stock-still, scared to death, unable to say a word.

“Earl Stillwell,” said the big man, putting a huge hand out in Micah’s direction.

“It was just one game!” Micah squeaked, backing down the steps. “I swear I’ll do better next time!” He gulped. “I promise!”

The man at the top of the stairs frowned. “What do you think I am, boy, a hit man or something?”

Micah stood against a wall, looking for a way to escape.

Earl began to chuckle, then he began to laugh out loud. He was still laughing when Darrell came running up the steps.

“Hey, Earl, what’s up? Did I miss a

good joke?" Darrell asked.

Earl was chuckling now. He pointed to Micah and laughed.

"You know this guy?" Micah asked Darrell, relief flooding through his body.

"Sure," Darrell shrugged. "Earl used to play pro ball. He's probably the Bulldogs' biggest fan. Comes to every game he can." Darrell glanced down at his watch, then let out a whistle. "Wow, I'm late! See you, Micah! See you later, Earl!" With that, he was gone.

Now Micah started laughing. All the tension left him. He might have known there wasn't really a hit man. He was learning that Tommy and Peter were all talk and no action.

"Come with me, son," Earl said. "Let's talk some baseball."

Earl explained the situation as they left the ballpark. He had been watching Micah play. Micah's catching needed work, but he had a great arm. Earl wondered if Micah might do better at



another position than outfielder. “Ever try pitching?” Earl asked.

It was getting near sunset, and they were walking on the railroad tracks that split the small town of Chambersburg. Micah looked ahead to the intersection where Bascomb’s Hardware already displayed a “Closed” sign. In another couple of hours, his mother would be getting home from her job at the mobile-home factory that Tommy and Peter’s family owned. He knew she was working overtime today.

Micah was walking on the rail, trying not to lose his balance. “Well, I pitched in Little League back home.” He smiled briefly at the memory. “I almost pitched a perfect game one time, too! But since we’ve been here, I can’t seem to get control. I guess I just lost the touch.”

Earl looked down at the gravel between the railroad ties crunching beneath his feet and nodded thoughtfully.

“Control, huh? Listen,” he said. “I

played a little pro ball. Maybe I could work with you on your control. When do you have time?"

Micah looked up sharply. A former professional ballplayer wanted to teach him pitching? Wow! "I have some time right now," he announced. "Where can we practice?"

"I've got some baseball gear in my shed," Earl said. "We can do some throwing in my front yard. I don't live far from here—just up on the east side of the tracks." He pointed ahead.

"You're just across the train tracks from me!" Micah grinned. "Hey, Mr. Stillwell, let's go!"

Earl lived in a well-kept house with a covered porch, a garden to one side, and a big front yard shaded by an old tree. Earl also had a large and powerful dog—almost as big as a pony, Micah thought when the dog rushed out to greet them.

"Don't mind Bear," Earl said, scratching his huge dog behind the

ear. "Bullmastiffs look mean, but Bear's just an old softy."

Micah had never seen such a big dog before. He thought Earl was a lot like Bear: He looked tough and mean, but he was great once you got to know him.

Earl went into a toolshed in a corner of the yard and came out with a home plate, which he set up in the front yard. He went inside the house, then returned with a catcher's mitt and a bag of old baseballs. After Earl marked off the proper throwing distance with a wooden stake, he stood at home plate and motioned for Micah to start pitching.

Micah threw, all right. Some of his pitches were very fast, fast enough to cause a loud smack when they hit Earl's glove, but many of them were wide of the plate. Bear would retrieve any balls that Earl didn't catch and seemed never to tire of helping out.

"Relax, kid!" Earl kept yelling.

Micah kept trying to relax, but his

arm just seemed to get tighter. Then Earl began telling country jokes, like the one about the three-legged hog who saved the farmer's life. Micah started to laugh, but Earl wouldn't let him stop throwing. It seemed the more Micah laughed, the better his pitching got. Pretty soon, he was getting almost every pitch over the plate.