



The Perfect Game

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Category: Romance

Description: Hannah Preston was on mission impossible, getting away from Mark Little, pity what they share, Hannah makes a run for it. Does she make it away from Mark? And how far does she get before her feelings for Steven get in the way?

Total Pages (Source): 51

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

One

Serena

My eyelids lowered for the tenth time as I tried to concentrate on Mr. Kendall's lecture. It would be easy to say this was the first time I'd been ready for a nap while listening to his monotone voice, but that would be a lie. He could make the most exciting story sound like it was just another day at the park.

The scent of garbage sent my gag reflex into motion, and my eyes opened to find a sneaker held in front of my nose. I swatted it away, doing my best to keep from throwing up. Once I was under control, I turned to the kid next to me, Colt Buttars. What a jerk.

"Are you serious right now? Those are disgusting," I whispered as harshly as I could, sneaking a glance toward the front to see if Mr. Kendall noticed. Nope, still focused on his notes.

Even with the shoe away from my face, it was as if the stench had formed its own cloud and was stuck there. I leaned away from Colt and did my best to wave away the air in front of me. It was all I could do to control my breathing as I kept my bagel down. Why were guys so gross?

It didn't help that I had one of the most sensitive noses known to man. Well, that was an exaggeration. More sensitive than anyone I'd ever met.

"Do you have something to add to the discussion, Miss Gates?" Mr. Kendall asked

from the front of the room.

I frowned, not sure what he meant, until I looked at my waving hand.

Shaking my head, I said, “No. Just trying to get some air in here.” I shot Colt a look, grinding my teeth together. He was so immature. Just like James.

I rolled my eyes and sank down in the chair of my desk, swallowing to get rid of the ball that had formed in my throat at the thought of another jerk in my life. As much as I wanted to think I was different from every other girl at Rosemont High, or at least in the sophomore class, I’d been duped by a boy. I’d had a crush on James, a senior basketball player, since day one of the school year, and when he finally paid attention to me a few weeks back, I’d become the giggling, swooning teenage girl I’d always made fun of.

When I found him making out with another girl at a party a week after we’d started talking and hanging out, I was the typical girl in a romantic comedy, eating pints of ice cream and forgetting what day it was as I cried my eyes out. But that Serena Gates was now behind me. I’d sworn off men for the foreseeable future. It had already made things so much easier.

If only that resolution had been able to raise my grades that fast.

I stared out the window, wishing I was in the pool in our backyard instead of trying to stay awake from the boredom. If my ability to play volleyball in the fall wasn’t directly affected by my current less-than-stellar grades, I probably would have skipped today to do just that.

“What do you think was the purpose of the play, *Our Town*?” Mr. Kendall asked, strolling back and forth in front of the class. He was a younger teacher, and he was cool for the most part, but I could definitely see the nerdy side of him every once in a

while. Like now, with this lame stage play.

Lisa, the girl who answered just about every question in class, raised her hand. I flicked my gaze to the clock on the wall to my left, groaning when I saw it had only been five minutes since the last time I looked. The girl's voice filtered through the room, and only a few words made it to my brain before I tuned her out.

I pulled out my phone, holding it under the desk with my left hand. My right hand held a pen and hovered over a notebook in the hopes that it would look like I was taking notes. Penny, one of my best friends and the star softball pitcher, would probably laugh at the whole scene. I'd never seen anyone with notes as meticulous as hers. I just had to make sure she never saw my report card or she'd probably disown me as a friend.

I scrolled through my social media accounts, trying not to focus on how I would probably grow old and die right there with how slow this class was going today. My ears finally picked up a topic I actually needed, and I put my phone away, focusing on what Mr. Kendall had to say.

"As a way to earn some last-minute extra-credit points for my class, you can attend Our Town at the Hayes Theater this weekend. If you write a five-page paper at the end of it, you'll earn fifty points toward your final grade."

My mouth dropped open, and the first surge of excitement I'd felt all day sent tingles through my upper body. Mr. Kendall never gave out extra credit, but fifty points could go a long way toward helping my D+ turn into a passing grade. I needed to remember the relief of an extra-credit opportunity at this time next year. Maybe starting out the semester with better habits wouldn't have me scrambling to make grades.

"How was your little nap there, Gates?" Colt asked, walking next to me as we left the room.

“If I ever have to smell an article of your clothing again, I’ll beat you.” I tried to keep a fierce expression, but I couldn’t help but smile as he looked like he didn’t believe me. I’d known him since elementary school, being in the same grade, and the kid was the most annoying person I’d ever met, but when it came to sports, he was pretty chill. Penny had said something about him beating out a senior for the starting spot as third baseman, so he must be pretty good at baseball.

“I’d like to see that,” said a familiar voice behind me in the hall.

I turned to find Jake, Penny’s boyfriend, passing with a couple of the other baseball players trailing him. Colt moved into their group like a duck to his family, and I shook my head. Boys.

One of the guys at the back of the group stared at me as the group walked down the hall, his head turning back until they’d moved around the corner. I only knew him as Ben the Pitcher, which is how Penny distinguished all the guys for us non-baseball fans. He was cute, but I’d never really talked to him before. And now was not the time to start liking other boys.

Shaking my head, I headed in the direction of my locker.

“How was English today, Serena?” Brynn asked, pulling a book out of her locker as I stopped by mine a few doors down. I looked at the book I recognized as being for one of the advanced placement classes and groaned. The two of us were only sophomores, but Brynn took school as seriously as Penny, which made it hard to fully complain about what I was going through in my regular classes.

I shrugged. “It was all right. I’ve got to go see a play to get some extra credit. Are you free on Friday?”

Brynn frowned. “I wish. My parents want to go camping this weekend. Not exactly

the thing I want to do with how hot it's supposed to be outside. Maybe Penny or Kate?"

"I doubt Penny will be free. Ever since prom, she's attached to Jake at the hip. But I'll see what Kate's doing." It hadn't hit me until now but I did not want to go to this play by myself, bonus points or not.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

We walked down the hall, meeting Penny and Kate in our spot near the doors. “Should we head out for lunch?” Kate asked.

“No Jake today?” I asked Penny, surprised to see her without her other half. It was a relief to not see them kissing and holding hands. I never thought Penny would be that kind of girl, all giggly around a boy, but I’d been wrong. Thinking about my own situation, even I hadn’t lived up to avoiding swooning over an attractive senior. Ever since she and Jake had figured things out at the dance, it seemed like they couldn’t stop holding hands or kissing. It was all innocent, but still. Gross.

Penny shook her head. “No, he had to stay and get some help in math. He’s hoping to bump his grade up before the final next week.”

“Aren’t we all?” I muttered, again annoyed about my current grades. A wave of panic took over, and I wondered what life would be like on the bench next year if I couldn’t pass all my classes. In English there was hope, if I could get someone to attend the play with me. Math was my best subject, so I didn’t worry about that. But art, I was hopeless when it came to anything but stick figures. If Mr. Kendall was giving extra credit, would Ms. Tibbs?

With only three weeks of school before summer break, I’d need every day left to paint or draw something remotely decent to raise my grade. Was summer school a possibility to make up for a semester’s worth of bad decisions on my part? Because it was almost pointless at this stage.

A pit formed in my stomach. I opened my mouth and said, “You know what? I need to check on something for art. I’ll catch you all after school.”

Looking at my friends, you would have thought I'd just yelled, Bomb!

"Well, uh, good luck," Kate said with a hesitant grin.

"Yeah, I know how it sounds. And don't," I said, raising my hand in front of Penny's parted lips, "I'm already scolding myself, so I don't need any lectures on taking school more seriously."

Penny raised both hands in surrender. "Better late than on the bench, right?" She knew me too well.

I turned and trudged up the stairs, heading in the direction of the art department. Ms. Tibbs didn't leave her room all that often, and I hoped she would be there during lunch. What would it take to pass her class?

I stared at the random off-white spot on the wall, the one I saw every time I walked to art, and just like before, I conjured up the scenario behind it. It looked like someone had tried to patch up the sheetrock, maybe after a fight between students. But the color had steadily changed over the past four months under my watchful eye. If only I needed help in science, I could propose some kind of experiment for it.

The art room was the first door on the right after turning the corner. I could get there in a trance, which is what had me transfixed on that spot on the wall. Until I plowed into what felt like a large moveable wall. The impact caused me to stumble back a few steps and fall. Even with all the drills my coaches had put me through in the past few years, I didn't go down with grace.

"Are you all right?" a deep baritone voice asked.

I had to tilt my head back to see the tall blond figure before me. Crystal-clear blue eyes searched my face, making my thoughts go fuzzy as my gaze flicked down to his

lips. Focusing on the whole face, I realized I'd just seen him with Jake after class.

Ben the Pitcher.

I pushed off the floor, tugging my shirt back down. "Yep, I'm good." My usual sarcastic nature seemed to be off-kilter from the fall. I looked up again, unsure of what to say. I'd never talked to him before, and it seemed those eyes had some sort of power to throw off my whole attitude. Something about him made goosebumps pop up all over my arms.

"You're sure?" he asked, reaching his hand out but stopping a few inches away from my arm, hesitating.

I raised a hand and forced a smile. "Really. I should have watched where I was going anyway. Good luck on your upcoming games, and I'll, uh, see you around." What was my deal? Why was I so flustered around him?

Ben looked as though he wanted to say something else but nodded and walked down the hall. Once he was out of eyesight, I realized my breathing had increased as though I'd just run sprints or something. Weird.

My stomach growled, and I spun back to the door of the classroom, remembering why I'd opted to skip lunch. Once in the art room, I glanced around. It took several seconds to spot the teacher crouched behind the pottery wheel. As I stepped closer, I saw her with a screwdriver, turning something on the machine.

"Something broken, Ms. Tibbs?" I asked, enjoying the moment as she jumped back in surprise.

When she relaxed, she said, "Yeah, I'm trying to figure out why it's making strange sounds. But I might need to ask the auto department. I have no experience with fixing

machinery.” She stood, wiping her hands on her paint-stained pants. Adjusting her glasses, she focused on me. “What is it you need, Serena?”

“I, uh, well, I couldn’t remember what you’d said we could do for extra credit.”

A close-lipped smile did nothing to make me feel better about the practical begging I was doing. “Yes, your grade is on the border of failing.”

Nothing like putting things bluntly.

“I know, and that’s why I’m here. What can I do to boost it?” I forced out a smile, hoping she’d get the hint that I needed this more than I cared to admit.

“I’m assuming you have to make up points in English as well?” Ms. Tibbs shuffled a few papers back and forth on her desk.

“I might.” I frowned, confused as to how this connected to my bad grade in English.

She nodded. “Good. Since we know your skills in drawing are somewhat lacking, I’ll give you another assignment. There is a small art gallery on the first level of the Hayes Theater. I want you to walk through it before whatever performance you’re going to. Pick one painting that inspires you and write a paper about the style of the art, why you like it, and what you think the artist’s reason for creating it was.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

Another paper? “Are you sure you don’t want me to sketch something or paint a still-life or anything?” Why was I trying to negotiate my non-existent art talents? As I thought about the essay, it was probably because I wasn’t good at expressing myself on paper either. That’s why I loved equations so much. The answer wasn’t subjective to what other people thought.

Ms. Tibbs threw her head back and laughed. “I’m sorry, Serena, but I don’t think you’d actually earn points from those things.”

Point taken. “Okay, okay, I’ll do the paper.”

“Good luck.”

I turned away, wishing I didn’t have such pressure to go to this play. But if it was going to let me play volleyball, I had to make the effort. Losing the sport I loved was not an option.

Two

Ben

I groaned, thinking of all the things I had to get done before I could sleep that night. I’d made it through the first part of the day and was heading to lunch after retrieving the notebook I’d left during second period, when I bumped into Serena Gates. It was the second time I’d seen her in a matter of minutes, and as much as I wanted to say something more interesting than “Are you okay?”—I got tongue-tied and my brain just sort of stopped, hesitating before helping her up.

It hadn't helped that her dark-brown hair hung over her shoulders as her blue eyes pulled me in. I'd seen her from afar ever since Jake and Penny had started hanging out, but my attraction for her had grown over the past few weeks.

I could have at least tried to come up with something cool to say, but instead, I freaked out and walked away. What would Jake or Dax say in that situation? It seemed like they always knew exactly what to say to girls, while I tended to clam up and feel like an awkward tower, especially with girls much shorter than me. She didn't even reach my shoulder.

But the more I learned about her, the more I knew I didn't stand a chance. She was one of those girls who went out with a lot of guys but the relationships never lasted. I'd never had a girlfriend before, but I was pretty sure if I ever got dumped, I'd be a wreck. That sort of rejection was as bad as getting a home run hit off my slider, my usual best pitch, to lose the championship game.

Mr. Kendall droned on, and my hand twitched. I was anxious to get to practice so I could get my slider on point for the game the next day. I hadn't been able to get it to work for the last three days, even though I'd put in an extra hour of practice each day, throwing to a net when Dax left.

"Here are the results of your latest papers," Mr. Kendall said, bringing me back to the present. He strolled up the aisle next to mine, handing out the essays we'd written on Ernest Hemingway. As he made his way back down the row where I sat, my stomach clenched. I'd struggled writing it, but I needed at least an A- to pull my grade up. I'd blown the chance to follow in my father's footsteps as valedictorian the semester before, but the pressure was still on to perform.

The paper landed on my desk, the large red letter causing the air to leave my lungs. B.

The bell rang, and I stuffed the paper in my backpack, barely hearing my teacher say

something about seeing a play for extra credit. It would be torturous but necessary.

But now it was time for baseball. Once I figured out my slider, the tightness in my chest would ease, and the benefit was that I could go a whole practice not saying more than the pitches I wanted to throw. “Slider. Off-speed. Fast.”

If only I’d known what to say to Serena the one time I actually had a chance to talk to her. When Jake and Penny were together, our groups kind of hung out, but the window for talking to her always closed a second or two before I got up the courage to say anything.

The locker room was already humid, steam coming from the showers from the kids just getting out of gym. My skin was already sticky, and I knew it was only going to get worse as practice went on in the Texas heat. I pulled off my t-shirt and threw on my practice jersey, trying not to let my awkwardness with Serena run through my mind over and over again, analyzing every part. I know people say girls overanalyze, but there have been times when I probably could have won that battle.

“What’s wrong with you, man?” Dax asked, slapping me on the back. The impact was harder than I expected, and I had to put my arms out to catch myself from slamming my face into the locker.

“Nothing. Just a long day of school, you know?” I turned, hoping to keep my feelings invisible from him. I knew my friends could read me like a book, and so far I’d managed to keep my little crush on Serena a secret. They might not care now that Jake and Penny were dating, and since Serena was good friends with Penny, they might even push the idea. But then I’d actually have to talk to her. In full sentences.

What girl liked a kid who could only say a handful of words before his tongue twisted and his brain shut down? I’m sure some girls thought I had an impediment of some sort. Nope, just an overactive brain that called into question every move I made.

Jake walked around the corner of the line of lockers and groaned. “Who’s ready to die in the heat today?”

I’d been too distracted to even check the weather for the afternoon. But in true Texas fashion, it would be sweltering hot with a side of humidity, making it difficult to focus on anything during practice. This was one of those times when I would be willing to have practice before school, just to get some relief from the heat.

“What are you talking about?” Dax asked, throwing Jake a look of disbelief. “You’re not the one who has to add all the catching gear on top of our practice uniform for three hours.”

“True. But it’s still hot. We better remind the freshmen to fill up the water. I’d hate for heatstroke to set in.” Jake wasn’t the team captain, but he may as well have been from the change he’d made over the past few weeks. Ever since prom, he’d been happier than I’d ever seen him, and way more responsible.

I tucked in my practice jersey and buttoned up my baseball pants. My pulse raced as I hurried to get out of the locker room, everything seeming to close in on me with my friends right there. If only I could get Serena out of my brain, I wouldn’t feel so flustered.

“I’ll go tell them.” Before they could say anything, I grabbed my hat and bag from the bench, running down the middle of the aisle of lockers.

Clicking through the mental list of all the things I needed to get done that night didn’t help get rid of the apple-cinnamon scent I’d smelled on Serena when we collided.

I made it to the end aisle of lockers where most of the freshmen were getting ready. “Hey, guys. Make sure we get enough water for today. It’s going to be hot.”

Hearing the groans already, I turned and walked out the locker room doors by the parking lot. From there I turned right, walking down to the field. I was earlier than normal, but I needed to get some kind of movement going through me or else I'd just picture the scene between the brunette volleyball player and my awkwardness over and over again.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

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“Clark, you’re here early,” Coach Maddox said from the other side of the dugout as I put my bag on the bench and sat next to it. I pulled out my cleats and yanked on the laces as I tied them. Loose cleats were probably the worst thing for a pitcher, and I was going to have to get another pair of laces in the next week or two. Several spots were already fraying, and I didn’t want to chance them breaking during one of our playoff games.

“I was ready and didn’t feel like hanging out in the locker room,” I replied as I stood.

Coach slipped on a catcher’s mitt. “How about we play some catch? I want to go over some of the notes I have about the Weyland game coming up tomorrow.”

I nodded, readjusting my hat so it covered my forehead completely. Some of the guys couldn’t stand to have it so low, almost blocking their view of the ball coming at them, but I’d grown used to having it like that in the Texas sun, making it easier to see the signs from the catcher as well as shade me from being blinded.

I swung my arms around in circles, loosening up the joints. I’d had the day off in the game the day before, but even with the usual easy workout to stay loose, everything felt a little more stiff than normal.

I grabbed a ball from one of the buckets and stepped out onto the grass. The ground didn’t give, meaning that any of the water from the sprinklers that morning had already dried up in the sun.

“What are we ranked now, Coach?” I asked, tossing the ball in his direction.

The man smiled, and if I couldn’t see the gray of his hair, I’d think he was only a year or two older than most of us.

“Same as it was when the papers came out on Sunday, Ben.”

I grunted as I tossed the ball in his direction, making sure to get the right snap of my wrist. Each little piece had to be warmed up or I’d be feeling even worse tomorrow.

“I don’t get to read the papers, Coach.” I caught the toss he threw back at me and threw again.

He held onto the ball, dropping his glove to his side. “What do you mean you don’t get to read the papers?”

I held up my glove, wishing I could go back and unsay the words. What I should have said was that I didn’t have time to read them or I didn’t really care.

Coach shook his head, his eyebrow raised as he awaited my answer.

“My parents read them. At the end of the season, they give me a folder with all the clippings so I can go through them.”

“Why do they do that?” Coach wound up and tossed the ball back in my direction.

I breathed out, the anxiety rising a bit. “When I read them last year, I ended up getting too tight or worried about everything but my pitches. So this was the compromise. I get to read any article with the team or with my name in it at the end of the season.”

The broad smile Coach gave me caused me to pause. “I didn’t know that. No wonder you’ve been on fire this year.”

My cheeks burned, and I tripped on the next throw, catching myself before falling to the ground. Almost like bumping into Serena. That’s all I needed was to get distracted by a girl just as the season neared a critical point of the playoffs.

“I don’t think so, Coach.” I could still picture the bad pitch I’d thrown two games ago, allowing a double. If I could just have a perfect game, where no one on the opposing team even touched first base, I knew I’d feel like it was enough. Then I wouldn’t have to analyze it a hundred times over. But until then, I had to keep pushing, keep practicing to get there.

I glanced over to see Jake, Dax, and Nate walking down the road to the dugout. At least I’d have a small reprieve from Coach’s line of questioning.

When I looked back, Coach Maddox was almost in front of me. “I know you’ve got this whole modest thing going on, Ben, but it’s okay to take a compliment. And as much as I’d like to give you the evidence that you’re doing really well, I need you on point in tomorrow’s game. So just make sure you get a good workout in. Make sure every pitch is working. We need a ‘W’ tomorrow.”

“I’d still like to see the scouting report.” The words came out with more force than I usually had, and Coach’s smile grew even more.

“Now that’s the attitude of a ballplayer. Let me get the team warmed up, and we’ll go over it while you throw a bullpen. Then I won’t have to explain it all to Dax again.”

I nodded, walking over to where the freshman had just brought in several carriers with bottles of water. Picking one up, I held it a few inches from my mouth and squeezed, grateful for the relief from a dry throat. We’d only thrown for maybe five

minutes, but sweat already streaked down the side of my face. It was going to be a long practice.

Three

Ben

We survived that practice as well as the game the next day. The scouting report Coach had received from the other teams who'd already played against Weyland had been crucial to our nail-biter win. I was able to throw the right pitches to keep their big hitters off guard, bettering our chances for home-field advantage once the playoff games started.

Friday's practice was lighter and much shorter, and from the exhausted looks of everyone in the locker room after, we all needed the rest. But that only meant another grueling practice on Monday to get us ready for the post-season games coming up next week.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“What are we doing tonight, guys?” Dax asked as we walked to the parking lot.

“We should head out to the bluffs. I hear there’s supposed to be a bonfire.” Of course, Nate would know where all the parties were at.

Colt was nodding his head right behind him. “Let’s do it.”

Shaking my head, I said, “Sorry, guys. I’ve got to go to a play for English.”

Jake slapped me on the back. “Don’t tell me. Our Town for extra credit?”

I frowned. “How did you know that?”

He shrugged. “I think just about everyone in Mr. Kendall’s classes is going to that. I think I’ll be okay without the extra points this time, though.”

My face must have told him I didn’t believe it because he said, “Miracles happen, people.”

Standing next to my small truck, I threw my bat bag in the back and waved to the others, all parked nearby. “You’re all invited to the show. I’m buying snacks.”

Nate’s laugh rang out. “I’m good. Candy and snacks are not enough to tempt me into going to a play I don’t actually have to go to. My mother forces me to enough of those ‘culturally stimulating events,’ as she puts it.”

I’d already known the answer, but I still would’ve liked at least one of them to agree

to go with me. But I'd survive without them there. As much as I had in common with the group of them, we also had a lot of differences.

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow, then. Let me know what you're all doing this weekend." I waved again, slipping into the truck. My leg banged against the dash, and I bit my tongue to keep from yelling. It happened at least once every few times I drove, the disadvantage to being over six feet in a truck where the seat couldn't adjust backward more than two inches.

Once I got home, I took a quick shower and pulled on a button-up shirt and a pair of nicer jeans. With my hair combed, I walked downstairs, breathing in the smell of pasta and garlic.

"Dinner's almost ready," my mom said, stirring a pot on the stove.

"Smells good, Mom," I said, taking down several plates from the cupboard. As I laid them out on the table, I glanced around, looking for my younger brother. "Where's Daniel?"

"He's supposed to be picking up the toys he dumped out in the playroom. But he's probably just playing with them." I could hear the smile in her voice even though I was turned away. He was only seven, and it was something I would've done at that age.

After I'd set out the utensils and glasses, I said, "I'll go check on him. Call us when it's ready."

I walked over to the spare bedroom down the hall, hearing Daniel's little voice before I even got to the door. With a light knock, I twisted the knob and pushed it open.

"Hey, buddy! Looks like you're having some fun." I glanced around the room with a

shocked grin on my face. Daniel definitely knew how to destroy a room. The bins our mother had bought when I was younger were all overturned, with big and little toys nearly covering the carpet.

His seven-year-old face beamed back at me, his slanted eyes disappearing with the expression. “Ben, you play with me?”

Sliding down to sit next to him, I nodded. “I can play for a couple of minutes, and then we need to clean up so Mom doesn’t get mad, okay?”

“Okay. I playing knights and dragons. You be dragons.” He shoved a plastic dragon into my hands and picked up two of the knights he had in a pile on the floor.

As much as I loved hanging out with my friends, this was one of my favorite places to be. I thought back to the years my parents had tried to have more children, with several pregnancies ending in miscarriage. When she’d made it to the twenty-week mark with Daniel, we’d all been overjoyed. And as hard as the news had been find out minutes after his birth that Daniel had Down Syndrome, we’d all come to know that life without him wouldn’t have the same amount of fun and laughter it did now.

Those first few years had been demanding on my mom with all the therapies he needed, and while he still had several appointments every week, his happiness seemed to rub off on me every time I was around him.

“Dinner’s ready,” my mom called a few minutes later.

“Okay, Daniel. Let’s see who can clean up this stuff the fastest. Ready, set, go!” I grabbed a bunch of the small figurines, throwing them into one of the boxes. Daniel went to work, always the competitor. There were times I thought he got more of that instinct than I had.

By the time we made it to the table, my dad walked through the door, leaving his briefcase next to it. “How’s everyone doing tonight?” he said, walking over to kiss Mom.

“Good!” Daniel said, his excitement causing the rest of us to chuckle.

“What are you all dressed up for, son?” my dad asked, his gaze taking in my clothes.

I pulled the bowl of salad toward me, nearly filling my plate. “I have to go to a play for English.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

Dad took his usual spot at the head of the table, loosening his tie in the process. “This late in the year? You only have two weeks left, right? Don’t tell me it’s a make-up assignment.”

His last words were like a hammer to my chest. My dad cringed each time he saw my grades, even though the lowest I’d ever gotten was a B+. The relationship I had with him wasn’t like the one I had with my mom, as I felt I was always defending myself or trying to prove something to him. With her, as long as I was happy, she was excited for me.

The only reason I was going to the play was that I needed all the help I could get to boost my overall average. I planned to get into one of the colleges with a physical therapy program, and for the ones I wanted, I’d need a higher cumulative average.

“It is,” I said, finally responding to his slight jab. I let the irritation disappear within me before saying, “I should be back around ten.”

“You’re not hanging out with the guys?” my mom asked, passing me the large bowl of pasta. She’d learned to make double the portions when it came to my favorite dinner.

I shook my head. “No, I’ll see them tomorrow. It’s been a long week, and I’m not sure if I’ll stay awake at this thing.”

“Can I go?” Daniel asked. A smear of spaghetti sauce on his cheek made him look like he was preparing to go to war.

“Not this time, buddy. We’ve got a night of your favorite books, remember?” My dad exaggerated his smile.

Bouncing around in his seat, Daniel’s eyes lit up. “Oh yeah. I’ll go get the books.” He stood and walked into the family room and over to the bookshelf. My mom looked as though she wanted to stop him, but she just shook her head.

The rest of dinner passed without any interrogations from my father, and I was grateful for that. I knew he meant well, but it always seemed to be the same questions, as if he didn’t know what else to talk to me about besides hounding me to spend more time with baseball. I just wished he’d be happy for me and support me in the things I liked instead of trying to mold me into him.

After helping clear the table, I headed out to the truck. I was going to be early, but I didn’t want to worry about trying to get into the play if I was late. Just as had been ingrained in me from the time I was in Little League, if I was on time, I was late. Otherwise, I found myself having to run way more than I wanted.

I walked through the front doors of the theater, the smell of popcorn making my stomach grumble even after the two portions of penne I’d just eaten. Walking up to the ticket booth, I bought the cheapest ticket possible. The small amount of money I earned at my physical therapy internship could only go so far. Gas meant a lot more to me than being three rows from the stage.

Finding an empty spot against the wall in the waiting area, I looked around for anyone I recognized. There were a few other juniors there, but I only smiled at them before pulling out my phone. To my friends, I wasn’t shy, but when it came to people I only knew from the halls at school, it was easier to just avoid eye contact than it was to initiate a conversation. I always had Jake, Dax, and even Nate who did that for me, so when I was alone, I preferred the silence.

The doors opened to the theater, and I walked in, looking for my seat in the upper tier. I took a seat and began going through the program the host handed me on the way in, trying to figure out what I could write my paper on. It was better to have some idea of theme so I could look for it throughout the play and then write about it later. We'd studied *Our Town* the year before in English, but Mrs. Haddis had retired after last year. She hadn't required quite so much interaction with the readings as Mr. Kendall did with our current assignments this year, and I struggled to remember all the aspects of the play.

The lights darkened, and I glanced at the empty chair next to me. The rest of the auditorium was full, and I shifted to the right so I wouldn't be blocking the view of the woman behind me. Just as someone came out to make a speech about donating to save the theater, the door to my right opened and a sliver of bright light filtered in. A girl walked in, but with the backlight, I couldn't make out her face.

That was, until she was close enough to ask me what seat I was sitting in. Serena Gates.

"Is this row HH?" she whispered loudly. Recognition popped into her eyes as she saw my face, and I think panic caused my heart to skip a beat.

I opened my mouth to respond, trying to force a yes out, but nothing came. I finally nodded my head, which was easier.

She looked down at the chair, and the seat number must have been the same as her ticket because she pulled the bottom seat down, sliding into it and sending an apple-cinnamon cloud my way.

It took a moment for me to realize I'd been clinging to the armrests, and I let go, folding my hands in my lap. How was I going to concentrate on the show when Serena was sitting next to me? I'd had a hard enough time focusing the past couple of

days after bumping into her in the hall, but that wasn't anything like sitting next to her for over two hours.

Four

Serena

I arrived late to the theater, and luckily I was able to beg my way into the auditorium. The next show was a matinee at ten on a Saturday morning, and I knew I didn't have a chance of making that one with a tournament starting at seven. There was no way I was going to miss even one game for extra credit when it came to volleyball.

Seeing Ben Clark sitting there set my insides turning. I wished I could see his crystal-blue eyes, but it was dark. For only having been as close as we were now once before, my mind and body shouldn't have been reacting to him like that. And then I remembered I wasn't looking to date or even have a crush on anyone until I was at least twenty-one. Maybe eighteen.

I'd never given the guy a second look, especially when James had been in the picture. But there was something about him that kept my mind replaying the interaction we'd had by the art room the other day. Maybe it was the fact that he wasn't arrogant, walking around with a swagger like he could do no wrong. Or that he was a pretty big deal when it came to the baseball team and yet he acted like everyone else had all the talent.

He seemed tense, and every time I accidentally bumped into one of his extra-long limbs, it felt as if we were playing freeze tag.

At intermission, I stood to stretch, grateful I'd been able to somewhat focus on the play.

“How are you liking it so far?” I asked Ben. I tried to hold back a laugh when I saw his expression turn to shock, his eyes going wide like he was about to be hit with something.

“Good. It’s good.” He stood and turned his eyes to the stage.

I tilted my head back in order to see his face, noting the sharp angles of his jaw and cheekbones. But that wasn’t something I was going to dwell on because I was done with boys, especially athletic ones. They always managed to rip my heart out. But I could always be nice to Ben.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“I’m going to get some snacks. Do you want anything?” I asked, smiling at him. When he turned toward me, my heart pumped against my rib cage, and I worked to keep eye contact until he answered.

He shook his head, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. “I can get—uh, that sounds, um. Maybe, uh, I’ll go with you.”

I rolled my lips in at his painful delivery. Did he have some kind of speech problem? I smiled again, hoping to reassure him somewhat. Nothing made me feel worse than someone trying so hard at something and failing. I moved out of the row so he could follow.

“Mr. Kendall’s class, huh?”

Ben turned his head to me. “Yeah. What class, uh, period do you have him?”

“Third.”

“Ah, so you’re a sophomore, right?” He opened the door for me, and I watched as his eyebrow went up with the question. We both squinted at the brighter lights outside the auditorium. As I walked by him, I could smell a clean scent of a cologne I couldn’t place.

Shaking my head, I reminded myself I did not need to be attracted to every guy who said more than two words to me.

“Yep. You’re a junior, right?” I asked, already knowing the answer. It seemed like

everyone but Brynn and I were juniors.

He nodded, pulling out a wallet from his pocket. When he opened it, I caught a glimpse of the front. I tugged his hand away, and a small shock of electricity flew up my arm. Ignoring the tingles, I turned the wallet so I could see the picture more clearly.

“A Disney wallet? Aren’t you a little old for cartoons?” I asked, laughing.

With a small smile, he shook his head. “You’re never too old for Disney. It was a present from my brother a few years ago. He loves it when I pull it out and reminds me that he was the one who gave it to me.” No stutter. Relaxed shoulders. And the smile on his face as he talked about his brother was bordering priceless. It made my status as an only child seem like I’d missed out on some great event.

“Do you have just one brother? I mean, is he your only sibling?” It sounded like an awkward question, but I was suddenly curious. I’d never met someone who was so secure that he wasn’t fazed by owning something people would think was childish. Then again, my mother had been trying to dress me up like an adult from the time I started eating baby food. I’d stopped allowing that three years ago, wearing just about the opposite ever since.

He stepped forward, ordering a large popcorn and some gummy sharks. “What do you want?” he asked over his shoulder.

“I’m good. I can get my own.” I waved my hand at him, hoping he would just pay and be done.

He turned to face me, his bright blue eyes wearing down my defenses. “I’m paying for it. If we have to suffer through this play, I might as well make it enjoyable for both of us.”

Hesitating, I pinched my lips between my teeth, trying to decide if I should cave and let him pay for me. Like a date. But not a date. Just two people who were doing extra credit for English.

“I’ll take some of those chocolate peanuts.” I pointed to the yellow box in the window display and kept my eyes there so I wasn’t tempted to look back into those pools of blue that looked like they could be from the Caribbean.

Ben ordered those and paid for the treats. We walked back in the direction of our seats, Ben opening the door for me again.

“I just have one brother,” he said, returning to our conversation. He threw a few kernels of popcorn into his mouth, chewed, and then swallowed before speaking again. Big points right there for not talking while he was chewing. I shook my head. This was not a checklist of boyfriend material.

“My parents tried for a long time after having me, but they had troubles with secondary infertility, I think they call it. My mom miscarried a lot and then finally was able to make it all the way with Daniel.”

I liked the ease in his voice as he spoke about his family, making it so he didn’t stutter. All the tension in his limbs seemed to flow away as he talked about them, and I wanted to meet them for some reason. My parents barely told me anything about what was going on in their lives, and the fact that he knew such intimate details about his parents trying to have more kids seemed foreign to me.

The smell of the popcorn caused my stomach to rumble, and I laughed, feeling a little awkward. We took our seats, and Ben moved the popcorn box in my direction. “Have some.”

I took a few kernels, knowing if I refused he’d probably be stubborn like he was at

the register. They hit the spot, the perfect amount of butter and salt. I'd only made a quesadilla before heading to the theater since Liza, our cook, had left earlier than normal.

"Thank you," I said, popping two more pieces into my mouth.

"No problem. What about you? Any siblings?" He tossed a piece of popcorn into the air and caught it in his mouth, turning to me with a near-perfect smile.

What was wrong with me? I was supposed to be avoiding all boys and any feelings for them. I'd chased James for months, and when he finally noticed me, it lasted for all of a week before he'd moved on to some perky girl on the drill team. James wasn't the first guy who had done that either. I was an expert at picking the wrong kind of guys, but for some reason, I couldn't see those signs beforehand.

And now I'd let Ben buy me some candy. Great. I was giving out vibes when I should be like ice. But he made it difficult for me to say no.

"No siblings here. My mom almost died when she had me, so I think that was enough excitement for my parents." I focused on the deep-red curtains on the sides of the stage below us, waiting for the pity statement most people usually gave.

"That was my life for ten years, being an only child, I mean. It was a change when Daniel came home, but it's more fun now, having a brother." His body froze, his eyes widening as he looked at me. "I don't mean that against you. I just—"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I raised my hand. “You’re good. There are definitely perks to being the only child. Like I can pretty much do whatever I want whenever I want. But there are times when I wish I had someone else to at least talk to about my dysfunctional family.”

Ben focused on opening the gummies, avoiding my gaze as he asked, “Are your parents divorced?”

I blinked a few times, reviewing my words to see if I’d given that impression. “Um, no. They’re just really busy with their jobs. My dad, well, he’s at the gym pretty much from morning until night right now. And my mom is designing her clothing line for next fall.” I could hear the bitterness in my words, but Ben didn’t notice. He handed me the package of gummies and turned toward the stage.

The lights had turned down, and I heard him say, “Finally,” under his breath.

A flood of embarrassment poured through me. Was he bugged to be talking to me? He was the one who’d asked so many questions. And bought me treats.

I flashed back to the last time James and I hung out. We’d been watching some show that had another agenda behind the storyline, and I kept pointing it out. I didn’t realize it until I analyzed the whole situation later, but it was one of his favorite movies and he hadn’t liked me calling attention to all those things. When I noticed he wasn’t reacting to my answers, I’d sunk into the couch and kept quiet.

I could still see the hardness of his eyes as he glanced back at me and whispered, “Finally.”

Was I just an annoyance to all things male? Or was it the fact that other than my small group of friends, I didn't have many people who listened or cared about what was going on in my life? Heat burned in my cheeks and ears. I was glad it was so dark in there so Ben couldn't see my embarrassment.

But I shouldn't even care. Rule number one of the new Serena was to stay away from the boys. It was better this way. Don't worry about talking to the opposite sex and get this lame assignment over with.

I glanced down at the box of unopened peanuts in my lap, trying to decide what to do.

As the first actors came out on stage, spouting things about their town, I set the box on the armrest. I'd make it through the rest of this dumb play and not worry about Ben from here on out.

Five

Ben

I thought we'd made some good progress at the play. I'd only stuttered a few times at the beginning, but I felt at ease with her, something that had never happened when I'd had a crush on any other girl.

My hopes leaped as she let me buy her candy, although she didn't even open the box. But as soon as the intermission ended, she stiffened, and all the courage I'd built up during our conversation deflated like a balloon.

Once the show was over, she gave a curt goodbye and hurried out the door, leaving the candy on the armrest. I'd actually been more focused on formulating a good plan to ask her out on a real date than watching most of the end of the play, meaning I'd have to do some more research online to get the gist of it for the paper.

Had I asked her too many personal questions and that's why she'd left like there was a fire?

She'd seemed fairly open about her parents and life, but maybe I'd read it all wrong, which was highly possible. But maybe she'd just learned to be polite since her dad was one of the most famous people in our town. The thought that her dad could bend me into a pretzel sent a shiver through me.

I was lying in my bed Saturday morning when I heard a knock at the door. "Come in," I called, my voice sounding much deeper than normal. With a quick glance at the time on my phone, I groaned. It was only nine in the morning.

"Still in bed?" Dax's voice caused me to sit up.

"I'm more surprised that you're in the land of the living at this hour on a Saturday," I joked, holding out my hand as he swung his forward to slap mine.

He sat on the end of my bed and shrugged. "I didn't go out with the others. After I ate dinner, I fell asleep and woke up at seven thirty this morning. I figured I'd come over and see what you were up to."

"More like make me suffer like you." I chuckled and fell back onto my pillow.

"How was your play last night?"

I froze for a moment, wondering how he could remember that. Lying on my back, I placed my hands under my head with elbows out, staring at the small spot on the ceiling from a leak years ago.

"It was a play. Nothing too exciting."

“You didn’t find any girls there, huh?” Dax asked, slapping the blanket over my legs. It didn’t shield my skin from the smack.

If blood could freeze inside a living body, I was sure mine had at that moment. But there was no hint of knowing in Dax’s expression, and I blew out a breath. Shaking my head, I pictured Serena again, the way her smile lit up her eyes. But that image was tainted by her storming away.

“I sat by Serena Gates. The play was boring. I think I fell asleep for the last half of it.” I rushed the last two sentences, hoping he wouldn’t catch on to who I sat by like a hound to prey.

Dax squinted. After a few seconds, he said, “Isn’t she one of Penny’s friends? A sophomore, right?”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I threw off the covers and pulled on the sweats I'd worn a few days ago over my shorts. My mom liked to keep the air conditioning on full blast when my dad was gone for work, and even in Texas, I felt the chill. "Yeah, I think so."

"She's kinda cute."

Dax's words caused me to spin toward him. I tried to school my expression into a natural mask, but from the sly smile he gave me, I knew I was in for it.

"You like her, don't you? I mean, normally you would have said something like, 'I sat by some random girl.' But you know her name."

I raised my hands and shook my head. "I—no. No, I don't have a crush on her. I've talked to her, like, twice. And the only reason I knew who she was is because of Penny and Jake."

Dax waved his finger at me, and I turned my gaze past him, lasering in on the trophies on a shelf against the wall. "You definitely like her. You only get flustered when you're around or talk to a girl you like."

"What are you talking about? I get flustered around every girl." I pulled some socks from the drawer, grateful my mom had gotten to my laundry. I'd been on my last pair of clean ones the day before, and even though I was supposed to do my own, with baseball and the internship, and homework on top of that, I was barely keeping my eyes open once I got home.

Dax stood and walked over, resting his hand on the large dresser that stored my

clothes. “No, not every girl. You talk to Penny like you’ve been friends forever.”

“That means nothing. I know she’s with Jake and doesn’t expect anything. Besides, she plays softball, and most of what we talk about is either that or baseball. Those are pretty safe topics in my book.” How I wished I could go back and not tell him about Serena at all. Or even start this day over.

“Come on, Ben. Just tell me. I’m like a vault. No secret is getting out of me.”

I chuckled, wishing I had some way to get out of this, or even a good example of him not keeping a secret, but he was good to his word for the most part.

I sat on the bed, slipping on my socks and shoes. As I tied the laces, I looked up at him. “Fine, I might have a little crush on her.”

“Did you stutter when you talked to her last night?”

“No, well, maybe at first. But then we were talking and things seemed to go smoothly. Until the play was over and she kind of stormed off.” I stood and pulled my baseball cap from the post on my bed. Adjusting it so it fit just above my eyes, I said, “Girls. Why do they have to be so hard to read?”

Something passed over Dax’s face, and I wondered if he’d gone through the same thing. He wasn’t the type to settle for a girlfriend, but trying to live in Jake’s former playboy shadow had to get old.

“I don’t know, man. But we should hook you two up. I think you’d make an interesting pair.”

I lightly punched his shoulder. “What do you mean, ‘interesting’? Not cute or adorable like Jake and Penny?”

Dax took a step back. “Does this look like the face of someone who would ever say cute or adorable?”

I laughed, and he continued. “No, it doesn’t. I’m just saying she seems like a spitfire, and you’re like Bashful Dwarf when it comes to women.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, man. That’s what every guy wants to be compared to. A dwarf.” I rolled my eyes at him, taking my Disney-character wallet from the dresser. I thought about the conversation Serena and I’d had about it the night before and smiled as I shoved it in my pocket.

Motioning with his hands up and down my body, Dax chuckled. “I don’t think anyone could mistake you for a dwarf, bean pole.”

I smacked his stomach, and the softness rippled just a bit. “No problem, Pooh Bear.”

Knowing he wouldn’t be too excited about that remark, I took off out the door and headed down the stairs.

Dax caught me at the front door and gave me a punch to the ribs. “Pooh Bear with fighting skills.”

“Where are you two off to this morning?” my mom asked, towel-drying one of her pots as she walked out of the kitchen.

“Good morning, Mrs. Clark. We’re going to wake up some of the guys and head over to the diner for some breakfast before practice later. Can I steal Ben?” He put on his charmer smile.

My mom relaxed even more. “Of course. Just make sure not to break any windows this time, got it?”

Dax and I chuckled as we opened the door and headed out to the car. Lou's diner had been where Jake started liking Penny, mostly because they had to work together when he'd been sentenced by his dad to pay off the debt from pushing Nate through the large front window by accident. The window was fixed, and Nate's scars were fading already. They were just lucky it hadn't cut his eye.

"Is that really where we're going?" I asked as Dax started up his car. It was small, but at least I didn't hit my knees every time I got in. If only my dad could see the comfort something like this had for me. It wasn't like Dax's car was new, either. I just needed something that could fit my height.

"Yeah, Jake had to work this morning. Might as well get breakfast while we make fun of him. We should head to the pool or something since we have a day off from practice."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I rested my head against the back headrest and relaxed into the seat. My thoughts turned back to Serena. The next time I saw her, I would ask her out.

A shot of fear ran through me at the thought. Was I mentally prepared for a rejection? There had been several moments during our conversation where we'd clicked, which meant I needed to figure out why she'd stormed off in the first place. I just hoped I'd be able to keep the stuttering under control.

Six

Serena

I pulled my shirt down around my middle as it had inched up during the last volley. It was officially summer, and I'd never been more excited to have the last few weeks over. I'd managed to get all my assignments done, even the extra credit papers, squeaking by with a few C's and a couple of B-'s. My parents had barely glanced at my report card, as my father was busy reviewing tapes of his past football games and my mother was drawing patterns for her next line of clothing.

It was still early Saturday morning, but the hot Texas sun beat down on a few of my teammates and me as we moved around in the sand. With all our tournaments over for the season, I'd gotten a few of them together, needing something to do outside of my empty house.

Movement to the side caused me to turn, and I thought I saw Ben the Pitcher walking over by the baseball field. I'd seen him a couple of times in the halls since the play but had avoided talking to him. When I'd casually asked Penny about him, she'd

done nothing but gush about what a great guy he was, that he was the perfect gentleman, just a bit shy.

It was possible I'd overanalyzed things at the play, but with all the betrayal I still felt after dating James, it was easier just to cut my losses and not worry about guys for the foreseeable future.

"Me! Me!" I heard Sasha call out from the side. I ran to get under the volleyball, readying my hands to set it to her. As if on automatic, my hands touched the ball for a split second as I set it behind me to her. I turned, watching as her long limbs and arms leaped from the ground and pounded the ball over the net and onto the other side of the court. The ball landed in the back corner, untouched.

"Yes!" I fist-pumped and took two steps to give Sasha a high-five. There was nothing better than assisting a great spike. The ball rolled back under the net, and we rotated, getting ready for Jamie to serve. I wiped at the sweat beading on my forehead with the hem of my t-shirt.

I glanced back over to the baseball field, recognizing Ben's face as he turned around on the mound. He wore a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, accentuating the muscles in his arms. He readied himself, ball in hand, and stepped forward, throwing the ball to what looked like a flexible net he'd set up. I turned back to our game, seeing the ball just as it sailed over the net.

The ball was knocked around a couple of times and then came back over. I set the ball again, but Mary didn't get into position in time, having to bump it over before it hit the ground. We were up by two points, and I was soaking it up. Most of the girls on my team would be starting their summer jobs soon, and I wouldn't get another chance at a volleyball game for at least two months, when practices and tryouts started for high school again.

The ball dropped on our side, closing the gap by one point. I thought about the high school season, which sent my brain whirring on all the things I'd gone through to stay eligible to play. My eyes drifted back to where Ben threw pitch after pitch, the look on his face telling me he wasn't happy about something.

The opposing team served it over, and I refocused, getting into position to set it again. My hitter opted for a soft hit, placing it right in the hole behind the blockers at the net. Perfect.

The ball came my way, and I moved underneath it again, only to find myself falling to the floor, a shot of pain starting in my ankle and shooting up my calf. The side of my head slammed against the sand, and for once I was grateful we weren't on a real court. After several seconds, I repositioned my upper body to see what I'd tripped on and saw Courtney lying on the ground next to me.

"What happened?" I asked, seeing stars in my eyes.

"Courtney slid, and you tripped over her," one of the girls said. Jamie came over and pulled Courtney to a standing position. She shook her head a bit as if something had been knocked loose.

Without thinking, I stood, but a shot of pain ran up my leg starting at the ankle, and I found myself falling to the ground again. Luckily, Sasha and Tammy caught me, and I sat between the two towers, practically dangling above the sand.

"Don't move, Gates," Mary said, bending over to look at the ankle. She pushed on a couple of spots, but the throbbing pain made it difficult to know what she was looking for.

"I'll be fine. Let me sit for a minute, and then I'll come back in." I'd had numerous sprained ankles since I'd started playing sports as a kid, and this felt about the same.

She looked up at me. “Let’s get you over to the bench.” My teammates helped me off the court and onto an old wooden bench in between the sand volleyball court and the baseball field.

“Are you sure you’re all right? That didn’t look good,” Jamie asked, hovering over me.

I shook my head, waving them off. “Just keep playing. I’ll come back over in a minute.” I turned so I was sitting sideways, resting my leg on the bench. Leaning over, I massaged around the ankle, hoping the pain would ease up so I could get back to playing.

The sound of balls hitting the bottom of a bucket caused me to turn toward the baseball field. Ben threw in the last few balls before toting the bucket back to the mound where he continued to throw pitch after pitch to the net. His reaction after most of them seemed more frustrated, but there was one where he fist-pumped and smiled. He was cuter than I remembered, and I found myself staring at him, wondering how long he would continue to practice. I knew I was slightly obsessed with my sport, but he was taking this to a whole other level.

Thirty minutes later, the girls left the court and walked over to me.

“I think we’re done, Serena. Do you need help getting to your car?” Mary asked, squatting down so I could see her without tilting my head back so far. “Or even just give you a ride home?”

I shook my head. “My car is in the shop, so I ran here. I’ll be fine. My ankle feels a lot better already.” I’d been so absorbed in what Ben was doing on the baseball field that I’d forgotten about the dull throbbing in my ankle. I stood, catching myself on the back of the bench.

“Let’s carry her to the car. We’ve still got time before I have to be home for my parents’ party tonight.” Courtney bent down with her hands out, ready to help scoop me up.

Waving my hands at them, I said, “I’m really okay. You all have things you have to do anyway. My dad said he’d be done at the gym by now, so I’ll just call him.”

“Serena, it’s not a big deal. We can drive a couple miles to your house.” The line in Mary’s forehead was nothing compared to the frown of her lips.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I debated whether I should let them take me home, but at the same time, it would be a good excuse to have my dad come get me. I hadn't seen him in days as practice for the NFL would begin in four weeks, which meant he was training extra to make sure he lasted the season with little to no injuries. Playing in his later thirties meant time was ticking on his contract and his pro-football shelf life, while he tended to forget that I wouldn't be around forever either.

"Just go. Seriously, I'll get my dad to come. He'll be traveling soon, so it'll be a good chance to bond." I almost laughed at the idea of Steve Gates bonding with anyone that wasn't holding a pigskin.

"Okay, you have our number in case you need it," Jamie said, patting me on the shoulder. "Let's go. I've got to get some water."

Even in the shade, I hadn't felt much relief from the rising temperature. The girls walked away, and I opened up my phone, seeing a message from my mother.

I'm so sorry, baby. We had some problems at the photoshoot. I probably won't be home to go to lunch like we'd planned. Raincheck? Call me when you're done with your thing.

Volleyball had always been a thing to her. I had moments of being a girly girl where I liked to get dressed up, but that was very rarely when my mom could see it. She'd tried to get me to wear her line of clothing countless times over the last couple of years, hoping my style of sports gear would change. There were a few items I didn't mind wearing that she'd designed, but I wasn't going to let her know that.

Getting injured in my favorite sport wasn't something I could tell her. I'd lost count of the number of times she and my father had argued over playing volleyball as opposed to taking piano or some kind of dance class. That was about the only time my father really had anything to say about my extracurriculars, which I was grateful for.

I pulled up my dad's number and dialed. "Please don't be at the gym. Please answer." I hadn't thought about what I'd do if he couldn't pick me up. With the amount of pain running from my ankle up to my kneecap now, I knew I wasn't going to make it the three miles home.

"Hey, kid. How was the tournament?"

"No tournament, Dad. It was just a friendly game of sand volleyball." I paused, breathing out in the hopes he'd be nearby. "But, I, uh, I got hurt."

A short pause met my ears before he said, "Did you get back in there and play?"

Leave it to the professional athlete to challenge the amount of pain I was feeling right now. "I can barely stand on it. Are you close? I ran here, and Mom is at her photoshoot until late."

"Yeah, I'm at the gym. Are you at Grover Park?"

"Yes. Just hanging out on a bench between the volleyball court and the baseball field." Too late, I wished I wouldn't have said anything about baseball.

He growled. "Baseball. What a waste of a sport." He paused, the grunt signaling that he was trying to lift while still talking to me on the phone. "Let me just pack up here. We'll figure out what to tell your mom on the drive over. See you in a few, kid." He hung up, and I breathed out a sigh. At least I wouldn't be stuck there for the rest of

the day.

I turned, surprised to find the mound vacant of its former pitcher. Searching the field, I found him behind one of the dugouts, probably putting his gear away.

When he stood, he flicked his head to move the blond hair out of his face before he adjusted the hat on top of it. He picked up a bat bag and bucket of baseballs he'd been throwing with, walking in my direction.

He must have been focused on something because he didn't see me as he walked past. It didn't help that I'd turned my head, covering my face with my hand. With the pain increasing in my leg, I wasn't in the mood to socialize.

I waited several moments before sitting back up and glancing around. A truck was still in the parking lot, but there was no one else in the park. Footsteps rustled the grass behind me, and I jumped, surprised to see Ben carrying the net he'd been using.

"Serena?" he said, pausing a few feet away.

My cheeks warmed, and I gave him a half-smile and waved. "Hey." So much for dodging that one.

"I didn't see you there. H-have you been here a while?" Ben stepped forward, leaning his hand on the end of the bench and staring at me with those deep blue eyes.

"Um, yeah. I was playing volleyball with my friends. I'm just waiting for my dad to come pick me up."

He looked down and must have seen my hand rubbing at my ankle. "Are you all right? It looks like your ankle is double the size of the other one."

I searched his face for any sign of teasing but only found sympathy there. I glanced down, startling when I saw that instead of the slender ankle I was used to, I was staring at a cankle, blue and black already appearing despite my tan skin.

“What happened?” Ben asked, taking a seat at the other end of the bench. “You probably should have left your shoe on.” He glanced down, lightly touching the area with his long fingers.

I’d be lying if I said I felt nothing from his touch. Was it because I hadn’t talked to a guy in weeks? But this was the same tingling I’d felt when our hands touched at the theater.

Studying his expression, I leaned my side against the back of the bench and smiled a bit. Was he actually worried about me? I tried to reconcile this guy with the one who’d been sick of talking to me at the play a few weeks ago. Had I just misjudged him? I shifted, feeling uncomfortable under his piercing gaze when he looked up at me. I was resigned to the fact that I was stuck there until my father remembered about his offspring.

Pursing my lips as I tried to come up with a snarky comment to his question, which didn’t happen, I said, “Just a volleyball injury. I tripped over one of my teammates and came down on it pretty hard. I thought I’d be fine after a few minutes of rest, but I’m still here.” I stretched my arms out at my sides to emphasize my words. Why I was still talking to this boy, I had no idea. It wasn’t like he was a doctor who could diagnose my injury.

“Those are never fun. Hopefully, it’s just a sprain.” The sincerity in his voice threw me for a loop. The second nice thing he’d said. Did he have a hidden agenda? Or was this just Ben?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“Yeah, I was hoping that too. My mom will go a little crazy when she finds out and will probably drag me to the hospital. I’m sure they’ll just tell me to come back again when the swelling has gone down.”

I heard a laugh and turned to find Ben’s smile wide, his eyes twinkling.

“I take it you’re familiar with hospitals, then?” he asked, pulling his knees to his chest. He draped his arms over them and turned to look at me, the intensity of his gaze making it hard to breathe.

“Maybe. My dad has gotten a few injuries over the years, so I’m getting fairly good at predicting what the diagnosis will be.”

Ben motioned with his thumb behind him to the truck. “Can I give you a ride home?”

My attention moved up to Ben’s face. I shook my head, not even entertaining the idea. “My dad said he would be here. Still just waiting for him to show up.” I looked down the nearly empty parking lot and sighed, wishing I could just go back to that moment in the sand and avoid Courtney’s leg. Then I’d be almost home from a good run, ready to enjoy a bubble bath and maybe even a pint of ice cream right now.

Without saying anything, Ben reached over and took my phone from my hand.

“What are you doing?” I asked, gritting my teeth. I tried to think of why he would need my phone or even what he’d be looking for. Nothing exciting there; that was for sure.

His thumbs tapped the screen several times before he handed it back to me. I looked down at my phone, seeing the message screen up. The word Hi was on the screen with Ben Clark at the top. He'd given me his number? And then texted himself to get my number. Original.

"If you need a ride, just call or text. I have to run something to my mom's friend a few blocks over, but if your dad isn't here anytime soon, just let me know. I've got room in my truck."

He gave me a small smile as he stood, hesitating for several moments. "You left your candy at the play. Was everything okay?" His eyebrows rose, waiting for an answer.

I debated whether or not to spill it. "I just thought I'd bugged you with all my chatter, and then you said, 'Finally,' and it just triggered some memories from my past."

A deep line formed in his forehead, and he shook his head. "You definitely weren't bugging me. I like hearing about your life. It had been a long day anyway, and I kind of wanted the play to be done so I could talk to you after."

Searching his face, I only saw sincerity. "You wanted to keep talking to me?"

"Yeah," he said, shifting his feet. He looked like he wanted to say more but settled on, "Let me know if you need anything."

With a quick wave, he turned, and I watched him walk away, maybe admiring the back of him a little too much. It was a relief that I'd misread the situation at the play.

A few seconds later, my dad's cherry red Lamborghini pulled up. "Hey, doll! Let me help you out there." My dad jumped out and ran around to my side, lifting me by my arms and practically dumping me into the car. That's what happened when he was six-foot-six and nearly three hundred pounds. I just wished he'd gifted me more of

his height.

My cheeks burned that he'd just lifted me like a rag doll. At least Ben had already taken off.

I slunk down in the seat, using my hand to cover my face. "Let's go, Dad. I need some ibuprofen or something."

"No problem, kid." He revved the engine and took off out of the parking lot.

I dropped my head and relaxed against the seat.

"Long day?"

I turned to look at him, trying to decide which direction I was going to let my emotions swing. "You could say that, yeah."

"How'd you get hurt again?" he asked, pointing to my ankle.

I shifted, accidentally bumping my ankle against the door. Closing my eyes, I breathed in, trying not to let the tears from the pain overtake me. This was definitely not a simple sprain.

When I knew my voice wasn't going to give me away, I said, "I tripped over a girl on my team when I went to set the ball."

"Weren't you supposed to have a tournament today?"

I glanced at the road before shaking my head. "That was last weekend, Dad."

"I'm so sorry, Rena. You should have said something." He slowed down as we came

to a stoplight. “When’s the next one?”

“That was the last one for club volleyball. I’ve got all of my stuff on the calendar in the kitchen. I have two months until the high school season starts, and I’m hoping I didn’t do serious damage to my ankle.” I pointed to my ankle and waited for whatever was about to come out of his mouth. Steve Gates was definitely a wild card when it came to sympathy.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I folded my arms over my chest. Biting my bottom lip, I pushed the tears back. Now was not the time to cry. I could see regret etched on his face out of the corner of my eye, and it almost made me give in. Almost.

“I’m sorry, doll. With practices coming up soon, my mind has been everywhere but here. Can you forgive your old man?”

Taking in a deep breath, I tried to decide if that was something I was capable of. It was almost a sad cycle now. I’d tell my parents I have an event, usually a volleyball game, they promise to come, don’t show up, plead for forgiveness, and usually give me some present to show how sorry they were. That’s how I’d gotten my car the day I turned sixteen.

Blowing out a breath, I nodded. Part of me wanted to throw a fit, but I wasn’t five. Sadly, that was about the only way I got attention these days.

“Let’s just get home,” I said, turning to stare out the window as the hot Texas wind blew through my hair. I knew some people envied my life, having celebrity parents, but they didn’t understand what it was like being an afterthought.

Seven

Ben

“Where’ve you been?” Jake asked when I picked up his phone call. I was a couple of blocks from the park after dropping off something for my mom at the house of one of her friends. My thoughts were back with the girl with clear blue eyes. My heart was

still pumping fast after talking to her. It had been a couple of weeks since school let out, and with my travel baseball team, I hadn't had much time to think about anything but trying to impress the scouts at each of the tournaments we went to.

"I was at the park," I said, hoping he'd let it drop.

Jake groaned, and I knew what he'd say. "Your arm is going to fall off if you don't stop practicing every single day. Your slider is just fine, but it won't be if you don't let your arm rest. We need you this weekend, Ben." He sounded like a fatherly figure, just not my father.

"How do you know I wasn't on the swings or going down the slides?"

Loud laughter echoed through the phone, and I chuckled, just thinking about trying to fit my long limbs down the twisty slide. I'd grown out of the park when I was around ten, although that didn't stop me from trying back then.

"That was a good one, Clark. Anyone else there with you? I haven't heard from Dax in a bit."

"No, I saw Serena Gates there." I flipped my turn signal, coming to a stop in the left-hand turning lane right before the light close to home. I was glad we weren't face to face.

"I didn't know you were friends with Serena. When did that happen?" Jake asked. A sound like water turning on in the background filtered through the phone.

What I wouldn't give to have friends who weren't so alert about things. "We sat next to each other at the play before school got out. I wouldn't say we're friends. I barely know her."

“But you could be friends, or more than friends.” From the sound of Jake’s voice, he was teasing. “Maybe you should double with Penny and me. She’d love to have one of her friends hanging out with mine. You’re the most normal, so that’s a plus.”

“What’s not normal about this?” Dax’s voice sounded over the phone, and I pulled mine away, wondering if I’d been cut off.

“Dax, we were just talking about you,” Jake said, his voice sounding far away for most of the sentence. “Catcher of the Year just showed up at my house,” he said into the phone this time.

Jake and I both chuckled. “Nothing is normal about you, Dax,” I said as I pulled onto my street.

When the laughter subsided, Jake said, “Are you free next week? I’ll have Penny set things up.”

I hesitated. I wanted to go out with Serena, but having my friend set it up would make me look like a chicken. It would definitely be easier than working through my stutter in front of her, but knowing the guys she’d dated in the past, I knew I had to be more confident. “Yeah, but text me the details and I’ll ask her myself.”

“Really? You’ll really ask her out?”

I took in a long breath, knowing they wouldn’t let me go back if I committed to it. “I’ll give it a try.”

“Nice. Will do.”

“Okay, family dinner awaits.” I pulled into our driveway and turned off the engine.

“Hey, Ben. We’re planning guys’night over at Nate’s house Monday night. Just meet us there around eight,” Dax said. “And that means no girlfriends.” I could only assume he was staring Jake down right then.

“I got that from your emphasis on guys’night, Dax. Penny’s busy with her dad and brother Monday anyway. It will be good to just hang out with all of us.”

“Sounds good, guys. I’ll see you then.” I slid my phone into the pocket of my gym shorts and walked inside.

My thoughts turned to Serena again. She’d been kind of ornery when I’d first sat down by her, but by the end of the conversation, she’d relaxed somewhat. I’d be mad too if I hadn’t been able to keep playing my favorite sport, but at least it wasn’t a major tournament or anything.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

Where did Serena live? The thought caused me to pause. I really shouldn't worry about her. A girl like her would never go for a guy who struggled to put two sentences together around her.

Then again, I'd surprised myself by keeping the stuttering to a minimum when we were sitting on the bench. I even felt somewhat cool when I entered my number into her phone. And she'd smiled like she couldn't believe I'd done that.

Man, I liked her smile.

Giving out my number was something I'd never had the guts to do before with other girls, but some unknown courage helped. Maybe it was the thought of what Jake or Dax would do that helped me not panic. If only I were as smooth as they were instead of tall and awkward.

With a full summer of baseball ahead of me, I was better off forgetting about her. That would make going into senior year a whole lot easier. But there were some challenges I still couldn't back down from, and asking Serena out was now one of them.

Eight

Ben

I spent Monday morning at baseball practice and then helping my mom with her flower gardens. She spent so much time out there day after day that I liked to tease her that they were her favorite child. She didn't love that, but she'd learned I was

usually kidding when I said it.

Daniel and I had built a sandcastle that sunk on one side in our play area around back. At least it was under a large weeping willow, giving my body time to acclimate after being out in the heat all morning.

“Where are you going with the bucket?” I asked Daniel as his little legs ran through the crabgrass toward the house. He put it beneath the outside faucet and turned the wheel, sending water crashing into the bucket and then all around. By the time he got it turned off, his shirt and shorts were soaked, as were his socks. It didn’t seem to faze him as he beamed, picking up the bucket and lugging it with uneven steps over to the sand pile.

“We need a river,” he said, turning the bucket over. Instead of landing in the hole we’d called a moat, it splashed over the castle, making it look like the sand was melting away.

I laughed loudly as I watched his face go from excited to confused as he knelt by the smooth mounds of sand.

“I killed it.”

“You definitely did that, Daniel. Can we play later? I have to go to work and then Nate’s.”

“Can I come?” he asked, his hands clasped together as he stared into my eyes. It was always hard to turn him down when he did that.

Breathing out a sigh, I said, “If Mom says it’s all right, I’ll come back and pick you up.”

He hopped up and down, practically bouncing around the yard. I'd taken Daniel with me to hang out with the guys a few times, and it was usually pretty fun. Daniel's infectious personality made it hard not to love him.

I walked inside to grab a different hat than the one I wore to games, and threw on my work polo and some cargo pants.

"I can't go." Daniel stood at the door to my bedroom with tears in his eyes.

With my phone and wallet in hand, I turned and squatted down, making it easier to be eye level with him. "Mom said no, huh?"

He nodded. "She said she's taking me to the store. I got holes in my shoes and need new ones."

I ruffled his hair and pulled him to me, giving him a big hug.

When he stepped back, I said, "What if we have a movie night or something tomorrow? I don't have work or practice, and we can ask Mom if we can make popcorn. Maybe she'll let you get some treats when you're shopping."

He danced from foot to foot, his eyes bright with the idea of a movie night. "Can I pick the movie?"

I stood, feeling the numbness in my legs from squatting for so long. "Of course." It would be the same movie he'd watched every chance he could for the past month, but I'd survive one more viewing of it. I practically had the thing memorized.

Stepping past him, I walked over to the stairs. "Be good for Mom, okay?"

I saw him nod before I turned and sped down the stairs. "Mom, I'm heading to work

and then Nate's," I called.

She stepped out of the laundry room on the other side of the kitchen. "Okay, just remember not to stay out too late. You have a dentist appointment in the morning."

"I know, Mom," I said, trying to keep my tone even. She was just trying to watch out for me, but I was usually on top of my schedule. It made me wonder how she'd react if I weren't so responsible.

I drove to the clinic, glad I had an earlier shift than usual. That meant I wouldn't have to stay and wipe everything down after everyone left. To be honest, work wasn't the first thing I wanted to do now that it was summer, but it was worth it to get some experience and a little money.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

Stepping through the doors, I glanced at the schedule of people who'd checked in, recognizing most of the names. I scrolled over to see the ones who'd be coming in later, which helped me prepare things for my boss to use. As I made it down to the times at the end of my shift, the very last name stood out to me, and panic took over.

Serena Gates.

Nine

Serena

As much as I dreaded going to the physical therapist, I was over hobbling around, unable to walk like normal. It had only been two days, and I knew I wouldn't survive in a cast for weeks or months.

My mom dropped me off on her way to her shop in downtown Pecan Flatts since it was too painful to drive with my right foot.

"You're not coming in, Mom?" I asked as she pulled up to the curb.

She grabbed her wallet from her purse and pulled out an insurance card with my name on it. "I'm already late for a meeting, Rena. Here's your insurance card, and just use your credit card for the co-pay. Your dad should be free to pick you up. He said something about finishing with his trainer around six." She pushed up her sunglasses and fixed her hair in the mirror. "I'll be home for dinner tonight, though. I think Liza made your favorite: chicken and kale."

I opened my mouth to say that was most definitely her favorite dinner, while I could probably find something better to eat in the trash. But now was not the time to argue. She was already irritated as it was. Just another reason for my ankle to get better. I needed the freedom driving myself places I could afford, because when my parents forgot about me, at least I wasn't begging them to be dropped off places like I'd done for years before I got my driver's license.

I got out and hopped on one foot to open the back door of my mom's SUV. I grabbed the crutches I'd been using the past day and a half. They were from when my dad had knee surgery three years before, and even on the lowest setting, they were awkward to maneuver. But anything was better than hopping or putting my full weight on one foot the whole time.

Walking through the door, I was greeted by the receptionist, who took all my information, insurance card, and payment before ushering me into the back room.

"This is John Talbot. He's the owner and head physical therapist of the place and will get you fixed right up." The woman left me in front of a guy who looked like he could've taken on a truck in a game of chicken.

"Serena Gates, it's a pleasure to finally meet you." He reached out his hand, and I placed mine in it, surprised that it disappeared beneath his thick fingers.

I frowned, wondering who he could have been talking to about me. "Finally?"

"Your dad talks about you all the time. He said you'd be in today when I saw him this morning at the gym. We go way back." The guy's broad smile was infectious, and as curious as I was about the truth of his words, I couldn't stop a smile. I just wished my dad would spend more time talking to me than about me.

A few seconds ticked by, and as John dropped my hand, the pieces clicked. "Are you

Big T?”

The man chuckled, the sound so deep I was sure he had to be using a voice synthesizer. “That was my nickname back in college. Your dad and I played together and then got drafted in the same round. I ended up with too many concussions after a few games and the doctor said if I got hit one more time, it wouldn’t go over well.”

“I’m surprised I haven’t met you before. Dad talks about you all the time.” I leaned onto the crutches, the burn in my good calf making it hard to focus.

John waved. “I met you a few times when you were a kid, but with how busy your parents are, it’s hard to find a time to get together.”

“You’re telling me,” I mumbled. The words struck too close to home, and I was just ready to get going with this appointment.

He patted a table and said, “Hop up here. We’ll get you warmed up and going. Did you bring your x-rays?”

All the air rushed out of my lungs. “Um, I didn’t get an x-ray done.”

“MRI?”

Shaking my head, a wave of shame rushed up, the heat singeing my neck and cheeks. John seemed to understand my embarrassment and patted the table again. I’d just trusted my dad when he said I wouldn’t have to go to a doctor for the injury. My worry now was that I’d have to go to the hospital and my ride had already left.

“I’m going to push around a bit, just to check things out, if that’s okay?” He looked me in the eyes, waiting for confirmation.

“Do what you need to. The sooner I can walk on my own, the better off I’ll be.” I hated the desperation in my voice, like I was one burst of wind away from blowing down the castle of cards that was my life.

He pushed and prodded, bending and flexing my foot at different angles. When I cried out the last time, he stood. “From what I can tell, it’s a severe sprain. Hey, Clark,” he said to someone across the room. “Bring me a heat pack, will you?”

A tall, lanky form came to my side with the heat pack, greeting me with a nod and a nervous smile. “Hey, Serena.”

“Ben? What are you doing here?” I stared at him, wondering if I was dreaming. He’d been in my thoughts a lot since Saturday, probably because I was trying to figure out if he was for real.

The corners of his mouth turned up, his eyes bright. “I-I’m an intern here. So pretty much the errand boy.” He grinned, glancing at John.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“Now, now. Errand boy makes it sound bad. How about my personal servant?” John chuckled, the sound even deeper than before. “It looks like you two know each other.”

I nodded. “From school.”

John grabbed some cords from the machine next to me and peeled off the plastic square attached to two square pads. He placed them above and below my ankle, the cold from the pads making me jump a bit. He turned to the machine, pressing the arrows upward. The pads created a few pulls, like a massage to my ankle.

“Let me know when to stop. You don’t want it to be stabbing pain, just enough to stimulate the muscles.” His finger slowed down, waiting a few seconds in between. The massaging turned to stabbing, and I cried out. “Okay, let’s go to the level below that.”

I leaned my head back on the small pillow, trying not to glance at the boy still standing to my left.

“Clark, how’s the wing feeling?” John asked him.

Ben bent his arm and then waved it around in circles. “Feeling good. I was going to talk to you about that. I, um, we have a tournament this weekend, and we have to leave Thursday night. Can I come in during the morning shift?” Ben bit his lower lip, his whole body tense. It seemed odd to be so worried about a job, but then again, I’d never had one.

“No problem. Just make sure Nancy knows to change it on the schedule.” John clapped Ben on the back and pointed to my ankle. “I’ve got to help Shirley for a few minutes. Once the machine beeps, take her over to the wall and work on a couple of stretches.”

John walked away, and I stared at Ben, my mouth dropped open. “You’re going to help me?” I tried to avoid the guilt I felt at seeing his expression drop.

“Uh, k-kind of. John will be right next to me while we go through your drills. He’ll just be working with the older lady across the room.” Ben pointed, and I turned, trying to locate the woman he was talking about.

Several people were spread out around the room, some on the tables for the electric stimulation to their injuries, like mine. Others were in the area with balls, boards, and bands, all working to strengthen muscles that were injured. The last group was in the hot and cold pools, one guy even submerged up to his neck in the cold. John was standing next to a frail woman.

Curious, I looked up at Ben. “How did you become an intern here?”

Ben shifted his weight from foot to foot, a flicker of emotion playing across his face. “If it were my choice, I’d just be doing schoolwork and baseball, at least until I graduate. I, uh, well, my dad told me I needed a real future, that I couldn’t just rely on baseball for a career. He wanted me to intern at his law office, but I, uh, I’m not good with sitting behind a desk. I like helping people, and this is what I want to do if baseball doesn’t work out.”

He avoided my gaze, and his words hit home. “I can’t believe you already have an internship. I haven’t even thought about what I want to do with my life.” I inspected my fingernails, sadness sweeping over me. At least his dad cared enough to give him direction. I lifted my gaze. “I’m sorry. My mom feels the same way about

volleyball.”

His eyes lifted to mine, the deep blue of them causing my stomach to flip. Traitor. “Really?” The hope on his face made me smile.

I nodded. “My dad is supportive, except for the showing-up-and-cheering-me-on part. My mom wishes I would be a supermodel or something like that.”

Ben gave me a small smile. “My mom and brother come to all of my games. I think my dad has been to two games my entire high school career.” He paused, and I saw his shoulders relax. He’d made it through thirty seconds without stuttering. “He came to the semi-final game this year. The one we lost.” He shook his head, the emotion apparently just as raw as it could have been the day of the game.

“If your dad is anything like my mom, he probably rubbed in the fact that ‘sports aren’t a sure thing’ and that you ‘need to find a passion that’s more stable.’ I just wish she could see how much volleyball means to me. I mean, maybe I should have a better motivator to keep my grades up, but that’s why I practically killed myself trying to get all the assignments done at the end of the school year.”

Ben turned and leaned against the edge of my table, folding his arms across his chest. “It’s amazing what the loss of something we love can motivate us to do. I like it here, though. This is what I’d like to major in when I get to college.”

“You want to watch people in pain?” I asked, grinning at the small joke.

“I think it’s cool how people can come in broken and eventually leave healed. Or as good as possible.” His eyes had a faraway look, and I suddenly wanted to know more.

“What caused you to want to go into physical therapy? Have you been hurt before or had some kind of surgery?” I shifted to a sitting position, surprised at how curious I

was.

He shook his head. “No injuries or surgery, although working here gives me a chance to strengthen my arm against injuries. Daniel, my brother, he, uh, had a lot of trouble with motor function and being able to walk when he was younger. Therapists would come in several times a week to work on activities to get his muscles strong enough to walk. I always thought that was so cool, like they were changing a life.”

I paused, trying to figure out what to say. “That, that’s awesome.” I’d never had anything like that impact my life. The most excitement I’d ever experienced was moving to Pecan Flatts when I was five so my dad could join the Texans. Ben’s story made me long for something similar—a purpose in life other than just playing volleyball and getting mad at my parents for neglecting me.

Ben stared at me for several seconds, and as I reviewed everything we’d talked about, a connection filled me. As much as I loved my group of friends, they all had people to support them in all their decisions. I’d just found someone who understood what it was like to want something so bad and not have anyone to cheer me on when I finally got it.

The machine next to me beeped several times, and Ben pulled off the gray heating pad, laying it on the table next to my ankle. I watched as his long fingers moved quickly to pull the pads off my ankles, his fingers brushing my skin causing a tingling sensation. There was so much that made up Ben Clark, and something pulled me to him, like I wanted to keep needling him with questions to learn more about him.

I hopped off the table like nothing was wrong with my ankle, and the pain shot up in waves. It took a few hops for it to ease, and I found myself able to breathe normally again.

Ben caught me under the arms. “Let me help you.”

I grasped onto his upper arm, leaning on him as we covered the distance between the table and the area where John was. We were close to one another, and that same scent from the play wafted up to my nose. I breathed in slowly, not wanting him to think I was some creeper. He just had good taste in cologne.

Once we made it to the area with medicine balls, stretching bands, and Styrofoam rollers, I was out of breath. “Thank you. I didn’t realize it would be that hard to make it such a short distance without the crutches.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

Ben smiled, and the combination of his cologne and the dark blue eyes caused a surge of attraction to blossom in my chest.

“Don’t worry. John will help you get back to playing in no time.”

“Mmmm-hmmm.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. No wonder Penny had gone from a hardcore tomboy to a more feminine athlete with a boyfriend. I shook it off, doing my best to focus on the stretch John showed me on a raised platform. Boys in general were just a surefire way to tears, but Ben was showing me that maybe I’d jumped to the wrong conclusions about every guy in the world.

We worked through several stretches and then a few strengthening exercises. Ben’s patience helped to keep me calm, even when I felt the pain. His dry sense of humor had me laughing a few times, and I was almost sad to be done with the session.

I texted my dad as I sat with my leg dangling in the cold bath. Twenty minutes would give him plenty of time to pick me up. When I glanced out the window at the parking lot when I was done soaking, however, there was no sign of the red sports car. I tried to shake it off, hoping to keep the tears at bay. I’d already cried enough over the last week. I didn’t need to continue the waterworks where the world could see.

Ten

Ben

I pretended like I hadn’t been glancing up at Serena while I helped another patient get hooked up to the stimulation machine. She was talking to another girl sharing the

cold tub and they were laughing about something, probably with the light dose of sarcasm I knew her for.

“Ben, go grab Serena and let’s get her ready to head out.” John’s words made me jump, and I wondered how long I’d been staring at her.

I nodded and strolled over to the small room with the tubs. “John said he’s ready for you, Serena. Let me help you out.” I grabbed a towel from the rack and held it out, waiting for her to lift her foot out of the whirlpool.

She reached for the towel, but I quickly dried off her foot and then held her upper arm, waiting for her to step down. “Thanks,” she said, red surging to her cheeks.

“Here, let me help you.” I lifted her arm gently and placed it around my back. One drawback of being so tall was most people couldn’t put their arm around my shoulders.

The first step we took, she lost her balance, and her reflex caused her other arm to go around my waist, hugging my middle tightly. It took a few seconds for her to relax. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—I mean, um, I thought I was going to fall again.”

“I’ve got you,” I said, smiling down at her.

Her smile in return was hesitant at first, her eyes searching my own for something I couldn’t figure out. She blinked and looked down, her arm nudging me forward like she was ready to go. It took a few steps before we were able to get into a rhythm, making it out to the taping area near the front of the clinic.

“That was faster than the crutches for sure.” Serena grinned at me as she shifted onto the table and scooted with her back to the wall.

All I could do was nod. This had been the best forty-five minutes of work ever, and I was sad to see it ending.

John walked up, pulling a new Ace bandage out of the drawer below, and started wrapping her foot.

“How long will it take to heal?” Serena asked him.

“I think you’re at a grade-two sprain. Worse than a quick tweak where you keep playing on it and it starts to feel better. You’ve still got pain coming from it, right?” He looked up at Serena, but she didn’t meet his eyes, concentrating on his hands wrapping the bandage.

She shrugged. “Yeah, I guess as long as I don’t go jumping off tables,” she glanced up at me with a smile before focusing back on the wrapping, “it’s not horrible.”

“Good. It’s going to be anywhere from four to eight weeks. Just don’t push it yet. Most people with an injury like yours need at least two months or so before they feel like they can put their full weight on it.”

I opened the ice machine, not wanting to leave to do anything else while she was still there. After scooping some ice into a plastic bag, I spun it around and wrapped the ends around my fingers, tying it off as I watched John finish wrapping her ankle.

Once he finished, John said, “I’d say come in at least three times a week for now. The more we can strengthen it, the sooner you’ll be back to normal, which your father requested.”

“He did?” The surprise on her face made her look more vulnerable than the outer shell of sarcasm she usually wore. But after all I’d learned about her in the past few weeks, especially today, it was understandable. I’d probably feel the same loneliness

she felt if my mom didn't come to all my games. And yet, Serena seemed to be grasping at any sort of love her parents would give her.

“Yeah, he said to make sure we take every measure to ensure a speedy rehab. The most important part now is to not rush it outside this clinic. You might feel stronger, but you don't want to do more damage because you pushed harder than your ankle can handle. Just trust the process, and we'll get you fixed up.”

Once finished, Serena slid down and grabbed the crutches, looking as though she wanted to throw them across the room.

John chuckled and looked at me. “Clark, go grab a pair of crutches that are a normal size for Serena.” He turned to Serena. “Using your dad's old set won't make it easy to maneuver.”

“You've got that right,” Serena said, smirking. I hadn't looked at the crutches until John said something, but they were way too tall for her.

I hurried into the back room, having to sort through a few stacks of different sizes. It would be a lot easier if everything had been organized into certain rows, but I wasn't going to mess with John's system. I already had too much to do around the clinic.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

After a few minutes, I found a match and brought them out to her. When she tried to walk with them, her eyes lit up.

“So much better! Thank you.” She moved in the direction of the receptionist, giving me a quick wave as she stopped for a quick break.

“Bye,” I said.

She nodded and grinned. “Thanks for all your help, Ben.”

That smile got me through the next half-hour of cleaning and sanitizing the tables and machines throughout the clinic. We were assigned to do it periodically throughout the day to maintain cleanliness as the patients came in and out.

Once I finished, I poked my head into John’s office and said, “I’m heading out. I’ll see you Thursday.”

“Yeah, man. Of course. If I’m not here when you leave, good luck at the tourney. You’ve got a lot of people cheering you on. Are you starting any of the games?”

It was hard to believe he cared. I knew I would forever have the support of my mom and Daniel, but most of the crowd at my baseball games was for the rest of my teammates.

“It’s a possibility. I’ll just have to see what Coach says. Going up against Monmouth would be fun since we smoked them last time. But they didn’t have their best player at the time. I’ve always wanted to see what I could do against him.”

John stood and rested his hand on my shoulder. “I bet you’d get him. Get out of here. Go cause a little trouble this summer. Just don’t tell your mom I said that.” He pointed at me and chuckled.

I turned to go, but his voice pulled me back. “And when it comes to Serena, I think you should go for it.”

I paused, my heart thundering in my ears. “What?”

“Her dad isn’t the best example of a father, and from today, it sounds like she can be a bit sarcastic, but from everything I’ve heard about her, she’s a good kid.”

“I-I-I don’t like her like that,” I said, raising my hands in defense. The lie was bitter on my tongue.

John gave me a knowing smile. “Whatever. I’ll see you later.”

I said goodbye and headed out the door, replaying Serena’s session to see what clues I’d given to John that I had a crush on Serena. Pulling my keys out of my pants pocket, I fiddled with them and grabbed the one that would start my truck.

Sobbing to my left caused me to turn my head, and I saw a familiar form sitting on the curb, crutches lying on the cement sidewalk next to her.

“Serena? Are you all right? What are you still doing here?” I stalked over and squatted down in front of her.

Wiping away the tears, she took in a deep breath. “I’m so sorry. I don’t usually get so emotional.”

“Did you call someone to come get you?” I searched her eyes, but she wouldn’t meet

mine.

“Yes, I’ve called and texted my parents several times.” She blinked rapidly, wiping the remaining tears away. “I just—it’s just so frustrating that I always seem to be forgotten or the very last person they think of. One more reason I need this ankle to heal, so I can drive myself.”

I stood, reaching out both hands. “Let’s go.”

She started and glanced at my outstretched hands. “Go where?”

“I can take you home. Or we can go on a drive or something.” I shrugged. I hadn’t thought it all out just yet. I could show up later to Nate’s house. It wasn’t like we had a set plan for what we were doing.

A few more seconds of hesitation passed before she reached up, her small hands grasping mine as she stood. It felt like a shockwave passed through the nerves in my hands, and I liked it.

I leaned down and picked up the crutches, holding them with my left hand while I supported her with my right. “Just take it easy here. I’m that truck over there.”

Serena looked in the direction I motioned with my head and giggled. “Wait, that’s your truck?”

A wave of embarrassment passed through me. “Yep. That would be mine.”

“I saw it the other day at the park, but didn’t pay attention to how small it was. How do you fit in there?” She looked between me and the truck, surprised.

“That’s a great question. I can’t tell you how many bruises I’ve gotten on my knees

from hitting the dashboard when I get in.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“Why not get a bigger car or truck? You deserve one that will fit all of you.” Serena looked up at me, her eyes bright with laughter, and I stumbled a bit, catching myself before we both went down.

A bunch of reasons passed through my mind as to why I couldn’t get a different vehicle. “I have to save just about everything I make here for gas and insurance. My dad is very into the idea of being self-sufficient. He bought the truck for me, but I have to take care of the rest. Sort of like a rental, I guess.”

I opened the passenger door for her and then placed the crutches in the bed of the truck. When she was in, I shut the door and hurried around to get behind the wheel. For the first time in a while, I didn’t slam my knee against anything when getting in.

“Your head practically touches the ceiling,” Serena said, laughing. She leaned over and put her hand on my head, flattening my hair. Her touch sent chills through me. “You’ve got an inch or so. How do you even see out the windshield?”

Hunching over, I said, “Like this.” I turned and flashed her a grin.

“If I were you, I’d request something different, citing future scoliosis problems.”

I waved my hand. “Yeah, then he’d just send me to work earlier to get that problem fixed by John.”

Serena laughed even harder than she’d done before, and I matched her, tears sliding out of my eyes because I couldn’t control them.

She directed me to her house, and as we drove down her cul-de-sac, I recognized the area.

“You live by Nate Everton?” I asked as I pulled into her driveway and put the gear in park. I was sad the ride couldn’t be longer.

She unbuckled her seat belt and turned to me. With a nod, she said, “Yeah, he’s lived there since before we moved in, and that’s been about eleven years, I think.”

I chuckled. “Well, that works out because I’m heading over there right now. We’re having a guys’ night.”

“Thank you—for the ride, for listening to me jabber on, for everything,” Serena said, pink tinging her cheeks. “And thanks for making me laugh. I definitely needed it today. Hopefully, you don’t get scoliosis.”

“I think my abs might be sore tomorrow from all the laughing.” I patted my stomach, feeling self-conscious suddenly. I was basically a tall, awkward teen, not someone Serena usually went for with big muscles and washboard abs. “I hope you feel at least a little better. Let me know if I can help you out at all, maybe send a meme when you’re in pain.”

She sat there for a few more seconds, her face relaxed with a slight smile, before pulling the handle on the door.

I shook off the self-doubt and jumped out of the truck and over to her side. One thing my father had always told me was to treat women with the utmost respect. Even if Serena didn’t like me, I hoped she appreciated the little things.

I grabbed the crutches and held out my arm, trying to use every last second to see her before she went inside. She punched in a code on the large garage, and I walked her

up to the door, slow enough to let her take one step at a time. I opened the door and helped her through the hall and into the large living room. I'd never seen a room so big in my entire life. Our house was a decent size, but it could probably fit in that space alone.

"This is pretty cool." I didn't realize my mouth had been hanging open until she reached up and shut it with her fingers.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. I'm not home often enough to enjoy it. Some say it's a perk of being the daughter of a pro football player." I caught a bitterness in her words and wanted to know more.

After helping her over to the couch, I brought a pillow to elevate her ankle and stood awkwardly before her. "What's it like having a dad in a professional sport?" My dad was so against me playing baseball that I kind of wondered what it would be like to have a dad who'd made a career out of his sport."

She gave a short laugh. "It's not all it's cracked up to be, let me tell you. My parents are never home."

"They don't come to your games or anything?"

"Not often." Her tone told me she didn't want to share more.

I glanced around, trying to see if there was something I could do for her. "Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head. "No, I think I'll be good. Thank you again for everything."

I heard a sound coming from the garage and then the engine of a car. We weren't doing anything wrong, but I suddenly felt like I needed to hide.

“Should I, um, well, garage or front door?” I stammered, my eyes widening.

She must have seen the panic on my face because she started laughing. By the time she settled down a bit, she didn’t have a chance to say anything as the door opened and in walked who I assumed were her parents. The moment I saw her dad in person, my mouth dropped open once more.

Steve Gates was even bigger than when I’d seen him on TV. No wonder they needed such a large space. He looked like he could toss me through the giant windows at least thirty feet away from where I was standing.

“Serena, you’re home?” the petite blonde said as she dropped her wallet and keys on the counter. The only similarities between her and Serena were the pointed nose and the crystal-blue eyes. All of Serena’s other features matched her father, aside from the height and size.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“Yep.” Serena didn’t move to turn around, and I tried to hold back the anxiety wrapping itself around my lungs.

The woman tilted her head, undoing her earrings. “Who’s your friend?” Her gaze looked me up and down, her expression neutral. Usually I felt dressed up in cargo pants and a polo, but in comparison to the clothes her parents wore and the extravagance of the house, I wished I’d escaped before they came in.

“This is Ben Clark. Ben, my dad and mom, Steve and Rachel Gates.”

Her father stepped forward with his hand outstretched. “We don’t get to meet too many friends of Rena’s.”

I put my hand in his, his palm basically swallowing up mine. For a moment, I had a vision of him crushing it, making it impossible for me to pitch in the tournament this weekend. I’d had to help someone with a fractured hand a few months ago at the clinic, and from the looks of it, rehabbing a broken hand wasn’t something I wanted to experience.

The handshake was firm, no pain inflicted. “It’s nice to, uh, meet you, um, sir.” My mind raced, trying to think of something better to say, some way to connect to this giant of a man and the father of the girl I had a crush on. I chanced a look in Serena’s direction, seeing an expression that matched her mother’s, only with the corners of her mouth tugged up slightly. “I was, j-just bringing Serena home after t-therapy.”

Now was not the time to start stuttering again. I really liked this girl, and I was totally messing up every chance I had at a date in the future.

“That’s right. How did your first therapy session go, doll?” Steve sat down on the other end of the couch, staring at Serena for an answer.

“It was great, aside from the fact that my parents forgot to pick me up.” She sighed, the sound more like exasperation. “I can’t wait to be done with rehab so I don’t have to rely on people all the time.” She turned in my direction. “I do appreciate it, Ben.”

The sadness in her eyes made me want to pull her into a hug and sit for a while, but with her father’s bulk sitting two feet away, that wouldn’t be the wisest decision.

“No problem. Um, I’ve got to run. The guys will be wondering where I am. It w-was nice to m-meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Gates. See you later, Serena.” I jogged to the front door, unlocked it, and ran out to my truck. I’d never been so relieved to be outside and away from the eyes of her parents. Except I was just going one house down.

Once I parked in Nate’s long driveway, behind Jake’s Jeep and Dax’s small car, I heard the ding of a text message.

Thank you so much. Sorry things were so awkward. I’ll see you at the clinic sometime.

There was that hope again, spreading even though I wished it wouldn’t. I had a full-on crush for Serena Gates, and I was pretty sure that if things didn’t work out, it would do more damage to my brain than I could control.

Eleven

Serena

“What’s wrong, doll?” my dad asked, still sitting beside me on the couch.

“What’s wrong is that I can’t even count on my own parents for anything. How many games have you come to this year?” I took a breath, trying to calm the rising screech in my voice.

Mom took a seat on the wingback chair to my right, crossing her legs and looking just as proper as ever. “Serena, honey, your dad met me at the office to get fitted for a suit I just designed so it will be ready in time for the gala we have to attend next week. But you can count on us for things. And we’ve been to some of your games this year. We went to that tournament a few months ago over in Springside.”

I leaned forward, the nonchalance in her tone driving my anger to the breaking point. “That was the first tournament of the year, and you stayed for thirty minutes.”

Holding her arms out and looking around the room, Mom said, “We have to work so you can enjoy everything we have here. You should be grateful for all the things we can give you—your car, a nice home, spending money.”

“I don’t care about that, Mom. I hate being here all by myself.” I stood, not wanting to stay in the room for a moment longer. I left the crutches, sick of maneuvering with them and silently hoping that hopping through the house would make them more sympathetic.

“You’re going to hurt yourself more, Rena,” my dad’s voice called after me, but I focused on the steps in front of me instead of the soothing calm of his voice. How he could be so vicious on the football field but so chill outside of it, I’d never understand.

I shook my head once I got to the top of the staircase. “Is it too much to ask for you to actually care about me every once in a while?” Tears surged, and I knew I couldn’t hold them back any longer. I turned and hobbled to my bedroom, throwing myself on the bed with a sob.

Just a few moments passed before the side of my bed sank down and fingers combed through my ponytail. “Come on, girl. No tears.”

“Just leave me alone, Dad.” I sniffed, wiping at my cheeks before resting them back onto my arms as I stared down at whatever bedspread my mother had bought for me a few months ago.

“I can’t do that. Talk to me.”

The internal debate began, and several seconds passed before I pushed up from the bed and sat with my back against the headboard.

“It’s the same old thing, Dad. Let’s just forget about it.” I looked down, my fingers twirling the small ties in the quilt.

My dad’s finger lifted my chin so I was looking at him. “There are definitely things we’ve messed up on, Rena. We’re new to this parenting-a-teenager stage, just like you’re trying to navigate life as a seventeen—”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“Sixteen, Dad. I’m sixteen.” I couldn’t help but say it with a bit of a smile.

He smiled, and I realized he’d done it to make sure I was paying attention. “That’s right, sixteen-year-old. We’re going to make some mistakes. Just give us some time, maybe a little forgiveness, and we’ll get through this together, all right?” He stretched his fist out in front of him, tilting his head to the side as he waited for me to reciprocate.

Half-heartedly, I reached over and softly punched my knuckles into his. “Fine, but you better not forget me next time.”

My pro-football-player dad grinned, not the scary expression he used for the field, but the look of a guy who knew how to smooth things over.

Once he left the room, my thoughts turned to my friends and their families. Penny’s dad came to as many games as he could, depending on his work schedule, and with all she’d gone through with her mom leaving, Penny understood. Brynn’s parents seemed fairly supportive, and Kate’s—well, when your mom was the PTA president, it wasn’t hard to see where her priorities were.

Ben’s face came to mind as I thought about him running out the door. At least his mom and brother showed up to games, even if his dad didn’t. But I had a feeling there was something more going on there, and the connection I’d felt a couple of times when I was around him only grew stronger.

I was so sick of feeling like the second-place loser when it came to my own family. As much as I wanted to hope that the little talk I’d had with my dad would help

change things, that would just be worse than accepting the fact that until I was able to move out on my own, I was more of a decoration than a daughter to support.

I cried long into the night, wishing something would change enough to make my life less heartbreaking.

Twelve

Serena

“Wanna come with us to the baseball game?” Penny asked through video chat Friday morning. Of course, she couldn’t just text me like every other person on the planet, but I was grateful for that. It had been a week or two since I’d hung out with my friends, the downside to being the only one without a job and unable to drive anywhere at the moment.

“Who all is going?” I asked, drinking the last of the milk in my cereal bowl.

“Me, Kate, Brynn. I can pick you up from your physical therapy appointment.” Penny’s voice held something more in it, like she expected some huge confession to spill out of me.

I stood, hopping on one foot to take my bowl to the kitchen. It was hard to maneuver with the crutches around the island, so I channeled my best inner bunny and made it to the sink. Once I made it back to the table, I lifted the crutches and placed them a foot or two in front of me. I grabbed my phone and leaned into the crutches as I swung my lower body with them, grateful my armpits weren’t as sore as they’d been the past few days. And having crutches the right size, as opposed to using my dad’s, made all the difference in me wanting to move around. Maybe I’d get used to these things right when I didn’t have to use them anymore.

“Yeah, I’m game. Just pick me up at three, if that’s all right.” I made it into the family room where I plopped down on the couch and dropped the crutches on the floor.

Penny nodded. “Of course. I’ll be over that way to help my dad with a job before, so it works out.”

“Why is everyone going to the game? I know you’re there for Jake, but what about the other two?”

“Kate said she wanted to support as many teams as possible since she’s the new student body president for next year.” We both rolled our eyes at that. I loved Kate, but she took things to a whole new level. “Brynn said she’s got nothing else to do since the family she nannies for is going to a family reunion this weekend.”

“How are things going for your comp team, Pen? Have you talked to any of the college coaches yet?” I shifted up on the couch, easing the numbness that had started in my lower back from not moving for so long.

Penny shrugged. “A few. None that are on my list, but there’s still time. At least, I hope.”

“It’s easier when you’re playing on a competitive team instead of relying on girls who only picked up a ball at the beginning of the season. We’re only a couple weeks into the summer. You’ll be fine.”

I’d been to a couple of the high school softball games, and there were a few girls who, when the ball came their way, made me cringe, hoping they’d at least keep the ball in front of them. The benefit to high school volleyball was that most of the girls who played were also on my comp team, so we worked together seamlessly. Except when I stepped on their leg.

With a giant grin, Penny said, “Look who’s all positive right now. Have you been brainwashed or something?” She chuckled, and I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“Oh, come on. Can’t a girl be supportive of a friend and fellow athlete?” I laughed at the look on her face, which reminded me of the afternoon I went to talk to the art teacher instead of going to lunch.

“You’re usually a little less peppy. Any particular reason for the change?” Her words brought up a mental picture of Ben, and I tried to shrug it off.

“Nope. I’ve got to run—okay, not literally, but I need a nap before I have to go to therapy. I’ll see you in a bit.”

* * *

Penny picked me up as promised, and we met the other girls in the parking lot of the local baseball complex. John had finally said I could go without the crutches, but he’d wrapped my ankle tighter than normal and gave me a large boot, probably to compensate for it.

I hobbled with the girls down the walkway between two fields, both occupied with teams and coaches and parents. With the awkwardness of walking on the boot, I wondered if it would actually be easier with the crutches.

A few clouds broke up some of the heat from the sun, and we settled onto the metal bleachers behind the plate. The announcer read off the starting lineup, and my eyes kept straying to number eighteen on the sidelines.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

Ben's name was called last, and he ran out to the mound, picking up the ball and whipping his arm around several times. He set up and waved his glove to the catcher before stepping forward and hurling the ball toward the plate.

"How fast does he throw?" I asked, suddenly curious. I'd never grown up with baseball in our house, as my dad was so focused on football and rugby that I only knew snippets of other sports. But it looked like the ball was coming in faster than I'd ever seen in person.

"Jake said his fastball comes in around the mid-eighties."

That sounded fast, but I had nothing to measure it against. "Is that good?"

Penny grinned. "Yeah, for a high school pitcher, that's really good. Ben acts like he's not that great, but he's been a top prospect the whole year. With how much of a perfectionist he is with his pitches, he deserves it."

"Are you saying you're not a perfectionist? It's not often I come to your house and you're not out there practicing." I raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to admit it.

"Okay, I like having control of my pitches, but Ben takes it to another level. He gets mad at himself if he doesn't perform well."

I sat back, watching as Ben posed again and threw the ball home before moving to the side for the catcher to throw it down to second base. If he was a perfectionist, it would explain why he'd thrown several buckets of balls at the park the day I sprained my ankle.

Play continued, and I was surprised how interested I was in the game. I must have just assumed Ben was a tall, awkward athlete since that's how he'd acted the last few times we'd been together, but on the mound, he was impressive. He even snagged a ball coming back at his face faster than I'd be able to react.

The game ended with our team coming out on top, five to four. Brynn and Kate left soon after, saying something about family obligations. My parents were flying to Florida at the moment for one last trip before NFL practice began, something about needing to check out the manufacturers for my mom's clothing line. Part of me wanted to tell Ben he'd done a great job, and since Penny was staying to talk to Jake, I figured it worked out.

I waited for the stands to be almost clear before attempting to walk down the stairs. Penny walked over and hugged Jake, and the two of them began talking about plays and using words I had no idea the meaning of.

Ben walked around the corner of the dugout, and I smiled, tucking some hair behind my ear. Why was I all of a sudden self-conscious about how I looked? I had to admit, he looked good in a pinstripe uniform.

He must have seen me because he shot me a smile before a boy came running up to him. Ben bent down, letting the boy wrap his arms around his neck.

"Hey, Danny boy. Thanks for coming, bud."

The boy stepped back, and Ben used his hand to mess up the boy's hair. "You were throwing it so fast, Ben. I want to be like you when I grow up." The enthusiasm coming from the boy only made my smile wider. The fact that Ben was so good to a boy with Down Syndrome only made my attraction grow.

Ben stood and waved a hand to me as a woman joined them. "Mom, this is my, uh,

friend, Serena. Serena, this is my mom, Amanda, and my little brother, Daniel.”

I blinked a few times, the words sinking in and matching up with what he’d told me at the theater. “It’s so nice to meet you both.”

“What happened to your foot?” Daniel asked, pointing at my wrap.

“I hurt it playing volleyball.” I gave him a sad expression, emphasizing it more than I normally would. It was the way I connected with all kids, and it seemed to have worked because Daniel frowned.

He turned and pointed back at Ben. “You should have Ben fix it. He’s really good with owies.”

I looked up at Ben, chuckling. “I know. Ben helped me the other day. He’s pretty good at his job.”

Ben’s cheeks colored like red apples. “I have a long, long way to go to be good at therapy.”

“I hope your foot heals soon. Do you play on the high school volleyball team?” Ben’s mother asked me.

With a quick nod, I said, “Thank you. Yes. John says I should be ready to go again in a couple of weeks, which will give me about two weeks to get back into shape before tryouts.”

Ben smiled, looking like he’d just won the lottery. “At least you don’t have the crutches today, right?”

I laughed. “That’s for sure. I’d be happy if I never have to use those things again.”

Ben's mom and brother chuckled, and warmth blossomed over my chest.

"Are you ready to go?" Penny asked, placing her hand on my shoulder.

I glanced at Ben, wanting to talk to him more. "Um, yeah. She's my ride." I looked at both Ben's mom and his brother. "It was so nice to meet you both."

I waved to Ben before walking back to the parking lot. At the end of the fence, I glanced back, seeing Ben walking in between his mother and brother, watching as his brother talked animatedly about something. The scene pulled at my heart in more than one way. The fact that a guy I was starting to have feelings for wouldn't just ditch his family because he was around his friends was a big change from my normal crushes. And his mom actually showing up to his game was something I wanted more than anything.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

Standing next to Penny's car, waiting for her to unlock it, I jumped when I saw a shadow next to me. I turned and squinted into the sunlight.

"Hey," Ben said, smiling at me.

I laughed. "Hey."

"I, uh, just wanted to thank you for coming to the game." He paused, rubbing his hands on the sides of his uniform pants. His gaze bounced around the parking lot and finally settled back on me. "This summer is kind of busy with traveling for tournaments and stuff, but I was wondering if you'd like to, um, like, would you go on a date with me sometime?" The last few words came out in a rush, and I could see the cautious way he watched me, waiting for my answer.

With a wide grin, I said, "I'd love to. Just let me know when."

His smile stretched from ear to ear, and he nodded, leaning forward to open the door once the lock clicked. I sat down in the seat, working to get the bulky boot in the car before he shut the door.

Penny started the car, and I waved to Ben as we drove away. I did my best to keep my gaze forward, sensing that Penny was bursting with questions.

"It looks like things are starting to move there, huh?" Penny said, keeping her tone as even as possible, even though she was grinning at me.

"Oh, shush. I'm glad he asked me. Now I'll just have to see when we actually go

out.” I watched the trees pass as we drove down the road, smiling at my reflection in the window. Ben had asked me out, and I was more excited about it than I’d been since James finally started noticing me. But this felt different. It meant more than anything James had ever done. I’d just have to wait and see how things turned out.

Thirteen

Ben

It had been difficult to get Serena out of my mind over the past week. The way she’d interacted with Daniel made the attraction I’d felt for her the past few weeks jump even more. And seeing her in the stands cheering me on had added a jolt of adrenaline to my pitching game. I’d even been able to ask her out on a date, although we hadn’t decided when to go out just yet. Between work and baseball, a lot of my time was already taken up.

We’d texted back and forth, nothing major, but it was fun to get to know her a little more, and it helped me relax because I could read and reread the message before I sent it, making sure it sounded somewhat decent.

We were at another tournament this weekend, this one a couple hours from home. I’d loosened up, throwing a few pitches with Zane, one of the backup catchers. Tom Dunn had the start on the mound, but Coach Lund had mentioned I would go in if he got into any trouble.

The rest of the team split up into infield and outfield groups, taking some practice balls to get them ready for the game. Zane and I leaned over the fence to the bullpen, watching the team practice. Each grounder or flyball, each throw seemed crisp and clean. We were as ready as we could be for this game and hopefully the next, as this tournament was the second largest attended by college coaches.

“How are things going with Serena?” Jake asked, walking up to the fence. Coach Lund had to go to the meeting with the umpire and opposing coach at the plate, leaving the infielders waiting for the game to start.

I frowned, irritation rising at his question. “Dude, we’re getting ready for a game right now. Get your head in the game.” We’d worked too hard to ruin things right now, and even though I liked Serena, now was not the time to be talking about girls and crushes. If I ruined our chances of doing well in this tournament, I’d never be able to forget it. I didn’t need to add one more nightmare of my imperfections to my nightly routine.

“Serena? Since when are you two dating?” Colt asked, strolling up behind Jake. He let his glove dangle over the fence as his other hand wiped at the sweat dripping down the sides of his face.

I shot Jake a look, my eyes narrowed and lips pursed. “We’re not dating.”

“You should be,” Jake said, grinning.

“Again, not the time to talk about this, Jake,” I said through gritted teeth. We were at the opposing team’s field two hours away, and I didn’t want to reflect on a loss for the entire ride home.

Colt looked between both of us, trying to figure out the connection. “Serena’s cool. I’d be all for you dating her. How does she feel about your stutter?”

Jake swiped Colt’s shoulder with his glove, sending the kid back a few steps. “Seriously? I’ll make sure Coach has you walk home from here.” He turned back to me. “Your stutter has gotten better lately. Is that because of Serena?”

He was just as bad as Colt. “I don’t know, I guess. I usually just have a hard time

when I'm nervous."

"Have you asked her out yet?"

I glanced over to where Coach Lund stood next to the plate, still listening to the umpire. Why wasn't he done already?

"I said we should go out sometime, but we haven't set anything up yet." I studied my glove, tightening a knot in the leather that was starting to come loose.

Jake took a step back, pounding his fist into the palm of his glove. "Let's make a bet." This conversation was about to go off a cliff. "We win this game and you have to ask her out on an actual date. Not some future date that might happen before you start going gray."

"And if we lose?" I asked dryly.

"We're not losing, so let's not worry about it." All of us turned when we heard Coach's voice calling the team to the dugout. To say I was relieved would be an understatement. I'd been trying to work up the courage to ask Serena out for several days, each time backing out at the last minute, whether it was through text or at therapy.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I thought about the text message she'd sent me before we got to the ballpark.

Wish I could be there. Good luck!

I tried to see the stands from where I stood, but I could only see the upper tier. None of the usual people I'd gotten used to seeing at our home games were there, and I just hoped we made it through this game so we could go to the championship.

I had to come in during the second inning, and I was glad we'd had enough days in between to rest because digging us out of a bases-loaded, no-outs situation had taken all the focus I had. The next few innings were better, allowing me some room to breathe. When Jake hit a three-run home run to put us up by one, I knew all I had to do was work with the last three outs and we were moving on in the tournament.

The first batter had been an easy strikeout, being the ninth batter. But starting at the top of the lineup, I had to hit every spot Dax set up at to get him out, and even then, he fouled off at least five pitches. I'd made the mistake of glancing into the stands and spotting several radar guns trained on me. I tried to push it away, tried to zone in like I'd been able to do for every other pitch that game, but the pressure was seeping in.

With two strikes on the last batter, I missed and threw it right down the middle, cringing as I knew at the release it was too good to pass up.

The ball connected with the bat, the sound echoing in my brain as it sailed into left field. Every part of my body tensed, and I stopped breathing as I watched it get closer and closer to the fence.

“Come on, Logan,” I said under my breath. The freshman was fast, but I wasn’t sure if he’d make it. At the fence, just as the ball was about to go, Logan somehow got his glove up and snagged it, tumbling to the ground after. He hopped up, holding his glove in the air as proof that he’d caught it.

We all ran out, yelling and tackling Logan to the ground.

“We just beat the number-one team in the state, boys!” Jake yelled so we could all hear above the crowd’s roar.

We made our way in to shake hands with the other team before heading back into the dugout. I glanced up into the stands, waving to my mom and Daniel. My stalwart fans. I smiled at them and let my eyes wander around the rest of the stands, wishing to see a blonde girl with a megawatt smile.

As we packed up, the guys all talked at once, the excitement loud. It felt good to have this game in the books. But it would have been better if Serena had been able to come.

Fourteen

Serena

It had been a long day, and I was so over rehab. John supervised my drills since Ben was gone, and I wished I could be there cheering them on. It was strange to be so excited for baseball since I’d grown up with every other sport but that one. But the more I’d gotten to know Ben, the more I wanted to be around him. And part of being around him was understanding the terminology that came with one of his passions.

Ben also listened to me ramble on and on about volleyball, especially when one of the sand volleyball games for the national team was on TV while I was at the clinic. He’d

asked me sincere questions and seemed interested in the answers. It was refreshing that someone outside of my small friend group would care enough to listen to me. Everyone else seemed to tune me out whenever I talked about something I loved.

John's phone dinged with a text message, and he pulled his phone out of his pocket. A broad grin spread from ear to ear.

"They won."

I stopped moving the band back and forth with my foot, my head snapping in his direction to figure out what he meant. "The baseball team?"

Nodding, John turned the phone toward me. I saw Lund, Ben's summer ball coach, at the top and a quick text that said, "They beat last year's state champs! Win for Rosemont 3-2!"

I started my reps again, knowing the faster I got done, the sooner I could retrieve my own phone. Hopefully Ben texted on the drive back to the hotel.

"Are you good friends with the coach?" I asked, curious that John would get a message so soon after the game ended.

John laughed. "Am I good friends with Coach Lund? We played together with Coach Maddox, the high school coach, in college. Lund was one of the fastest guys I've ever seen. Too bad he blew out his knee in the outfield, or he could have gone onto the pros. He knows quite a few of the college and pro scouts, so he's the ideal coach for the boys. My wife has been trying to set him up on a date for the last two years."

He walked away, saying he had to grab a couple of papers, and I pushed through the exercises, ready to be out of there. It was a Friday night, and all I wanted to do was hang out and wait for Ben to get back, which wouldn't actually happen until late

Saturday night, barring some tropical storm. Did that make me the sappy girl waiting around for a guy? Maybe, but at this point, I was pretty sure he liked me back. I mean, he did ask me on a date, unless that was for a bet or something.

My foot was healed enough to drive, and I'd never been so excited to be behind the wheel as I was after relying on people the last two weeks. I pulled into the driveway and parked, smiling when I saw a couple of lights on. At least I wouldn't be completely alone.

We won! It was awesome. I pitched five innings.

A shiver ran up my back as I read the text from Ben. I was surprised by how fast my feelings for him had grown over the past couple of weeks. It had been a rocky start, but he'd texted me after his game, which had to mean something.

The phone rang, and I saw his name on the screen. A thrill shot through me at the thought that he'd contacted me so soon after the game was over. Probably enough time to call his mom or even talk to her if she'd driven up for the games.

I leaned against the brick next to the garage door and answered. "Hey! Congrats! That's so exciting. When is your next game?"

"Thanks," Ben said, sounding more shy than normal. "It's, um, tomorrow night. I probably won't be throwing much. They brought me on early in the game."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“How many pitches did you throw?” I’d learned this important detail after the last therapy session we’d had together. The fact that Penny could throw game after game while Ben was only allowed so many pitches before he had to rest for several days blew my mind.

Ben cleared his throat. “You remembered. I think it was around seventy.”

Grinning at the fact that I remembered all the little details he’d explained, I asked, “So you’ll probably come in as the, oh dang, what’s the word? The last pitcher of the game?”

His deep laugh rumbled through the phone, and I wished he was there by me. I didn’t know at what point I’d started liking Ben the Pitcher, but what I felt for him made my feelings for James earlier in the year pale in comparison.

“Relief pitcher. Yeah, I can come in as relief.”

I smiled, trying to keep the giddiness out of my voice. No wonder Penny turned into such a mush when she started dating Jake. No matter how much I tried to be chill, I just couldn’t.

“Maybe I’ll drive up tomorrow. I could probably get Penny to come with me.”

“Really?” The sound of the one word made me laugh. He seemed stunned, like he’d never expected that to happen.

I nodded even though no one else was around. “Of course. Are you on the bus right

now?" I listened and heard guys talking and laughing in the background. Sounded like a winning team with all the energy.

"No, we're just getting ready to head back to the hotel. No buses in summer ball." Ben's voice trailed off, and I heard a healthy pause. If I hadn't heard all the other noise, I'd have thought we'd been cut off.

"That's good. Well, I should let you go. Text me when you get back." Panic took over my chest at my words, and I hurried to say, "Or just tomorrow. Whenever."

Ben cleared his throat. "I was, uh, thinking, um, that m-maybe we, if you're not busy, that, uh..." He paused and what sounded like a cough echoed through the phone. A few more seconds passed, and he said, his words going so fast it took a second for me to comprehend, "Let me know if you're coming for sure. It would be fun to see you in the stands again. I was, uh, wishing you were there earlier today."

I smiled so wide my cheeks hurt, and my heart soared. "Yeah? John got a text from your coach about the win, and I wished I'd been there. The daughter of a pro-football player and now baseball enthusiast."

At my response, I heard a whole bunch of cheering, and I laughed. "Sounds like a lot of people there. Teammates?" A sliver of fear hit my chest, wondering if anyone had heard my last statement. I'd been through a lot in my life because of the status of my parents, but I'd done as much as I could to avoid talking about them so casually as I'd just done. Most of the people at school knew who my parents were, but I still didn't like being made fun of or even people sucking up to me because of it.

"No, well, yes." His voice sounded so far away, like he was going through a tunnel or something, even though there were no tunnels in between where the game took place and Pecan Flatts.

“Oh, John said I’m almost healed.” I’d been excited to hear that, and the fact that he’d been so surprised I’d rebounded in three weeks. An ankle injury wasn’t something I wanted to repeat.

“No way! That’s so awesome, Serena. You deserve it after how hard you’ve worked to get back to normal.” I could hear a smile in his voice, and my cheeks ached from smiling for so long.

Was this how relationships were? No worrying about the other person sneaking behind my back with another girl? Or having someone to tell all the exciting parts of life to? If so, I wished I’d found Ben months ago. Then I could have avoided some major heartaches.

I chuckled. “Thanks. I had a pretty good assistant trainer.”

“Intern.” He paused for a moment. “Sorry, I’ve got to run. Coach has some news about the game tomorrow.”

“Okay, good night.”

“Good night, Serena. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” His words sounded like a promise, one that made me giddy just thinking about it.

Fifteen

Ben

The guys gave me a hard time the night before about not setting a firm date with Serena, but if she was coming to the game, I didn’t want to ask her over the phone. I wanted to see her face to know that she really wanted to go and wasn’t just saying yes out of pity. It seemed like over the past few weeks she’d been less sarcastic and

brooding, more happy and confident.

The next day sped by, and it was soon game time. The sun was down, the lights on, and we were in the big stadium used by one of the community colleges. As I saw the number of scouts with their guns ready and aimed at the field, I was glad I wasn't starting. I just needed to focus enough to pitch flawlessly when called in and hope it would be enough.

Serena sat with Penny and Kate next to my parents and Daniel. I'd been surprised my dad had decided to show up to the game, but ultimately, I was glad he'd come.

The other team's shortstop ended up with a torn ACL during the fourth inning, and it seemed like all the momentum had swung to our side after that. We ended the game, winning seven to two. Coach pulled me in during the seventh inning to pitch, and while it wasn't a perfect game by me, I was just happy with the win.

It took forever for us to line up to receive the trophy and awards from the state athletic director, but I kept glancing up at Serena. She met my gaze each time, and I thought about the two of us together. I could bet no one would have ever pegged us for liking one another, the shy guy and the fiery volleyball player.

After all the celebrations, we packed up and headed out to where families stood waiting for each player. Daniel came bounding up and pulled me into a big hug. "You were awesome, Benny!"

I laughed and hugged him tight.

My mom took over with a hug after Daniel let go, and then my dad held out his hand. I gave it an awkward shake before giving him a hug. I was too excited to care about anything at that moment. We'd taken the championship, something we'd made a goal to do at the beginning of the summer season.

"We'll meet you in the car," my mom said and smiled back at Serena as they walked in the direction of the parking lot.

"That was so amazing!" Serena said, beaming. Her beautiful eyes were open wide, and her smile caused my eyes to focus on her lips too often. She threw her arms around me, and I got a whiff of strawberry from her hair.

When she pulled back, our faces were only inches from each other, close enough to kiss. I glanced down at her lips one more time, wondering what they would taste like, but the knots in my stomach brought me back to reality.

I'd claimed to have kissed a girl when the guys asked, but the truth was, I'd never had the courage to do anything like that. And now that I was this close to a girl I liked, I wished we weren't in a mob of people, that we were alone.

"So, how about that date?" I searched her eyes and face, waiting for the response. My stomach tightened, preparing for rejection.

"I'm in. My schedule is pretty open for the summer. Besides therapy and hanging out with friends here and there."

“Um, how about Monday after I get home from work? I can pick you up around six or seven.”

She nodded, a shy smile on her lips. “I can’t wait.” Her voice was airy, and there was a moment where I almost leaned in to kiss her. But the sound around us amplified and a bunch of other people came up and slapped me on the back, saying congrats and good game.

Serena stepped back and smiled. “I should probably go find my ride before she takes off. Penny decided to drive. Text me later?”

I stared into her blue eyes and couldn’t believe someone like her could like a stuttering, awkward guy like myself. “Will do.” What we were going to do was still a fuzzy concept, but I had some good direction. With a little help from Jake, I was sure it would be a date to remember, or at least I hoped it would.

She disappeared into the crowd, and I talked to a few other people before making my way to the parking lot, ready for a shower and bed.

I threw my bat bag in the back of my dad’s SUV and slid into the back seat, grinning at Daniel as I got in. “Thanks for coming, little brother.”

He held out his shirt, and for the first time, I actually read what it said.^{#1 Ben Fan.}

“That’s an awesome shirt. Where did you get it?”

“Mom got it for me. But she said it took longer than she wanted.” Daniel bounced against his seat belt, trying to sing along with the song on the radio.

My mom turned in the passenger seat. “He saw it a few weeks ago, and we ordered it then. Something must have happened with the sellers because it got canceled and then

just showed up yesterday. He's been trying so hard to keep it a secret." She turned her attention to Daniel, and I followed her gaze, ruffling his hair with my hand.

"At least you got to wear it for the last game of this tournament," I said, sliding down in my seat.

"There were a lot of recruiters there, Ben. A lot of people said good things about you too," my mom said.

I turned, curious what my dad's opinion was. He'd been silent since I'd gotten into the car.

"Uh, thanks for coming, Dad."

He nodded, looking both ways as he drove out of the lot. "Good game, son. It was fun to see you win the whole thing."

I stared at the back of his head, wondering if my father had somehow been abducted by aliens. He'd never said something complimentary about my favorite sport, and I wasn't sure what to say to that.

"Is there something going on between you and that blonde girl?" He glanced into the rearview mirror, making eye contact for a few seconds before focusing on the road again.

I shrugged, my mood changing from shock to defense. "We're good friends."

"Keep it that way, son. You don't want to ruin your future."

My stomach dropped like a ten-pound weight. "What do you mean, 'ruin my future'? Serena's a good girl."

“Isn’t she the daughter of Stephen Gates? I’ve heard things about her, and I think you should stay away.”

Ben knew Serena had a sort of reputation as a rebel, that she’d gone through numerous relationships within just the last year. But from everything he’d learned about her, she just needed someone to listen, to pay attention to her, to care about the things she cared about.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

Anger surged. “She’s a good girl, Dad. She just needs someone to take the time for her. Her parents hardly come to support her in anything.” Like you, Dad, I wanted to say.

After that, the ride was silent except for Daniel’s karaoke. The more I thought about the conversation, I wanted to hit something, which was unlike me. My dad was just like Serena’s parents, only coming when it was convenient for him and not caring about my feelings.

I kept my mouth shut the rest of the drive, watching out the window to calm the irritation bubbling up because of him. I was going on a date with Serena Gates in two days, and he wasn’t going to interfere with that.

Sixteen

Serena

It had taken a while to get to sleep the night after the baseball game. I was more excited than ever for our date Monday, and I kept coming up with scenarios of what we’d do.

The more I thought about it, I’d never actually been asked out by anyone. Not on a real date, anyway. James had asked me to come chill at his house, hoping for a makeout session probably. That’s where I’d gone wrong. I’d picked the guys who would rather not talk. Now, I’d never been more relieved that kissing had been the only thing I’d done.

Ben's text Monday afternoon said to dress comfortably, so I picked out a pair of Bermuda shorts and a tank top with sparkly beads. It was one of my mother's creations, and I hoped to make it out of the house before she saw me wearing it. Otherwise, she'd hound me for the next two weeks when I walked around in exercise shorts and t-shirts.

I grabbed a jacket and headed downstairs, my heartbeat pumping in my throat.

The doorbell rang, and for once, I was glad my parents weren't around for introductions, even though they'd met Ben the night he'd brought me home from therapy.

I opened the door and grinned. He was dressed in jeans and a button-up plaid shirt. It was the first time I'd ever seen him without a ballcap on and with his hair done. I was tempted to reach up and kiss him.

At the baseball game, we'd been so close when I hugged him, and I thought he was going to kiss me. I'd felt a little hurt when he didn't, but then seeing all the people around us, I didn't want to have an audience for a first kiss with him.

"You clean up well," I said, stepping through the door and turning to lock the deadbolt.

When I turned around, Ben was smiling. "You look amazing."

I did a little curtsy and laughed. "Okay, Benny, where are we off to?" Using the nickname his brother called him caused him to pause, and I worried I'd said something wrong. But then the corners of his mouth turned up, and the air rushed back to my lungs.

I walked next to him for a few strides until we came to the several stairs to the

driveway. Without warning, he grabbed my hand, his focus on something straight ahead, like it had taken all the courage he possessed to do it. He steadied me going down the stairs. John had let me out of the large boot at the last appointment, and I had relished that first drive in my little car.

“We’re going on a picnic.” He stole a glance at me and then focused back on the stairs.

“A picnic?” Surprised, I looked at him for more details. I must have been expecting something more than that.

His face fell a bit, and I tried to force some more enthusiasm. “That sounds like fun.”

He opened the door to a newer car than his truck. “Did you get a new car?”

Shaking his head, he chuckled. “I wish. My mom let me borrow hers.”

“I like it. Kind of sporty but still functional.” A lot more realistic than driving around in a Lamborghini like my dad.

“Yeah, she’s never been a minivan-driving soccer mom, so this has been her ride for the last eight years or so.”

“Before Daniel, huh?”

Ben turned to me, his eyes studying me before he shifted into drive. “How’d you know that?”

“I just guessed. Daniel is seven, right?”

He nodded and turned to reverse out of my driveway. “My dad bought my mom this

car after the last IVF treatment failed. Six weeks later, she was pregnant with Daniel. I think she's afraid to trade it in because of all it meant to her during that time."

"I've been on the side of receiving a car to cheer me up, and while I want to say it didn't help, it definitely did. And now that I can drive again, I have my freedom back." Freedom from what, I wasn't really sure. It wasn't like my parents kept a tight grip on my day-to-day life.

Ben drove through several of the major streets, and we weren't going in the direction of any parks.

"Are you sure we're going on a picnic? Didn't you just pass Pecan Park?" I pointed behind me, hoping he'd give me a little hint of where we were heading.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

He flashed me a mischievous grin, and I frowned. I wasn't always a fan of surprises, as it usually meant my parents were making up for lack of time spent with me—or having to do something uncomfortable like model for my mother's clothing line. That one hadn't gone over well. Aside from the outfit I was wearing now, my mother's style was different from what most teens wore, and I had more curves than the average model she used for her shows.

Ben turned up the radio a bit, tapping his hands on the steering wheel. When he turned into the parking lot for the reservoir at the other end of Pecan Flatts, I looked between him and the water, curious as to what this could mean. Feeding seagulls?

He got out, and I followed, meeting him in front of the car. When he walked away from the vehicle, I was more confused than ever.

“Don't you need food for a picnic?” I asked, waving my hand toward the car. If he was teasing about food, I was going to have to get my own food. My stomach had already grumbled more than it should have with it being so early.

“Nope,” Ben said, his eyes bright. It looked like he was trying to hold back a laugh, and I made a fist, punching him in the upper arm. “Ow, what was that for?” He still had humor in his expression.

I scrunched my nose in response. “For not telling me what's going on. I don't know what kind of girls you usually date, but this one likes to eat real food. Not stuff we pretend to have.”

That got a good chuckle out of him, and after a few more strides, we walked around

the big building on the edge of the reservoir. He pointed in the direction of the water where a large boat sat.

He watched my face as I took it in. A picnic on a boat. That was definitely original. We walked up to it, and I recognized the colors and shape of the thing.

“Did you borrow Nate’s boat?”

“No, I’m not really sure why Nate had to show up. We’re actually farther down the dock.” Ben’s tone sounded more irritated than I’d ever heard, and I smiled. At least he had a few flaws here and there, because I’d been wondering whether or not he had some. Although, I’d noticed the perfectionist tendencies Penny had pointed out over the last week.

We kept walking hand in hand, a constant stream of what felt like electricity pulsing through them. A wave of relief washed over me. A picnic on a boat would have been way too romantic for a first date. I liked the guy, but I wasn’t planning marriage or anything.

A light breeze blew as we stepped onto the dock. It had been a couple of years since I’d been there, but nothing had changed. The same weathered wood for the ramp and the same small hills in the landscape.

A blanket had been laid out on the end of the dock, and a bag from what looked to be the local sandwich shop sat on top of it. I smiled and looked up at him. His eyes were wide as he wrung his hands in front of him.

“Looks like fun. Are those your fishing poles?” I asked, pointing to the rods leaned against the railing.

“Yeah, I thought we could fish. Something low-key.” He stuck his hands into this

pants pockets and shrugged. His stare made me wonder if he was awaiting my approval. While the idea of fishing wasn't in my top ten things to do, I figured I might as well give the guy a chance after he'd made the effort for all this.

“Okay, but just know I've never caught a fish before. If we don't catch anything, I don't want to hear any whining that it was my fault. Full disclosure.” I raised my hands in the air like I had nothing to hide, and he laughed that deep belly laugh again.

He motioned for me to sit down, and he knelt next to the bag, pulling out two half-sandwiches and two bags of chips. “We've got ham and American cheese or turkey and provolone. Which do you want?”

“Turkey. And I'll take those barbecue chips,” I said, snagging the items from his hands. As I opened the sandwich, I asked, “Do you come here often?”

Ben shook his head, swallowing the bite he'd taken. “Not as much as I used to. Baseball takes up a lot of my time, and then when you add in the clinic it doesn't leave a lot of time for other stuff. What about you? Do you work somewhere?”

I rolled my lips in, feeling the shame of not having a job. I'd been thinking about taking one lately, even though I didn't need one with the allowance my parents gave me. With all my friends working and pure boredom at home, it might be a good idea.

“I don't have one. I've been thinking about how you already know what you want to do with your life, going into physical therapy, and I wish I had some idea of what I wanted to do.” I looked down at my sandwich, feeling vulnerable and wishing I could go back and not say anything.

Ben shrugged, finishing a chip in his mouth. “Well, you don't have to stick with what you're doing right now. Sometimes you just need to try a few things out before you know what it is you like or are passionate about.” He turned his head, his eyes staring

out at the water, a calm presence taking over him.

We chatted about little things for a while, and when we finished our meal, he stood, reaching for my hand. “Are you ready to fish?”

I forced a smile, not wanting to fish but also not wanting to offend him. “Sure.”

He handed me a pole and helped unhook the line so it wouldn’t be tangled. “Okay, how much fishing experience do you have?”

“Well, my grandpa took me once when I was five. I think I frustrated him with all my questions and whining, so he never took me again.” I’d started the sentence with a smile, but by the end, I wanted to run back to the car and drive home. Even my grandfather hadn’t wanted to spend more time with me.

I glanced up at Ben, wondering if he would feel the same way—if, once he got to know the real me, he’d leave or just avoid time with me at all costs.

“Okay, so press this button,” he said, his thumb over mine on the release button. “Swing the hook back here like this and then throw it forward, releasing the button.” He was close to me now, his hands on my wrists, helping to guide the line out onto the water. For some reason safety coursed around me and all thoughts of my grandfather and parents left.

When everything was set, we sat at the edge of the dock, legs dangling in the water.

“Where’d you learn how to fish?” I asked, taking in Ben’s relaxed posture.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“My dad taught me when I was younger, back before he started his own law firm. He had a lot more time then, and he was more patient with my quirks. He’d bring me here when my anxiety would flare up.”

The fact that he was so open about it made me want to know more. “Do you still have problems with it?”

He bit his bottom lip, his eyes narrowing on the water. “I think it’s morphed into something different. I feel like I’m always having to prove to him that I’m a good son, or that my interests are important. And I think that drives me to work on things more, obsess over the little things. Just like the play. I didn’t necessarily have to go to it for my grades, but I wanted to go from a B+ to an A-, hoping it would please my father.”

“That seems like a lot,” was all I could think to say. I hadn’t tried to please my parents in at least five years, but that was probably because there was no use in actually trying. They weren’t home enough to even notice when I put in the effort.

“I try not to worry about it, but I think it’s something I’ll have to keep working on. It’s even worse when it comes to baseball just because my dad has no interest in it or thinks it’s a waste of time.”

I smiled, reaching over to touch his arm. “Well, I think you’re pretty amazing at it. If it’s something you want to pursue through college, why not? And then from there, you can decide if you want to be in the big leagues or not.” My smile grew wider, tears pricking at my eyes from the look of surprise on his face.

“Thank you,” he whispered, turning back to the water.

I moved my hand over, placing it in his lap. As we sat there, enjoying the sound of the water, I realized this was the first time I’d ever held hands with a guy. His skin was rough, callused in some spots, but his fingers were long, almost touching my wrist as they intertwined with mine. Most of all, I was happy.

“I get your relationship with your dad. My problems come mostly from my mom. I think she wishes I was more of a girly girl, someone who just wants to go shopping and talk about clothes all the time. I mean, I don’t mind doing that every once in a while, but I kind of wish she’d get excited about what I like every once in a while too.”

Ben scooted closer, letting go of my hand and wrapping it around my back. “I’m sorry, Serena. If you ever need to, you can vent about it to me.”

The end of my fishing pole bent, causing the line to go taut.

“I think we’ve got something!” he said, scooting closer to me. He put his other hand over mine as we turned the lever, reeling in the line. He moved it at a decent speed as the pole bent a little more every few seconds.

“Pull back like this,” he said, guiding my arms as we pulled the line in. He helped me put my arms back down and said, “Okay, keep reeling it in.”

He stretched for the net near the corner of the dock and leaned over the water as I kept reeling. Soon enough, he scooped up what looked like a bass. Even I knew that, and I had no experience with fish.

Ben lifted the net up with the fish hopping around in it. “Look at that! You caught your first fish.”

I was more excited than I thought I'd be. "Is it a big one?"

"He looks to be a good size. Let's get him off so we can throw him back." Ben's forehead creased as he focused on the line.

"Throw him back? We just spent all that time to catch him. You don't want to keep it?" I was surprised at my sudden protectiveness of something so slimy and wet.

Ben chuckled. "You caught it, so you get to decide what you do with it. But if you keep it, you'll have to clean it."

"Like cut it open and stuff?"

When he nodded, I swallowed hard and shook my head. "I'm good. Let the fish live."

We both laughed at that, and I studied Ben as I watched him hold the fish with one hand, working the line loose in the other. He was such a nice guy, and I found myself wondering if I even measured up.

But then I thought about the flaws he'd just admitted to me and the quirks I had. Maybe we were a lot more alike than I originally thought.

Ben freed the fish but must have cut himself on the hook because he tensed up, losing the fish from his hand. The fish flopped on the deck several times, and I jumped back, accidentally kicking it back into the water. I let out a nervous laugh but saw blood coming from Ben's left pointer finger.

His whole body shook, his gaze frozen on the scratch. It took a minute for me to realize he wasn't going to move. I grabbed a paper napkin from the bag and reached over, wrapping the square around the cut. Blood seeped through it easily, and I shifted the paper over, wrapping it tightly around the wound.

“Uh, thanks,” he said, looking between my face and where my hand was holding his finger. “I’m not very good with my own blood.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m not worried about it.” We sat in silence for a minute or two, and I peeled back the napkin to see how much damage the hook had done to his finger. It was deeper than I’d thought at first, but I could only see it when I wiped away the blood every few seconds. Thankfully, it wasn’t his pitching hand.

Wrapping it back up, I said, “We’re going to need some medical supplies. Hold this here, and we’ll walk to the car.”

My pole was ready to go, so I reeled Ben’s in quickly. I scooped up the bag with the leftover food and grabbed the blanket as I followed him down the dock.

“Here, let me help you with something,” Ben said, letting go of the napkin. It unraveled, and I shook my head.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“It’s not that far. Keep that tight until we get something to wrap around it.” I lengthened my stride, knowing that juggling two fishing poles, a bag of food, and a large blanket that wasn’t folded would only get heavier if I walked slowly.

Ben followed, his face pale and worry etched around his eyes. “I’m so sorry. I can’t believe—I’m so sorry,” he kept saying. I wanted to comfort him, but my main goal right then was to get to his car.

Once we made it to the parking lot, I opened the trunk, dumping the blanket and bag inside. I had to pull the poles apart to fit inside the trunk, but once that happened, I slammed the door.

“Give me the keys,” I said, looking up into Ben’s dark blue eyes. They were stormy now like he was fighting some internal battle.

“I can drive,” he said, sounding more like a robot than his normal self.

I shook my head, palm out as I waited for the keys. “I know it’s just a cut on your finger, but my ankle is fine, and this way you can keep it covered until we find some bandages.”

He finally relented, pulling the keys out of his pants pocket and handing them to me. I opened the door for him, and he slid in, frustration in his expression.

I moved the seat forward enough to reach the pedals and started the car. “Okay, direct me to your house.”

It only took a few minutes until we were pulling into his driveway. His house was nice—nothing near the size of mine, but with Penny’s and Brynn’s houses being smaller than mine, I was used to it. And it wasn’t like a mansion of a house could make anyone feel more at home. I knew that better than anyone.

I unbuckled my seat belt and got out of the car, walking over to where Ben now stood.

He glanced at an SUV in the driveway, and his face fell. “Y-you don’t have to stay. I, uh, feel bad that this is how our date went.”

Ben avoided my eyes, and I moved to stand in his line of sight. “You’re fine. Let’s get you inside and make sure you have everything you need.”

He walked with me toward the front porch, his steps wooden as he moved forward. As he opened the door, I tried to figure out what was wrong besides a small cut on his finger. He couldn’t be going into shock, right? There hadn’t been quite that much blood. Was he worried about something?

I saw his mother walking down the hallway and called out, “Mrs. Gates, do you have some Band-Aids and ointment? Ben cut his finger on the fishing hook.”

She turned and surveyed the two of us. “Yes, let me grab it. You two have a seat in the kitchen.”

Seventeen

Ben

Of course, all this would be happening to me. I’d done a lot of work to make sure our date went off without a hitch, and here I was, acting like a statue because of a little

blood. I could stomach it on other people just fine, but when it came to seeing the red liquid coming out of my limb or appendage, it was too much.

My mom came back with the first aid kit, opening it. Serena reached over her and pulled out ointment, a bandage, and some white tape. Without saying anything, she removed the napkin from my finger and opened a small white package to wipe the area around the cut with the cool wipe.

She applied the ointment and then two bandages, finishing it off with the white tape to keep it all secure. “There you go. Now you should be good.” She pulled out a bottle of ibuprofen and opened the bottle. She shook out two pills into her palm and moved it over to me. “Take these to help.”

I took a glass of water my mom had filled and swallowed the pills, hitting my chest to make sure they went down.

“That’s impressive, Serena. You look like you’ve worked with injuries quite a bit. Are you a CNA?”

Pink rushed to Serena’s cheeks, and she looked more bashful than I’d ever seen her. “No, I just, well, my dad plays football, and he always has cuts or small wounds that need cleaning out. I used to do that a lot when I was little. He’d sit and wait for me to get it all done and then, and then, yeah.” She looked like she wanted to say something else but stopped herself.

“You have the patience to be a nurse; that’s for sure.” My mom beamed at her, and Serena looked even more surprised than before. “I always wanted to be a nurse as a young girl. But then I got older and realized I was pretty good at planning out food for a party.”

I smiled, pointing to my mom. “She owns a catering business, MC Catering.”

“Really?” Serena said, looking at my mom for confirmation. “I’ve heard great things about your company. I think you’ve catered a couple of parties my parents have gone to.”

“It’s a lot of work, but my friend and I make it work so we can be moms too.” She smiled at us. “Lee and Daniel just left in the SUV, and I need to finish cleaning upstairs. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Now that the blood on my finger was hidden, the panic had eased somewhat, and I said, “You’d be great at nursing. You didn’t freak out once, like I did.”

“Thanks,” was all she could say, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

My mom turned to walk back down the hall, and Serena glanced around. “Where did your dad take Daniel?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“He goes to therapy on Monday nights.” I rubbed my hands on my shorts, trying to make the sweating stop. The throb in my finger had started to ebb thanks to some ibuprofen. I didn’t want to look at her because I knew I’d find disappointment there. What a waste of a date. “I should probably get you home.”

“Yeah, we can hang out another day when you haven’t hooked yourself,” she said, chuckling.

I tried to smile, but all of the mistakes I’d made that evening fought for my attention, and I knew dwelling on them now would only make things worse.

The drive over to her house was quiet, and Serena asked several questions, but I wasn’t in the mood to chat. I just needed the night to be over so I could slowly work my way through the humiliation of what had happened on the date. At least I wouldn’t have to see her again until school started. Maybe by then, I wouldn’t feel like such a dork.

Eighteen

Serena

I kept trying to get Ben to talk on the drive to my house. The poor guy looked like he’d screwed up Christmas or something.

Once we pulled into the driveway, I smiled at him. “Thank you for tonight.”

“Yeah, for the whole dorky idea. Maybe we should have just gone on Nate’s boat like

the guys suggested.” His lips pinched together, and red splotches appeared on his neck and cheeks. He avoided looking at me, and I wished there was a way to get through to him that this had actually been a fun night. Probably the best date I’d ever had, even with all the drama added in.

I’d never seen him so defeated, and without thinking, I reached over and wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him in for a few seconds.

I leaned back, tipping his head up so I could look into his eyes. “Ben, I much preferred the dock to a boat. It was fun and thoughtful. Things happen, and you’ll be fine. Let’s do something this week, maybe one night after I’m done with therapy.”

He nodded and gave me a small smile, but it didn’t reflect on the rest of his face.

I reached over and pressed a kiss to his cheek. I’d never had someone who cared about my happiness enough to worry about whether a date had gone wrong or not.

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better,” he said glumly. He fiddled with the knobs on the radio, and I couldn’t tell if he wanted me to leave or stay.

I rested my head back against the headrest and laughed. When I stopped, I looked over at him. His expression was curious and a little confused, his eyebrows cinched together. “No, really. I’ve never been on an actual planned-out date before. And this one was so much fun, even though you got hurt, which I’m sorry about.”

He leaned his head down to rest on the steering wheel. “I’m so sorry. I just wanted everything to be perfect.”

Irritation seeped into my chest, and I clenched my fists for several seconds, trying to decide what to do.

“Ben. Ben?” I said, waiting for him to look at me. When he did, I leaned forward, pressing my lips quickly to his. That same spark I felt when holding his hand tingled through my lips. He’d frozen like a statue at first, but then he relaxed, his hand moving to cup my cheek. A sound came from his phone, and I pulled back, feeling the heat rising at being so forward.

I’d kissed a few guys over the last two years, some of the guys all the girls in school wanted to hang out with, but the simple kiss I shared with Ben was hands above all of them. Maybe even combined.

I glanced at Ben, whose eyes were glassy as a small smile played on his lips. “What was that for?” he asked.

With a shrug, I said, “I just wanted to. Now, will you stop beating yourself up? You’re the first guy to ask me on a real date, and I care that you’re all right. Dates don’t have to be perfect to be fun.”

He finally sat back, chuckling, his shoulders more relaxed. “I’ll try. Thanks, Serena.”

“For what?”

“For being you.”

I paused, surprised at his words. I’d always thought that being me was what pushed people away, except for Penny, Kate, and Brynn of course.

“I’ll text you,” I said, slipping out of the car and waving before I went into the house.

* * *

Once inside the house, I was surprised by the smell of baked goods and garlic, not

necessarily together. Walking into the kitchen, I saw our cook, Liza, stirring something in a pot.

“Hey, Liza, what’s going on?” I stared at the counters overflowing with rolls and pastries, cupcakes and cookies. I was the only one who usually ate anything like that, as both my parents were very strict about their diet.

“Ah, Serena, how was your day?” The older woman smiled, her round cheeks rosy from the heat of the stove.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I slid onto one of the barstools and leaned onto the countertop. “It was pretty good. I just got back from a date with Ben the Pitcher.”

Liza’s eyebrow rose. “Is that his name?”

I laughed, shaking my head. “No, he’s just really good at baseball, so that’s what my friends have called him for a while. He’s really sweet and fun, except when he cuts his finger open.”

“What?” Liza looked at me with a shocked expression, trying to figure out if I was teasing or not. I tended to do that with her, as she tended to overreact. But then again, I told her just about everything in my life. She was the one I saw the most in this house, even though she only came in a few days a week.

“He just caught it on a hook.” I waved at the platters of food and asked again, “What’s all this for?”

Liza took a deep breath, giving a slight shake of the head. “Your mother has a fashion show tomorrow night. I’ve been baking all day, trying to get ready for it. I just need to box most of it up so it will still be good for tomorrow.” She pointed to the pot. “I’m making chicken alfredo for dinner, so I hope you have some appetite left.”

As if in response, my stomach growled. It had already been two hours since I’d eaten the sandwich, and true to form, I was still hungry.

“Can I help you put these all away? Where are the boxes?”

Liza looked at me, her brows furrowed. “Are you okay?”

I laughed and waved her off. “I know, I know. I’m not usually the most helpful person in the world. But maybe that needs to change.” I thought about Mrs. Gates’s statement about me being a good nurse. Maybe that’s what had spurred a little change tonight. Maybe I had hope for the future, something I actually wanted to do that would be fun.

Liza pointed me in the direction of the boxes, and I pulled one out, tucking in some of the corners to where they needed to be to hold their shape. As I carefully picked up cupcakes and set them side by side in the box, I said, “Do you think I would make a good nurse, Liza?”

There was a pause, and I waited to hear the worst. When it came to Liza, she always spoke the truth, though she could deliver it in a way that didn’t make me feel like I was a horrible person.

“Serena, I think you would make an incredible nurse. You’ve always taken care of your dad when he’s had injuries. And you’re quick in the science area. You should look into some classes to start preparing for it if that’s what you want to do.”

Excitement filled my chest. The thought of becoming a nurse felt more right than anything I’d done in my life up to this point.

“I think I’ll do just that.”

Nineteen

Serena

“Serena? Serena.” I heard my mother’s voice and opened one eye, not ready to be

waking up.

“What?” I groaned, pulling the covers over my head. I could see a sliver of bright light through the blinds, and I knew it was already late in the day. I’d been up late researching things on nursing but was sad that I wouldn’t be able to start anything like that until I was eighteen. At least my birthday was coming up in a few weeks to speed up the process.

A hand touched my shoulder, shaking it softly. “I need your help, Rena.”

I rolled over, rubbing my eyes. They felt like sandpaper had been rubbed against them, and with the light on, water rushed to them.

“Are you all right?” my mom asked, feeling my forehead with her hand.

I pushed her arm away and sank down in the covers a little more. “I’m fine.” She almost never came into my room, and I wondered what the emergency was all of a sudden. “What do you want, Mom?”

The clock on my nightstand said it was ten in the morning, and I turned my focus back to my mother. Her hair was done and she had her makeup on, dressed and ready for the day. I couldn’t remember a time when I’d not seen her like this throughout most of my life.

“I need to ask a big favor.” She grimaced, trying to make it look like a pleading smile. As much as I didn’t want it to, my curiosity surged. She must have seen something on my face because she continued. “One of the models who signed up for the show tonight came down with the flu and won’t be able to walk. I need this show to go well so I can get the attention of the magazines and get some celebrities wearing my line. Will you fill in?”

I started with a slow laugh, increasing the intensity and volume bit by bit. “You want your daughter to wear your clothes? The one who just sprained her ankle a few weeks ago? The one you forget about all the time?” I clamped my mouth shut, surprised I’d said anything and with such force.

My mother’s face looked as if she’d been slapped, her skin turning a splotchy red. “I don’t forget about you. Is that really what you think?”

“I’m not modeling for you, Mom. Your teen line is not my style.” It was the most blunt I’d been with her in months, and as much as it hurt to see her reaction, I needed to tell her that.

“Please, just do this one thing for me, and then I’ll be at every game of yours this fall. This means a lot to me.”

If it hadn’t been for the pleading in her voice, I might have had the courage to say no. I wanted to scream that she shouldn’t be bargaining for supporting my life, but I was too tired to care about that right then.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“Fine.” It was the only word I could grind out between clenched teeth. Two more years. That’s all I had left to stay under their roof, and then I could be gone. I’d become a nurse and pay my own way for everything, because I wasn’t going to be manipulated to do things the rest of my life.

Twenty

Ben

I hadn’t heard from Serena since I’d dropped her off at home the night before. And of course, my brain decided to play that fact over and over throughout the night, making it so I couldn’t sleep. I’d had a fun, simple date planned, and I’d screwed up even that. No wonder I struggled when it came to girls.

Kissing her was pretty amazing, but it would’ve been better if I’d been able to focus on her instead of what a lame idiot I was for screwing things up with a little fishing hook.

I dragged myself outside to the porch, hoping some time throwing against the targets would work out some of my frustration.

“Benny!” Daniel called as he sped around on his bike. The helmet he wore had been loosened too much, causing the helmet to sit toward the back of his head instead of covering all of it.

“Hey, Danny boy! How’s your day going so far?” I tried to keep my voice light. Maybe if I did that, my attitude would change.

“It’s going great! Mom just gave me a popsicle for helping her bring in some of the vegetables, and now I’m riding my bike. I was going so fast down the road. Do you want to see?” His eyes were bright and hopeful.

How could I say no to that? “Let’s see it,” I said with a wide smile, sitting on a chair on the porch.

He took off down the sidewalk, disappearing past the neighbor’s hedge. Seconds later, he came zooming back, his legs going faster and faster with each circle of the pedals. The determination on his face made me chuckle, and I felt at least ten times lighter.

The door opened, and my mom came out and sat on a chair next to me. “What are you up to today, Ben?” she asked, her eyes focused on Daniel coming up the drive.

“I’m not really sure yet. I don’t have work or practice. It’s the first time in a while I’ve been completely free.” I thought of Serena then and how she talked about having nothing to do most days. It was such a strange feeling, like I could relax and not rush off to the next place. “I need to throw a few pitches at some point, but for now I’m open.”

“I could use your help tonight, then. We’re supposed to help with a wedding reception, and we’re short-staffed for how many people are expected. Your father has to work late, and Mrs. Shiels is going to take Daniel for a few hours until he gets home.”

I sighed, not ready to help with a catering job. It was something my mom had always done on the side, and I knew she needed the out sometimes, but me helping pick up plates and run errands was not something I wanted to do on a relaxed summer night.

“Don’t you think I’ll be better off here, watching Daniel?” I could hear a bit of the

pleading in my voice and hoped she'd take the hint.

“Really, I need you there with me. There will be some new hires, and you have at least some experience with this kind of thing.” She tapped away on her phone, probably texting Barb, her best friend and co-owner.

It had been at least a year since she'd needed my help the last time. At least it wasn't every time there was an event. She'd slowed down a lot since before Daniel was born, and the catering company she and Barb had built from the ground up allowed them to take turns managing it, giving both women the best of both worlds—they could stay home with their kids and rotate working the events.

My eyes turned out to the little truck in the driveway, and a thought came to me. “If I help, can we get an upgrade on my truck? I'm going to have permanent bruises on my knees from getting in the thing all the time.”

My mom's smile turned to a giggle, and she tried to cover her mouth. After more than a minute of laughing, she said, “Yes, we need to do something about that. I've been talking to your dad about getting you something a little bigger. It will probably cost more in gas, though.”

“I don't care about that. I don't even care if it has rust down the sides. It would just be nice to feel comfortable driving around for more than ten minutes.”

“You know we don't do bribes, but you've definitely earned the upgrade. I told your dad when he bought it that you'd have to cram yourself into it soon enough. I think we passed that point at least six months ago.”

I gave her a half-smile. “Why didn't you say something back then?”

She shrugged. “Every time I thought about it, I got distracted soon after. Mom

problems.” She slid off the chair and knelt next to me, her hand on my back. “I hope you know I’m proud of you, Ben. Keep working at your goals, and you’ll achieve them. Just don’t dive in too deep where you get yourself hurt. I know throwing as many pitches as you do all the time can wear out your shoulder.”

“I’ll be fine, Mom. I’ve got John to patch me up if I need it.”

“Yeah, but even he can’t fix everything, and definitely not in one session.” She stood, waving Daniel down to adjust his helmet.

The afternoon passed, and I mowed the lawn, trimming the edges like I was supposed to for one of my chores “just for living at home,” as my dad would say.

I showered and changed, checking my phone as I got out to see if Serena had sent me a message. When the phone didn’t show any notifications, I decided to send her one. The guilt of ruining my chances with her rushed to the surface, but maybe it was still salvageable.

Hey. I was just thinking about you. How was your day?

I pressed send before I had a chance to erase anything, knowing I’d spend twenty minutes or more debating the right thing to say.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

As I pulled on my black slacks I kept for events like this, I laughed when I saw the bottoms reaching at least three inches above my ankles. Hurrying into my mom and dad's room, I found her in the master bath, curling her hair. "Um, I think we have a problem. I'm just not going to be able to work tonight. I wouldn't want your company to be criticized for their attire."

She turned and looked down the length of my body, chuckling when she saw the flood pants. "Har-har. You're in luck because I figured you'd probably need some new ones at some point." After a few steps into the master closet, she pulled out a pair identical to the ones I was wearing.

I raised an eyebrow, knowing something wasn't right. "When was it you found out you'd be short-staffed?" I leaned up against the doorframe to the bathroom, staring at her for an answer.

"Well, yesterday Barb mentioned we didn't have enough servers, so I got some pants when I bought the food for tonight. You were so excited about your date last night that I didn't want to ruin anything." She picked up her curling iron again, twisting a piece of hair around it. "Speaking of the date, how did it go...besides the cut? Serena's a nice girl."

I searched her face, looking for any sign of a lie. All I saw was sincerity.

"I messed it all up, Mom. I really like her, and I'm sure she now wonders why she went out with me in the first place." Anxiety welled up in my chest, and I swallowed hard, the mound in my throat making it difficult.

My mom set her curling iron back on the counter and walked over, pulling me into a hug. If I hadn't been so down, I might have laughed as her head barely came to my shoulder.

"Ben, it was an accident. You can't blame yourself, and from how Serena was when y'all got here, it seemed like she was happy. I think you're getting into your head too much again." She dragged her thumb down the side of my face, making the knots in my stomach ease somewhat.

A text came through, and I glanced down. Seeing Serena's name caused my stomach to flip. "Thanks for the pants, Mom. I'll be ready in a few." I hurried into my room, not wanting to read the text in front of her.

I'm all right. I have to do this thing for my mom tonight, and I'm not excited. How's your finger?

I sat on my bed, trying to figure out how Serena felt from the words on the phone. If she'd been let down because of the date, she wouldn't have said so much, would she? But then there was the kiss and the look that said she meant what she said about having a good time. I just needed to avoid analyzing every little detail.

That's funny. I have to help my mom too. Finger is good. I'm just glad it was my glove hand. It would be hard to pitch with a sliced finger.

That sounded awkward, but it wasn't any different than how I'd be face to face.

Yeah, it would be. Good luck with whatever you're doing tonight.

I waited for several more minutes, wondering if that was going to be the last thing she wrote me. No mention of doing something in the next few days. She'd either had a bad day or she was done with me. Considering how she talked about her parents, she

was probably not too excited to spend it with her mom.

When no other text came through, I turned the volume off and slid my phone into the front pocket of the new black pants my mom had given me. How she kept track of my size when I grew all the time, I'd never know.

My brain was still mulling over the last text message. No promise of future plans. Maybe I needed to stop thinking about her and move on. I didn't want to be one of those guys who held on long after the girl had moved on to a new relationship. And from what I knew of Serena, I could be labeled "the guy I went on a date with one time" by next week.

Twenty-One

Serena

I wanted to bang my head repeatedly against a wall as I glanced at the clothes my mom was making me wear. Maybe some teens liked this style, but I looked like a forty-five-year-old woman. The buttoned cardigan and capris made the already warm air in the conference center like a furnace, and I was already sweating. Even the makeup girl had commented on the heat.

I glanced at the other models dressed and in line for the fashion show to begin. My mom didn't share much about her business with me. I knew she was trying to hit a certain market, but I wasn't sure what market that was. Maybe business casual? I didn't have a head for business, but I figured that niching down was probably better than trying to appease the masses.

To look at my mother, I'd think she had more fashion sense because she was always dressed in trendy styles. Why wasn't she going for that niche? The pastel colors we all wore made me bored just looking at them.

The music began, and I heard Rachel Gates announcing the spring line of...something. The mic cut out at that moment. Several other designers milled around, arranging things on their models and shouting for different people to come help.

I'd been one of my mother's first models over five years ago when she was just dabbling in fashion design. I'd loved it then, so excited to be part of her growing business. But things changed when I started to grow out of the outfits and styles she produced. When she'd switched to old lady clothing, I wasn't quite sure.

The fashion show seemed to drag on, and I was glad when I finally finished showing the three pieces my mom set aside for me. Sitting outside of the large room, I slumped against the wall and rested my head back.

"Serena?" a familiar voice called.

I opened my eyes and saw Ben striding over, dressed in black slacks, a white shirt, and a black tie. He looked even more attractive than he had at our date the night before, with his hair combed and gelled.

I stood and stepped forward to hug him. "What are you doing here? I thought you had to do something for your mom." I shifted to my back foot, leaving only a foot of space between us.

He smiled and nodded. "Yeah, we're in the big room over there for a wedding."

"The Carchiever wedding? I heard that was a big deal. They live just a few houses down from us. What's your mom got you doing for it?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“They were short on servers, so I had to dust off my skills.” The joking tone in his voice made me smile.

“At least you didn’t have to be a model for your mom.” I rolled my eyes to emphasize how much I disliked it.

He reached forward and touched my arm, sending tingles shooting throughout it. “At least she asked you to, though, right?”

I hadn’t thought of it like that. Maybe it was a small peace offering because she’d been busy so much lately. But then I remembered she’d leveraged coming to my volleyball games with it and the feeling disappeared.

I leaned into him, wrapping my arms around his middle and resting my head on his chest. He hugged me back, and I hadn’t felt that comfortable in a long time. All the irritation melted away, and I wanted to stay like that forever.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Serena?” I heard from behind me.

I pulled back and looked up at Ben. “Sorry, I’ve got to go help gather up all the clothes. Good luck with serving. Stay away from knives, and hooks.” I chuckled.

It took him a few seconds to make the connection. “Again, about last night, I’m so sorry I ruined everything. I feel—”

Placing my pointer finger over his lips, I shook my head. “It was an accident. I’m surprised it didn’t happen to me, to be honest, since I’m the graceful one between the two of us.” I laughed, and Ben joined in, although there was still a hesitancy in his expression that made me wonder what he was thinking.

“We should do something again this week. We have another tournament this weekend, but I can hang out Thursday if you’re free.”

I nodded, liking the hope in his face as it seemed to relax all the worry out of him. I glanced at his lips and then back up to his eyes. “I’d like that.”

He paused for a moment and bent down, brushing his lips across mine. He broke away before I was ready and gave me another hug. “I’ve got to get back too. Go clean up and I’ll call you later.” Jogging back to the other room across from where my mom’s fashion show had taken place, he waved before disappearing through the door.

I walked back into the dressing room, surprised at how much quieter it was now that everyone had left. The other designers had all disappeared as well, and as we collected the clothing, I was curious as to whether we’d actually worn all of it.

“We’ve got to run this over to the warehouse before we head home.” My mom sounded and looked exhausted, something I’d never noticed before.

“Are you happy, Mom?”

Her head snapped up, and her eyes searched my face, trying to figure out what my question meant. “Of course I’m happy. Why do you ask?” She pushed the cart with all the garments hanging on them. Most of the shoes were on the bottom of the cart, and the ones that didn’t fit were in one of the two large totes with all the other extra things needed for the show.

I shrugged. “It just seems like you’re always working. Is this all worth it?”

The muscle in her jaw flexed, and I knew I’d touched a nerve. For the first time in years, I hadn’t meant to.

We made it out to the van in silence, and she loaded up the cart and all the other things before shutting the doors and turning toward me. “I used to think it was worth it. But now I don’t really know.” She bit her bottom lip, and I could tell the wheels were turning in her mind.

“Then why do it? Why put yourself through all this? Dad makes plenty of money right now to take care of us.”

“Maybe I don’t want to just be the trophy wife of an NFL linebacker. Maybe I like the idea of creating clothes people can feel comfortable in.” Tears were pouring down her face, and I wished I could go back and unask those questions.

“I think you could make it, Mom. You just need to find your thing, the thing that people will buy without you killing yourself by forty.”

We got into the van, and she used her fingertips to wipe underneath her eyes. “And give up everything I’ve been working on for the past five years? I can’t do that.”

“I’m not saying give it up, just find one thing you’re really good at, like hair products or shoes. The full wardrobe thing isn’t working.” I stared at the road, not wanting to see the tears fall again.

The cab fell silent, and I wished I was anywhere but there. My stomach growled long and loud, breaking up the tension somewhat.

“We should probably get you some food. I know how you are when you’re hungry.”

At least she knew that much about me.

“Rena?”

“Yeah?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“Thanks for that. I needed it more than you know.” She reached over and grasped my hand for several moments before she let go, merging onto the freeway in the direction of the warehouse.

For the first time in forever, my mom seemed like she cared.

I thought about Ben dressed up, supporting his mom. Of all the people I could have fallen for, he would be the most supportive of anything I wanted to accomplish. I just hoped he was feeling the same way about me.

Twenty-Two

Ben

The summer seemed to be passing faster than the months did when we were in school, my time being used up with all the practices and work. Serena and I had hung out a few more times, and each time I was split between thinking I was the luckiest guy in the world and wondering when she was going to move on like she'd done with the other guys in school.

We had fun on the Fourth of July, roasting hot dogs and s'mores with our combined friend group, and I even got brave enough to hold her hand a few times in front of all of them. But as the days wore on, I got more and more nervous about the upcoming tournaments, and without extra time to work on my pitches each day because of practice and work, I started to feel like I was running on a treadmill that kept increasing in speed but my legs couldn't catch up. I was just waiting for the moment when I flew off, my dreams crashing into my reality.

“Ben!” my father called up the stairs. I heard it just as I went to call Serena. We’d never really defined our relationship, but as much as we texted and talked on the phone, we may as well have been official.

I walked down the stairs, curious about what he could want from me at nearly ten o’clock on a weeknight. He’d been working late again, and it had been a few days since I’d physically seen him.

“What’s up, Dad?” I stopped on the last stair and leaned against the banister, looking into the kitchen.

“Why does it say you’ve only worked twenty hours in the last two weeks?” He was holding up my paycheck, and from the tightness of his lips, he wasn’t in a great mood.

“I’ve had a lot of practices and then tournaments. We’re almost done with those, though, so I’ll be taking more hours at the clinic.” I was glad my voice came out in a normal tone instead of conveying the nerves rattling around inside me.

He wiped a hand over his face, his expression just as tight as it had been. I was ready for an explosion, for him to start yelling like he’d done so many times before when it came to my life choices.

“Ben, you just need to move on from this fantasy that you’re going to play professional baseball. Do you know how much guys in the lower levels actually make? It’s pennies, Ben. And the amount of time they have to travel on buses and stay in run-down motels?” He hadn’t raised his voice, but his stare showed me his disappointment. I wished I could just go to my room and lock the door for a few days.

My brain called up a picture of Serena and I thought about what she would do in a situation like that. “I love baseball, Dad. Why can’t I at least give it a shot?” I’d

started out strong but sounded like I was begging by the end.

“You need to be saving up for college rather than wasting your time throwing pitches all the time. I’m not going to be covering for you after graduation, and the less money you have saved up, the longer it will take you to go through school.”

I bit the end of my tongue for a few seconds, trying to organize my thoughts before I said something I shouldn’t. “You didn’t always want to be a lawyer, Dad. I’m not giving up baseball, not yet. Maybe I won’t pitch in the major leagues, but maybe I can get a scholarship to play in college.”

My words hit him like a slap in the face. Without another word, he turned and stormed off to the master bedroom.

I ran up the stairs, adrenaline pumping through me. I waited a few minutes before dialing Serena, knowing she could understand at least a little of what I was going through with my father.

“Hey, what are you up to?” Serena asked.

I glanced around my bedroom. It was a disaster from running in and out all the time, dropping my baseball gear before leaving for work, changing from work clothes into nicer clothes to go out, and then the pile of pajama pants I needed to wash.

“Not much. Just got done throwing outside. And then had an argument with my dad.”

“What about?”

I took in a deep breath and blew it all out quickly. “About baseball and how it’s taking time away from making money to save for college.”

She paused before saying, “I’m so sorry. At least you get lectured about your life choices.”

I chuckled. “Right now, I’d be happy if I didn’t get yelled at for something I love.” The words replayed quickly in my head, and I panicked, hoping she didn’t take that the wrong way. My feelings for her grew every time we were together, but I didn’t know what love was, nor did I think I was ready for that.

“If it makes you feel any better, in exchange for helping model at my mom’s show, she promised to be at all my games this year. Isn’t that some kind of written rule in the parenting handbook? You’re supposed to support your kid in their activities—without bribery?”

I thought about her words, surprised by the bitterness in them. I had at least one parent who supported me at everything possible. “You’re amazing, Serena. I’ll be there to watch you play.”

“I’d like that. Are you nervous for your tournament this weekend?”

I thought about the question for several seconds, even though I knew the answer. “Yes and no. My pitches were working really well tonight, so that’s a plus. But this is a big tournament. I just don’t want to screw it up.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

“You’re going to be fine, Ben. You work harder on your sport than anyone I know, and I’m sure you’ll strike out everyone this weekend.” Her light laugh filtered through the line, and I smiled, despite the ache in my stomach. “You’ll impress the college coaches and get a scholarship.”

“If I’m lucky. There are a couple of guys who have been throwing way better than I have. Their stats are so low that I don’t know if I can even compete.”

Serena sighed a bit. “Ben, you can’t worry about what the other guys are doing. Just play your game. Throw one pitch at a time until you make it to the end of the game. Then repeat until the end of the tournament.”

“Thank you,” I said, blowing out a breath.

“For what?”

“For being patient with me.”

“That’s what girlfriends are for, right?” Her words caused me to freeze, afraid to take a breath if that would change her mind about what she’d just said.

I rubbed the back of my neck, grateful she couldn’t see the half-excited, half-scared look on my face. “Girlfriend, huh?”

There was a long pause, and I pulled the phone away, checking to see if she was still on the line.

“Um, I mean, if you want me to be your girlfriend, I’m up for it.” Her words sounded so unsure, and it made me wonder if that’s how I sounded when I was nervous.

“I like the sound of that.” I lay back on my bed, trying to sound casual while my insides were having a party. Knowing she liked me enough to say that helped boost my confidence a few notches.

She laughed. “I have to go. A bunch of the girls from the team want to start some pre-season conditioning before it gets too hot in the morning. Do you have to work tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’ve got the early shift. Too bad you’re all done with rehab and can’t come visit me.” It was the most forward thing I’d ever said, but I needed the reassurance that her being my girlfriend wasn’t just a fluke.

“That’s what happens when you work for a great clinic. Patients get all better and don’t have to come by anymore.” She paused and giggled. “I’ll see if I can stop by. If not, do you want to do something tomorrow night?”

I was already scheduled for an eight-hour shift at the clinic and knew I’d need at least two hours after that for pitching and conditioning. “Yeah, I’ll call you when I’m done with everything, and we’ll watch a movie or something.”

“Sounds good. I can grab some snacks on my way to your house.”

I smiled, liking the fact that she felt so comfortable at my house. My dad still gave me a warning look every time he saw her over, but Daniel and my mom loved her, and that was all that mattered really.

“Good luck running,” I said, snickering.

“Thanks, I need all the help I can get.”

We said good night, and I stared at my ceiling, amazed at how the summer had gone. I’d ended the school year with a crush on a girl, and now she was my girlfriend. I never would have called that almost two months ago.

Twenty-Three

Serena

It was a rare day to find my friends available to hang out during the day, but for once, none of them had to work.

Penny and I were sitting next to the pool in Kate’s backyard, drying off from a swim. I’d needed the chance to hang out with the girls because I was running out of places to go during the day. My big house was too quiet, and there were only so many hours of TV I could watch before boredom set in.

Working out with my teammates that morning had been fun, and I was already feeling the soreness in my muscles. Since I’d been discharged from therapy, I’d been wearing a brace to make sure I didn’t do anything to mess it up again, but it felt good to move and train.

“How’s the job search going?” Penny asked. She was lying on her stomach on one of the pool chairs, her eyes closed. Since Kate and Brynn were still in the pool, I assumed she was talking to me.

“Job search? I haven’t really been looking for a job.” I adjusted my sunglasses, tipping up the sides a bit so they didn’t bite down on the tops of my ears.

Penny pushed up with her hands and flipped around on the chair, leaning back with

her face tipped to the sky. “The diner is hiring. Jake finished paying off the window they broke and got a job at one of the dealerships in town. Lou would love to have someone take over his job.”

“Wasn’t he a busboy?” I wrinkled my nose, thinking of cleaning up after people.

“Yeah, but that’s not the worst thing in the world. I started there.” Penny turned to look at me, her auburn hair a brighter copper in the sun.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I chewed on the side of my lip. The food industry wasn't my first choice of places to work, but maybe a job would help with my boredom. And then I'd have something to do.

"You think I need a job?" I asked, teasing her.

Penny laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "It wouldn't hurt. You might find something you're good at. I know you've taken an interest in being a nurse, but you still have a while before you can go to school for that. Having some other jobs to add to a resume might help when it comes time to find a job."

I didn't like the fact that she was right, mostly because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. Hopefully, people were willing to hire an almost-seventeen-year-old, but I preferred not to smell like grease for the rest of my life.

"You can always help at a nursing home," Brynn said, popping out of the water closest to Serena. "My great-grandmother's nursing home has a girl about our age who helps out around the place, wheeling the residents to the places they need to go, visiting them, that kind of thing. It might be a good start." She grabbed a towel and dried off.

The day wore on, and I headed home, hoping to hear something from Ben. I showered and started looking up jobs in Pecan Flatts, hoping something would spark my interest. I didn't have the skills or the desire to change oil in cars, and I'd never mowed a lawn or babysat before. But it could be fun working in a mall.

I spent the next thirty minutes filling out applications for different openings at

nursing homes and a few of the hospitals, throwing in a few for clothing stores as a backup. I checked my email in between each one, just in case I got a response back from the previous ones. Why I was suddenly excited to work, I wasn't sure. It felt like a step I needed to take, and if it got me out of the house and doing something for a few more hours, I'd take it.

I checked my phone at seven, but there was still no message or call from Ben. Maybe I'd just swing by and see if he was home. I dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, not bothering to take my hair out of the top knot it was in. Looking in the cabinet, I found several treats and snacks. Liza must have done the grocery shopping.

After grabbing a few of the packages of gummies and chocolate, I strolled out to my car. It didn't take long to get to Ben's house. His truck was sitting outside, and I wondered why he hadn't called.

I blew out a breath before knocking on the front door, hoping Ben's dad wouldn't open it. I'd only met him a couple of times, but each time I got the vibe he wasn't a big fan of me hanging out with his son.

"Serena!" Daniel said, grinning at me as he swung the door open. "You brought treats. You're my favorite person."

Ben's mom came up behind him with a smile on her face. "Oh, hi, Serena. Ben didn't tell me you were coming over. He's out in the backyard. Come on in."

I wondered if I'd done the right thing and hesitated. Maybe it would be better to wait for him to call me. But we'd established the relationship. We were boyfriend/girlfriend so it shouldn't be a big deal, right?

"Thanks. We'd talked about doing something, but I didn't hear from him. I thought I'd come over and bring a few treats."

Mrs. Gates laughed. “Calm down, Daniel. I’m sure Ben will share some with you. Let’s go find him.”

Daniel took off, bounding for the back door, his voice shouting before I’d even crossed the kitchen. “Serena’s here, Ben! And she brought treats. Can I have some, please?”

I’d reached the door by then, gazing through the screen door. Ben rubbed his hand through Daniel’s hair and turned, smiling up at me. I walked onto the porch steps and returned the smile.

“Hey, I didn’t know you were going to stop by.” He strode over and gave me a quick hug. It felt more like something a brother would give to a sister. I had to relax. His mom and brother were around. Maybe it was awkward for him.

My brain replayed the words he’d said in our conversation the night before, and I was sure I wasn’t crazy. “Oh, you said we’d do something tonight. I was bored at home, so I thought I’d come by and see if you still wanted to watch a movie or something.”

“Uh, yeah. That would be fun. Do you mind if I finish this bucket of balls first? I haven’t been as consistent hitting the corners, and I need to throw a few more.”

“Can I have some of your candy, Ben?” Daniel asked, waving one of the packages I’d brought.

“Yeah, but you better ask Mom first.”

Daniel turned and ran back inside, calling out for his mom.

I shrugged, glancing around the backyard. I’d never been out here, but I was impressed with the beauty of it. In one corner stood a swing next to a big sandbox.

Beautiful trees lined the back fence, and flowers grew along the base of the house. At the other end of the yard were several large nets and mats. Ben stood on what looked to be a removable mound. It seemed like the perfect setup to help him practice at home. So why had he gone to the park the day I'd sprained my ankle?

"Wow, I didn't realize you'd need all of that for pitching," I said, gesturing to the nets at the other end.

"It's kind of my own design. I've had to piece things together as I've gotten money from work. What would be awesome would be to have a real mound and a net down the rest of the backyard as a batting-cage type thing, but my dad has said no more times than I can remember. This is better than having to go somewhere every time."

I found a bucket with a lid sitting on the grass a few feet away from the one Ben was grabbing balls out of, and I dragged it over. He threw a pitch, missing the hole on the inside corner by about an inch.

He groaned, leaning over to grab another ball. He set up his feet on the mound, bringing the ball into his glove before striding toward home plate and letting go of the ball.

I grabbed a ball and tossed it up to him so he didn't have to bend over every time.

"Thanks," he said with a small smile. He turned back to the mats at the other end, striding forward again. This time he missed high by about two inches.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

He tensed up, looking more frustrated than I felt when the ball landed on the floor on our side of the court. I opened my mouth to say something, but I got the feeling he'd already forgotten about me sitting here, his sole focus on hitting the hole.

Ten minutes later, he'd finished throwing the last ball in the bucket, only making one pitch through the hole he'd been aiming for. I stood and walked next to him as he grabbed the bucket, his anger evident as he whipped it around and started mumbling under his breath. I'd never seen him this way, so intense and beating himself up.

After picking up a couple of balls and tossing them into the bucket, I stepped over and touched his shoulder. "Ben, are you okay?"

His eyes turned to me, looking as though he didn't really see me. "I'm fine. I just can't get this pitch to work."

I let out a nervous laugh and bent over to pick up another ball. "I don't think you missed more than two inches on this entire bucket, and there's, what, fifty balls in it?"

"Fifty-six." His voice was flat. He walked to the corner of the fence and grabbed the last few balls. He chucked them into the bucket, and I started toward the house. When I turned and found him positioned on the mound again, I frowned.

"Hey, I thought we were going to go watch a movie after that bucket." I folded my arms across my chest, hoping he'd get the hint that practice should be over.

He shook his head. "Just give me one more bucket. I won't be able to concentrate or sleep tonight until I've gotten more through the hole."

A ball sailed toward the net, hitting the edge of the hole and banking in.

“That was awesome!” I said. I turned to look at him, but his expression only relaxed for a second before he bent down to retrieve another ball. Shaking my head, I said, “You’re going to hurt yourself. I’m going inside.”

Irritation rose in my chest as he didn’t even nod or look as though he’d heard me.

“Is he finally done out there?” his mom asked, washing a dish with a scrubber as I entered the kitchen.

I shook my head, taking in a deep breath before I said anything. I was swinging between anger and shock at how the night had turned out.

His mom dried her hands off on a towel and walked over, resting her hands on my shoulders. She was a few inches taller than me, and I had to tilt my head up a bit to look into her eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Serena.” Without warning, she wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me in for a hug. “He gets into this mode, and we just have to let him ride it out.” She pulled back, keeping one arm over my shoulders, and ushered me into the living room.

My lip trembled, and I sniffed back the beginning of tears. I’d promised myself I wouldn’t cry over a boy after what happened with James, but there was so much more emotion when it came to this relationship that my throat burned from trying to hold it all back.

“What triggers it?” I managed without sounding too desperate.

We sat on the couch, and she turned toward me, her eyes sympathetic. “Ben tries

really hard to be the perfect son. He's always been that way, always wanted to excel. But it's been getting worse lately. I know how much he loves baseball, but there are times when I wish he would find another sport."

I was surprised to hear that from his mother, especially since she came to every game of his. "Why? What is it about baseball that makes him like this?" I really liked the Ben from therapy, or the Ben from the dock on our first date. But Ben the Pitcher was beginning to wear on me.

"I love my husband, but he isn't the biggest fan of sports in general, least of all baseball. I think he had some bad experiences when he was younger, didn't get picked for one of the all-star teams or something, and now he thinks it's a waste of time."

I raised an eyebrow, surprised Ben's dad could think that about a sport. There were so many more things to it than just a couple of hours during the game. It was the hours of practice, the ability to develop teamworking skills, as well as the responsibility of showing up and giving it everything. But Ben's 'everything' seemed to be more over-the-top than even I could have imagined.

"So what's got Mr. Baseball bound and determined to hit that certain hole outside?" I jutted my thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the back door.

"Ben got an invitation this afternoon to an elite training camp next week. I guess they had a player drop out, and Coach Maddox reached out to him, asking if he wanted to take part in it. Ben asked my husband if he could go, saying he'd pay the fee with the money he'd earned at the clinic." She swallowed and the pucker of her lips looked as though she'd eaten something sour. "After their disagreement last night, it didn't go well."

"Does Mr. Gates not want him to play in college or something? I would think an elite

camp would be an amazing opportunity.” I’d be over the moon if I’d been invited to one of the elite camps for volleyball, and even if my mom said no, my dad would probably win her over.

“Dave just wants him to figure out a career and go for it. He’s not too keen on physical therapy being the best as it’s long hours and not that great of pay.”

“What do you think?” The woman kept talking about her husband’s opinion, but I was curious about what she wanted for her son. She was a woman who’d built a catering business and made it work for her and her family. There was no way she didn’t feel somewhat strongly about all this.

“I love watching Ben play. He has such a natural talent and reminds me of watching my brothers growing up. But he gets so in his head, to the point that I can’t get through to him when he’s like this.” She reached over and took my hands in hers. “I just hope you won’t let this affect your relationship. He lights up when he talks about you.”

My mind reflected on all the other times I’d seen Ben, or when I walked into a room and his big smile flashed, and I knew she was right. But the Ben outside right now was like some other person.

“I think I’ll just head home. Have him call me when he’s back to normal.” I stood, glancing around the room. Taking a step closer to her, I said, “Tell Daniel he can have the package of gummy bears.”

She laughed. “I will. You’ll probably cement yourself as his favorite person after that.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I walked out of the house and over to my car. As I opened the door, I heard the familiar sound of Ben's foot on the moveable mound around back.

It would be all right. We all had bad days, and I couldn't expect him to be happy all the time.

But as I drove back home, I felt just as empty as I usually did with my parents. All I could hope was that this was some fluke, because I'd never felt second-best when it came to Ben before. Maybe a bubble bath and some reality TV would help put things into perspective for me tonight.

Twenty-Four

Ben

It took another three buckets of balls for my brain to be okay with the results. My arm was tired, and I could feel soreness already in the side of my neck. I picked up the balls and put the bucket back in the small shed. I considered taking down the nets, but the thought of my dad and our conversation about the elite camp made me want to tick him off. He wasn't a fan of anything out of place in the backyard, sometimes cleaning up even while we were playing.

Right now, I had to figure out a way to get into that camp. I had saved enough money for it, although it would make driving anywhere long distance or outside of my usual routes impossible. But to be working out in front of some of the state's top baseball coaches, the chance to up my scholarship opportunities was priceless.

I wiped the sweat on the sides of my head on my sleeves, kicking off my shoes in the small space my mom had designated as a mudroom a few months before. Water was next on the radar, and I walked to the cupboard to pull out a glass. I stuck it under the dispenser on the front of the fridge, filling it until there was only a half-inch of space left in the cup. It took about four gulps to drain it, the cool water helping decrease the body heat from being outside in the Texas night air for longer than I should have.

My mom walked into the room, leaning her hip against the counter and her arms folded tightly. From her pursed lips, I could tell she was not happy about something.

“Are you back to normal? Or do I need to hit you on the head?”

“What do you mean? I’m always normal.” I set the glass into the sink and paused, knowing I needed a shower more than anything.

She shook her head. “Your girlfriend came over to see you, and you acted like she wasn’t even here. I’m all for you going to this camp, but not at the expense of Serena. I suggest you find a way to make it up to her and fast.”

“Did she leave?” I panicked, just now realizing how late it was.

“Yeah. She said to have you call her when you’re back to normal.” My mom’s eyebrow rose as if challenging any wrong response I was going to share.

My stomach twisted as I felt the anger surge. I just wasn’t doing anything right anymore. “She’d probably be better off dating someone else anyway.” I bit my tongue, surprised at the words. But as I thought about them, they felt truer than I wanted to admit.

“Why would you say that?” My mom’s face showed just how disappointed she was in me, her narrowed eyes trained on my face. I knew I was going to be there a while

when I saw that expression.

Pulling out a chair, I slumped into it, not wanting to go into any of this, least of all with my mom. But she would bug me over and over about it until I told her anyway.

“She’s dated a few other guys from school, but they never lasted very long, and they’re all the typical popular guys. I’m not one of those, Mom.”

My mom placed her hand on the table a few inches from me, towering. “Relationships go two ways, Benjamin David Clark. From what you’ve said, she initiated the boyfriend/girlfriend titles, and I’m willing to bet she kissed you first, so I would say she’s invested in the two of you. Were those guys even remotely like you in personality?” She paused, and I knew she wanted an answer.

“No.” It was true. The kind of guys she usually went for weren’t like me at all. Most of them were players or just all-around jerks.

“Then I suggest you make it right.”

“I will, Mom. I’ll talk to her right now.” I moved my fingers to trace the pattern on the tablecloth. “Will you talk to Dad? Please, I promise I won’t be as intense about practicing the rest of the week if I can go.” I was full-on begging at this point, and I added in the praying-hands pose in the hopes that it would sway her.

She nodded. “I’m not promising anything, but I’ll have a talk with him when he gets home from the gym.”

I blew out a breath. If there was anyone who could convince my dad of anything, it was her. Having her on my side was one thing I could count on for the most part because she always looked out for me, warning me of things that could go wrong.

Like with Serena. I'd been in the zone, wanting the pitches to hit the right spot, and I hadn't taken the time to actually talk to her. I was just screwing things up right and left when it came to her, and we'd only been officially a couple for less than a day.

I headed up the stairs, trying to think of what I could say to her. My finger hovered over her name on my phone, trying to decide if I was going to call or text. As much as I wanted to send a message, I knew it would probably be better to call.

The ringtone sounded loud in my ear several times before I heard the line connect.

"Hello." She said the word softly, and the guilt increased.

"Serena, I just wanted to say I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have been like that. It's just that I really want to go to this camp—"

"You don't have to explain," she said, her words still softer than I'd ever heard her. "Your mom told me about the conversation with your dad."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

Blowing out a breath, I tried to find something that would help convince her that I was sorry. “Please forgive me, Serena. I know I made a mistake tonight. I was just so angry that he wouldn’t let me go that I couldn’t focus on anything until I, well, until I could prove to him that I deserve to go.”

The line was silent for several seconds, and I could hear my heartbeat in my ears, pounding loudly as I waited for her response.

“It’s all right, Ben. I get being irritated with parents. If you can go, how long is the camp?” Her voice cracked and I could tell how much she was trying to be upbeat about the whole thing.

“Serena, are you okay? I’m a jerk, and I’m so sorry.”

I heard her intake of breath, and then she said, “I’ll be fine. I was just excited to hang out with you, and if you’re going to be gone, I won’t get to see you for a while.”

“The camp starts on Monday, and I think we come home early Friday afternoon. Aren’t tryouts soon for volleyball?” I leaned back on my bed, resting my free hand underneath my head.

“Yeah, Monday.”

“What did you do today?” Her short answers were making it difficult to carry on the conversation.

“Hung out with the girls. Applied for some jobs.”

I paused a moment. “That’s awesome. What kind of job?”

“Nursing assistants, the kind where you don’t need to be trained yet.” There was little emotion in her voice. I was going to need something to make up for my tunnel vision.

“That would be awesome. It would give you some experience before you start the CNA program, right?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. We’ll see if I even get any of them. I’m going to head to bed. We’re going running again, and I don’t want to be dragging.”

I was so used to her initiating a time to hang out, and I wished she would do it again. But when a few seconds passed and she said nothing, I said, “Do you want to retry movie night tomorrow? Maybe I can come to your place this time?”

“Um, yeah, we can do that. I’ll text you tomorrow. Good night.”

The phone clicked, and I stared at the ceiling. I hadn’t achieved complete forgiveness, but I hoped that by moving our date to tomorrow, we might go back to how we’d been over the past few weeks.

Twenty-Five

Serena

The house was clean, and I’d made some popcorn as I waited for Ben to show up. Glancing at my watch, it was already ten after seven. He was late, and it wasn’t doing much to help keep the anger from simmering in my stomach. If he stood me up after yesterday, then his words of apology meant nothing, and I was done.

I checked my phone, hoping I just hadn’t heard a text saying he’d be late. Nothing.

Grabbing a blanket, I pulled it up to my chin, relishing the warmth against the air conditioner. I thought about how Ben had been acting weird lately, trying to pinpoint when it started. He'd been so chill and fun up until our first date on the docks, and then it seemed like he'd almost walled himself off. Was he really that much of a perfectionist that he didn't think our relationship would ever work out because of a mistake?

I mulled that over until the bell rang a few minutes later, and I stood to answer it.

"Hey, you made it," I said.

"Sorry, I had to finish up some last-minute stuff and then jump in the shower." Ben leaned over and hugged me as he stepped into the house. His hair was wet, and he smelled like body wash. He shifted nervously, sticking one hand in his back pocket.

I waved him into the family room. "You're good. My parents are at some charity gala for my dad's team, so it's just us tonight." I sat back in my seat on the couch and pulled the blanket up again.

Ben hesitated and finally sank down, sitting a few inches away from me.

"What should we watch?" I asked, turning on the TV.

He shrugged. "I'm good with whatever."

"You don't have to be so agreeable all the time, Ben. What do you want to watch?" I nudged, staring at his profile.

He turned to me, his eyes almost pleading for something. "I like action, adventure, sports movies, but I'm good with what you want to watch."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I nodded, opening up one of the streaming services on the screen and flicking through. “Do you see anything?”

He shook his head, but it didn’t seem like he was really looking at anything. Why was he acting so weird? A flicker of sympathy ran through me, and I wondered if something else had happened between him and his dad.

“Hey,” I said, scooting closer and touching his arm. “What’s wrong?”

“My dad said I could go to the elite camp.” He opened his mouth like he was going to say something else and then clamped it shut.

“But?” Having met David Clark a couple of times, I knew there was probably a condition attached.

Ben blew out a breath. “I have to quit the clinic and work at his office as long as he does every day.”

I leaned back against the couch. “Seriously? You love your job. How are you going to have time to practice?”

“I’ll do what I can. He said I need to take time off from things, to refocus.”

“So making you work double shifts is the way to do that? That’s not right, Ben. You’re still in high school. Doesn’t he remember what that was like?”

Silence surrounded us as I watched the emotions play across his face. “I just don’t

know if I can go against him on this. I really want to go to the camp, but working all the time seems like a steep price to pay for a week away.”

I waved my hands for emphasis as I said, “Yes! Why is he so worried about you anyway? You’re a really good kid who’s probably only been in trouble once in his whole life.” Not that I’d done anything terrible either, thanks to friends like Penny and Brynn.

Ben turned to look at me, his eyes searching my face for something before he decided to speak. “I think he’s worried I’ll be let down by baseball like he was as a teenager.”

“What are you going to do, then?”

“I mean, this camp always has some of the top college recruiters and if I can learn a few tips for pitching, or even strategy, it will be worth the cost moneywise. But once I get back from camp, I’ll have to work for him until graduation. If I don’t go, I’ll always wonder what chances for a scholarship I could’ve had, no matter what ones I get offered.”

I smiled. “I think you should go. But I don’t think it’s right to punish you for something you love.”

As Ben gave me a smile, I leaned against his shoulder, enjoying the silence between us. “Maybe he’ll let you off for my birthday, though.”

“When’s your birthday?” Ben asked, his words vibrating through my head as he turned so his chin was against the top of my head.

“The Friday at the end of your camp. So come celebrate with me. We can go do something fun, celebrate whatever you achieved during camp. Maybe I’ll have a job by then.”

“You can probably apply to take my spot at the clinic. John always asks how you are now that you’re done with therapy.”

With a laugh, I said, “I’d be lucky to get that job. I might apply, though, if I don’t hear back from anywhere else.”

Something else was bothering Ben, and as much as I wanted to force it out of him, I didn’t want to scare him into not wanting to talk to me about anything again.

In a softer voice, I asked, “Anything else you want to ask me or talk about?”

He took in a deep breath. “How many people have you kissed? Besides me, I mean.”

His question caught me off guard, and I shifted back in my seat. I tried to read his expression, but it changed from serious to nervous and then back again.

“Not including you, three.”

“Really?” A mixture of relief and surprise flashed across his face.

“Yes, really,” I said, my cheeks heating in record time. I wrapped my arms around my waist, staring at the coffee table in front of us. “A lot of the rumors around school aren’t true, but it’s easier to let them go unanswered than to have people wanting things from me because I’m Steve Gates’s daughter.” I paused again, trying to decide how much to tell him. But since he’d asked me directly, I wanted him to know. I didn’t need secrets between us.

“My first kiss was at a beginning-of-school party during freshman year on a dare. Actually my first two were dares. And then number three was James last winter, who I found kissing someone else a week later. All the other guys I dated were just guys I talked to in my classes. I’d be interested in them for a week or two, and then they’d

just stop talking to me.” I finally looked in his direction, curious how he was taking all the information. He looked thoughtful but not like he was ready to run away. “What about you? How many girls have you kissed?”

His eyes went wide, and he let out a nervous laugh. “Umm, you’re my first kiss.”

“Wait, what? When I kissed you in the car, that was your first kiss?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

He nodded, looking more terrified than I'd ever seen him.

“Well, for the record, you're a pretty great kisser.” I giggled as his neck, face, and ears all turned bright red. I glanced down at his lips but was surprised when he leaned forward, kissing me gently. After a few seconds, I pulled back, laughing. “What was that for?”

He grinned. “Just trying to block out those other kisses from your mind.” We laughed together and he said, “How about we watch a movie?” He slid his hand around mine, interlocking our fingers.

“Sounds like a great plan.” I leaned into him, unable to wipe the grin off my face. Things were going well, I just hoped we'd continue like this for longer than a couple of weeks.

Twenty-Six

Ben

It was the end of day two of the Texas Elite Baseball Camp, and I'd never been as exhausted as I was dropping onto the bed in the dorms we were all assigned to. I'd thought I was in decent shape before I arrived yesterday morning, but my legs were jelly and so was my brain. After being assigned to the group of pitchers, I realized how much I'd been lacking in my abilities.

The coach in charge of us had pointed out several times that as a pitcher, we had to be better than just throwing pitches. We had to think through scenarios, look for

weaknesses in the hitter's swing, and know what we could throw to strike them out. I was a baby while the other guys were toddlers or even young kids when it came to this kind of stuff. There were times I thought it would've been better had Coach Maddox recommended someone else to fill the spot.

There had been moments when I heard my father's voice telling me it wasn't worth it and my baseball career wouldn't pan out, but then I'd remember Serena's words, along with my mom's and Daniel's encouragement that I could actually make it through this.

Most of the other guys had stayed out tonight, playing some games in one of the other dorms. I lay down on the top bunk, opening my phone to see a few messages.

One was from Serena.

Good luck tomorrow! You're amazing, and you'll do great. Know I'm thinking about you.

My chest swelled with pride as I thought of her. It was funny to think about how prickly she'd been when we first sat by each other in the theater almost three months before. But from the message she'd sent, it was like she'd just needed someone to listen to her and she'd started to come alive.

I clicked out to the next message, knowing I'd want to spend some more time on the words I'd send her. The next message was from Penny. From my screen, I could see we'd only messaged once before, and I was curious as to what she could need right now.

Call me when you're done with your camp for the day.

I glanced at the time stamp, seeing it had come in only a few minutes ago, an hour

after Serena had sent her text. Something hadn't happened to Serena in that time, right?

I dialed the number, hoping to ease the panic surging.

"Ben." Penny sounded out of breath. "I'm glad you called me back. I needed to talk to you about something really important."

"Is everyone okay?" I'd originally thought of Serena, but maybe Jake had been in an accident. With how easily he'd broken the window at the diner, I wouldn't be surprised if something like that happened to him again.

Penny chuckled. "Yeah, as far as I know. Why? Are you worried?"

I blew out a breath, grateful to hear that. "I just don't get texts from you very often, so I figured you had some news about something."

"Well, I'll know to add 'emergency' next time. Okay, so Serena's birthday is this Friday, and we're planning a little surprise party for her."

"That would be fun." Should I have been the one to plan it? I was probably the worst boyfriend on earth at the moment. But at least Penny had called me about it.

"Yep. She's never had one. We're going to have it at Kate's house, and the guys are all going to be there too. You'll be able to make it, right? I mean, the camp ends that afternoon?"

I pulled the phone away from my ear to clear my throat and returned it there, hearing Penny's light breathing through the line. "As far as I know. I think we get done at about four."

“Okay, you’re about ninety miles away,” she said, her voice going soft like she was talking to herself. “Friday afternoon traffic on the highways home. Let’s have you plan to pick Serena up at her house around seven thirty. We can figure out an excuse for why you’re stopping over at Kate’s house, and then we’ll surprise her.”

“What if I get stuck in traffic?”

Penny groaned. “Don’t be sending those vibes out, Ben. Positivity. Okay, never mind. We’ll come up with another plan. Either Brynn or I will get her to the party, but you need to show up as soon as you’re back in town. She’s never had a surprise party, just like she’s never been to a school dance, and as much as she won’t admit it, she wants both things to happen at some point.”

“Wait, are we talking about the party or are you talking about a dance? We haven’t even started school yet for the year.”

“Focus on the party. That’s goal number one right now.” She paused a moment, her voice dropping in volume. “Do you want me to pick up a gift from you?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

My stomach tightened, and I was sure something was squeezing my lungs. “Umm...good question. What do you think she would like?” Heat rose to the tips of my ears as I thought about it. I was probably the worst gift giver ever, and it seemed like a birthday gift to my first girlfriend was almost as much pressure as being called to pitch in a tight spot.

“You like her, right?” The fact that one of Serena’s good friends had just asked me if I liked Serena or not meant I was doing an awful job in the boyfriend department. I wasn’t sure if Penny was this blunt with everyone else in the world, but she had a way of getting information out of me that even I didn’t know.

“Of course I like her.” I liked her smile, her sarcasm, and the way she snuck Daniel treats every time she came over to my house. She loved volleyball about as much as I loved baseball, and she’d been through a lot in the past few years, even though most people assumed she had the perfect life. But what to get her that conveyed all that wasn’t coming to mind. “Let me get back to you on that.”

“Okay, then. Well, I have to run, but good luck at your camp, and we’ll see you on Friday. I’ll text you Kate’s address so you have it.” She hung up, and I stared at the phone, wondering what I’d just gotten myself into.

I wracked my brain to come up with something that would be unique and show her how much I cared about her. The disappointment on her face when I showed up late to the movie night still twisted my stomach as I remembered it. I didn’t know much about the future, but I did know I needed Serena in my life. My feelings for her had gone from major crush to stronger feelings than like. But was there a physical representation of that I could give her?

I had three more days of baseball. Plenty of time to figure that out. And staying away from her like my dad had advised before I left for this trip wasn't an option. I wanted her by my side, walking through the halls of the school and cheering for me in the stands during a game. And I would be there doing the same thing for her games. We both deserved the support of the people who loved us, and I was pretty sure I was there.

Twenty-Seven

Serena

"Girl, why are you dressed so somber?" Brynn asked, sitting in my room.

I looked down at the jean shorts and black blouse. It had been a while since we'd actually gone out anywhere, and maybe Penny's more subtle style was rubbing off on me.

She stood and walked into my closet, grabbing several hangars and spreading the clothing out on my four-poster bed. As I scanned the pieces, I realized she'd pulled out several items I'd never seen before. I stood from the chair next to my desk and walked over, pulling out a tag so I could see the brand.

RG. My mom had designed these? I held up the white lace shirt with a second layer underneath all but the sleeves. The second had ruffled sleeves and just a few pieces of bling along the front of the shirt.

"Why don't you ever wear any of these? I might have to borrow one or two of them." Brynn held another shirt up to her, turning several ways in the mirror and making faces.

"I didn't even know I had them." These definitely didn't fit in the old-woman

category, and I hoped she was planning to sell more things like this in her shop. This was way better than what we'd modeled at the fashion show, and if Brynn and I were both excited about them, it was a good sign.

I pulled on the lace shirt and changed to a navy-blue circle skirt, adding some heels when Brynn insisted.

"Since when has it been like pulling teeth to get you to dress up?" Brynn said, admiring herself again in the mirror, this time with the shirt on.

With a quick shrug, I sat down and applied some mascara and eyeshadow. "It helps to know where I'm going. I get that you want it to be a surprise, but just tell me already."

Brynn pulled on her upper lip with her teeth. "Um, no. Then no one would ever tell me a secret again. You'll just have to wait a little bit longer." She curled her eyelashes and then coated them with mascara before saying, "Have you heard from Ben today?"

I glanced toward my phone as if it would suddenly produce a bunch of messages from him. I'd barely heard anything from him over the past few days, but I could only imagine what the coaches were putting him through.

"No." I gave a forced smile. I hadn't heard from him since Tuesday when he'd called. He'd sounded so tired but also like something was off. That was just the start of my defenses rising in response to a lukewarm boy. But then at the end of the conversation, he'd sounded like he wanted to say something more serious but had held back. Since he hung up, it had been radio silence.

Brynn looked as if she'd just smelled something disgusting. "Really? He better make up for it tonight."

Pointing my finger at her, I asked, “So you’re saying he’s going to be wherever we are tonight?” I grinned, hoping to coax any tidbit of information out of her. I hoped she was right because the strongest feeling I had right then was missing Ben, his awkwardness and his quirky sense of humor.

She used her thumb and pointer finger to pull an imaginary zipper over her lips. “My lips are sealed.”

“Not anymore.”

“Whatever. It’s seven fifteen. Let’s go. We’ve got to meet the girls in a few minutes.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later, we pulled into Kate’s driveway. I didn’t see Penny’s car and still had no idea what was going on. Brynn stalked up the steps and opened the door, walking right into the house.

“What are you doing? You don’t live—”

“SURPRISE!”

I jumped back, almost falling off the small step into the front door, barely catching myself on the handle.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I glanced around, surprised to see not only Kate and Penny, but several of the baseball guys. Even most of my volleyball team had shown up. But as I scanned the room, there was no sign of my tall pitcher boyfriend.

“Uh, thank you all. I had no idea you’d planned all this.” I glanced at my friends, smiling wide. This was my first surprise party, and it was just as amazing as I’d always pictured. After thanking a bunch of people, I stared at Penny, hoping she’d be able to communicate the reason my boyfriend was missing across a room full of people.

She gave me a sad smile and a shake of the head like she didn’t know what had happened with him.

Kate ushered everyone to the upstairs bonus room where music was playing and a bunch of food and games were set out in the large space.

Brynn, Kate, and Penny surrounded me. “You look amazing, Serena,” Kate said. “I need to borrow that shirt for school.”

I leaned closer to Penny and whispered in her ear, “Where’s Ben?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice a little louder. “I told him we were doing this tonight, and he said he’d be here.”

I turned to survey the room, wondering if anyone could hear her over the loud music blaring from the speaker system overhead.

“I talked to him on Tuesday night about the party. I told him I’d pick you up a gift for him to give you since he wouldn’t have much time coming back from camp, but I never heard from him after that.

“Okay, let me call him.” I pulled out my phone, walking down a hallway in the hopes of finding a quieter spot to be able to hear. I dialed the number on my main screen, listening to it ring several times before going to voicemail. I texted him, worried he’d gotten into an accident or had some other injury.

Brynn hooked her arm through mine. “Let’s just enjoy tonight. I’m sure he has an explanation.”

I stared down at the black screen on my phone, wishing it would light up and have his name as the caller. “I hope so.”

I liked him way more than I wanted to admit, and each time I thought about it, the worries increased. My feelings for him were lightyears beyond what I’d felt for the other guys I’d dated, which had been more of just a physical attraction than anything else. Ben was relatable and funny, and when he wasn’t too stressed about baseball, he treated me like I was the only girl in the world.

I hoped he was all right and there was a good reason for him not being there, because I didn’t think I could bear it if he fit into the same category as my parents.

Twenty-Eight

Ben

I swatted at a mosquito near my face and leaned forward, squinting to see the catcher’s signals behind the plate. It was the last day of the camp, and I’d learned so much in the few days I’d been there. The lights shone down on the field, making the

navy-blue sky look black. The stands were filled with over thirty different college coaches, armed with radar guns, tablets, and notebooks.

I had to focus on the next pitch and not let my mind panic over what they might be writing down. It wasn't necessarily all about me, with thirty-nine other players at the camp.

The catcher flashed me the sign for a fastball on the outside corner. I glanced at the batter, taking in his stride, how far away his feet were from the plate, where his hands rested on his shoulder.

I nodded, bringing the ball into my glove. I strode forward, throwing the ball to where the catcher didn't even have to move. I made a small fist pump, not wanting to show too much emotion with the batter still at the plate.

The next pitch was a slider, moving out of range of a strike. The next one was another fastball, this time on the inside corner. As soon as I let go of the ball, I wanted it back, knowing my shoulder had rotated farther than it was supposed to and the ball was headed right for the middle of the plate.

The ping of the ball hitting the bat caused my heart to sink, and I turned to watch it sail over the fence. The batter rounded the bases with his arms high, and I was just ready to go home. I glanced up into the stands where most of the coaches had their heads buried, writing whatever it was they needed to remember.

The kid playing catcher jogged out to me with a new ball from the umpire. "Hey, you're good. Just settle down. Hit your spots. We'll win them with offense." He tossed the ball into my glove and looked at me until I nodded.

"Yeah," I mumbled. I needed to keep my focus. Hit those spots I'd spent so much time throwing to so I could get out of this inning.

“Just throw like you’ve been throwing this whole week. There’s no surprise here.” He jogged backward a few steps and turned around to sprint behind the plate.

The word “surprise” triggered Penny’s voice from her call the other night. “We’re throwing Serena a surprise party on Friday.”

I closed my eyes, shame washing over me. I was missing the surprise party, and I hadn’t even contacted her today to tell her happy birthday. With the camp beginning around seven in the morning and not finishing until after nine for the last four days, I’d been exhausted and hadn’t even called my mom, just sending her a text that I was still alive.

The schedule had said we’d be done with the camp by four, but some of the guys who’d been there before said there was always a big scrimmage the last day, and that was the best chance to be looked at by college coaches.

Blinking a few times, I saw the signal and threw the next pitch, the ball landing in the dirt a few feet in front of the plate. The catcher moved enough to block it with his chest protector, but I knew that things were already spiraling out of control.

Three pitches later, the guy who was in charge of the pitchers walked over and pulled me out, trying to tell me good job. I tuned it out, feeling the failure in every part of my body. I’d not only failed at getting attention from scouts, but I’d failed my girlfriend by not showing up when she needed it.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

The moment the game ended, I pulled out my phone and sent her a text.

Happy Birthday! I'm so sorry I didn't make it for the surprise party. I'm driving home now.

After the coach's closing remarks, I took off my cleats and ran inside to get my bag, knowing I needed to hurry back to Pecan Flatts. My stomach was tied up in a ball of anxiety about how I would find Serena. I just hoped she'd be able to forgive me for missing her party.

Twenty-Nine

Serena

A text came through from Ben, but his words did nothing to comfort me. I was in a bad mood and had locked myself in one of the bedrooms in the basement of Kate's house. I could still hear most of what was going on, but I needed a few minutes where I didn't have to fake being happy.

Ben had told me the camp ended in the afternoon. So why wasn't he here? And why hadn't he sent me a message earlier? I guess I had to be grateful nothing major had happened to him since I talked to him the other day, but that still didn't take away the pain of betrayal running through me.

Hot tears ran down my cheeks, and I was sure my heart was breaking.

The hopeful side of me pulled up scenario after scenario of what could have

happened to him, that he'd stayed longer because he was getting some kind of scholarship offer. But my rational side told me he'd forgotten about me, just like my parents had. The only messages I'd gotten all day were from Penny, Brynn, and Kate, and it hurt that the three who were supposed to support me the most, my parents and my boyfriend, hadn't said a thing. Until this message from Ben anyway.

I dried my eyes, knowing I needed to be grateful for the friends who were there no matter what, the ones who'd thrown me a surprise party. Walking out of the bedroom, I tipped my head back, trying to fake a smile. It was hard, but I would socialize because I was thankful for all they'd done.

The party wasn't huge, and I was glad of that. People played videogames on the nearly floor-to-ceiling television, danced to music, or just stood by the food table and ate.

"What do you think?" Kate asked, grinning at me.

I reached over and gave her a hug, holding a moment longer than normal. Hugs weren't usually my thing, but it was more refreshing than ever, and I needed to draw some strength to make it through the rest of the night.

"It's awesome, Kate. Thank you," I said, taking a step back.

She gave me a pout. "I'm so sorry about Ben. Penny called to tell him about the party on Tuesday. Do you think he forgot?"

I shook my head, lifting my phone in the air. "No, I got a text from him a few minutes ago. He was at baseball camp still."

"Really? I thought the camp ended this afternoon."

“You and me both.” I tasted the bitterness and scrunched my nose, trying to hold back another wave of tears. Crying in front of the whole room of people here for my birthday wasn’t something I wanted to dwell on for the next several years.

Kate placed a hand on her hip and tilted her head to the side, searching my face for something. “What are you going to do?”

I threw my hands up in the air. “I’m not sure yet. He’s been so weird the last couple of weeks, and I’m just not sure I can keep putting myself through this. I mean, I’ve already put up with at least ten years of my parents forgetting me and all the little events in my life. I don’t think I can do that for a third person.”

Kate drew me back in with another hug and whispered, “You’ll figure it out. Just listen to his side of the story before you decide anything.”

I nodded, wiping at my nose with the back of my hand. What I would’ve given to hit a volleyball right then.

Thirty

Ben

It was nearly midnight when I got back to town, and I drove over to Serena’s house, hoping I could at least talk to her and make up for not being at the party. I’d stopped at a store right before closing and grabbed some flowers and a few of the snacks I knew she liked. They weren’t great, but I hoped it would buy me enough time to set up a makeup birthday dinner for tomorrow.

The house was dark, and I looked for any signs of the family being home. I wasn’t sure if Serena parked in the garage or not, but I needed to try.

Are you home? I'm outside.

I hoped the emoji would help my cause. My heart beat in my ears as I stared at the screen.

Just before it turned black, a message from her popped up. It's late.

What did that mean? Like, go away? Or that I was too late to say I was sorry?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

I know, but I brought you something. Can I just talk to you for a minute?

Another long pause before she sent, You get one minute.

My stomach dropped, knowing she must be angrier than I thought. I stepped out of the car with the flowers and the small bag of treats and walked up to the front door.

The door cracked, and Serena slid out, pulling on a zip-up jacket. Her hair was in a high ponytail, and her eyes looked a little puffy, but the roof of the porch blocked the moonlight, making it difficult to see clearly.

“I know I’m really late, and I’m sorry for missing your birthday tonight. The camp went longer, and then they announced there was a scrimmage game after. Did you, uh, did you have a good day?” I needed her to say something, to help me figure out how I could make it up to her.

“It was all right. The party was kind of fun.” She paused, glancing down at her bare feet for a moment and then back up to me. “I just wish you’d been there.”

Nodding, I said, “I know. Me too. I was trying to get here as soon as I could. I got you a couple of things and want to take you to dinner tomorrow. Are you free around six?” I stretched the flowers out to her in one hand and the treats in the other, smiling as wide as I could with the tension around us.

Serena shook her head, her lips pressed together like she was about to cry. “I can’t, Ben. I don’t think I can do this right now.”

“C-can’t do what?” My stutter was coming back at the worst time ever.

“Us,” she said, pointing a finger and waving it between the two of us. “We have a lot going on, you with baseball and me with volleyball just starting up. Maybe it’s better if we just say we had a good run and leave it at that.”

I took a step back as if her words had physically hit me. Was this just how she was? I know I hadn’t been the best boyfriend, but I wasn’t ready to end things.

“I don’t want to be done, Serena.” My voice broke on her name, and I turned my head for a moment, looking out at the lawn while I tried to get it under control. “I think we’re really good together.”

“Go home, Ben. I’ll see you at school.” She crossed her arms and turned back to the door, slipping inside without a backward glance.

My limbs were paralyzed, and I stared at the door for longer than I can remember. School didn’t start for another two weeks. When I could finally move, I left the flowers and bag on the front porch and walked out to my truck.

It had finally happened. I’d ruined our relationship by worrying so much about the things I thought I could control that I’d pushed Serena away. I’d let my need to prove my dad wrong drive the doubt she had about people not supporting her even deeper than when I’d first met her.

For the first time, instead of wishing I had more time to practice my pitches, I wished for a way to go back and fix the things I’d messed up. Because moving on from Serena Gates didn’t seem possible right now.

Thirty-One

Serena

“Are you ever going to smile again?” Penny asked, punching me lightly in the shoulder. The four of us were at Lou’s diner, and she’d sat down next to us on her break.

It had been ten days since my surprise birthday party and breakup with Ben, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever be okay again. I hadn’t seen him since, but with school starting next week, I knew I was bound to.

I’d been surprised when he’d shown up so late, and I wanted to talk to him about it, to tell him how much I’d wanted him to be there at the party. But when he tried to hand me the gifts he’d brought, it was like he was trying to buy back my affection, just like my parents. I was done with people who wouldn’t even put in the effort to be with me.

I gave Penny a fake smile and picked up a fry, slathering it in ketchup before sticking it in my mouth.

“That doesn’t count, girl,” Brynn said, chucking a balled-up straw wrapper in my direction.

“I’m fine, you guys. Or I will be. Eventually.”

“Would you be happier if Ben were here?” Kate asked, her eyes pleading for some answer to solve the problem.

I leaned my head back on the top of the booth and sighed. I’d told them all about what had happened after the party, and as much as I said I wanted to move on, they seemed to be having a harder time of letting go of Ben than I was.

Or so I told myself.

There were several times where something small would trigger a memory of Ben, and I pushed them out of my mind as fast as they came. It was easier than really feeling the betrayal.

“I don’t think so, Kate. You guys are the only ones who actually listen and care about me. Who support me in my life. I just—I don’t want to end up with someone who thinks he can just bring me gifts to make up for not spending time with me, you know? And don’t say that it was one night, Brynn, because it started before that night. I want him to do well in baseball. I want him to succeed and get a scholarship because I still care about him. But I don’t want to go through the rollercoaster of emotions every time we’re supposed to do something and he has to get something perfect before we can hang out.”

Penny wrapped her arm around my shoulder and gave me a side hug. “I can understand that.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

The topic changed, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Ben was a good learning experience when it came to relationships.

My parents had tried to make up for forgetting about my birthday on Friday with tickets to Europe over Christmas. As much as I'd always wanted to go there, I refused. I didn't want huge gifts to sway my sympathy. I wanted time. Time spent doing things together. I just hoped they would figure that out before I left for college.

The girls talked about Kate getting asked to homecoming already, and a pang of envy hit me that I wasn't going. I mean, we hadn't even started school yet and guys were fighting over her. I guess that was a perk, or a curse, of being the student body president. There would be other dances, and I just had to get past this last heartbreak before I could focus on all that. With volleyball in full swing, I had plenty to keep me occupied during the day. It was the night that was the hardest.

Thirty-Two

Ben

I'd been a wreck the last two weeks. Having to dress up in slacks with a button-up shirt and tie to sit behind a desk all day was probably the most boring thing I'd ever done. When I got home, I'd spend the rest of my awake time outside throwing pitches against the net. I'd managed to throw enough balls in the right spots to help my brain somewhat, at least enough to make it through each day. Baseball would always be there, or at least for the next few years, even if Serena wouldn't.

And now I stood on the mound in the championship game of the biggest tournament

of the summer, the excitement of my teammates coursing through me as we took on one of the top-ranked teams in the state.

I'd made it through the first three innings without allowing anyone on base, thanks to a couple of key plays by Jake at short and a diving catch from Logan out in left. We were up to bat, waiting for a player on the other team to get checked out after a line drive to the knee.

"Did you ask Penny to homecoming?" Colt asked, leaning on the top of the bar separating the dugout from the field. He was staring at Jake, and I turned, curious of the answer. Jake had a fear of dances since one of his good friends had died in a drunk-driving accident after prom eighteen months before.

He shook his head. "I haven't yet, but I'm going to. What about you guys? Are you asking anyone?" He looked at Colt and then me, raising an eyebrow in question.

Colt grimaced. "I've been thinking about taking a girl from one of my classes last year. I kind of wish homecoming wasn't so early this year. Two weeks after school starts isn't enough time to get to know people."

I laughed at Colt's look of frustration over something as simple as a date.

"What about you, Clark? Are you going to ask Serena?" Jake stared at me, no hint of teasing in his tone or expression.

"I can't do that. She broke up with me. Wouldn't that look clingy if I ask her now?"

Jake slapped my shoulder. "No, if anything, maybe she'll see how much you still like her."

"I don't." The lie tasted sour on my tongue, and I turned toward the field, watching as

the trainer helped the second baseman stand.

“Just keep telling yourself that, Ben.”

We were out on the field after a fly ball hit by our first baseman, and I zoned in, digging down into all the practice sessions I’d had over the past couple of weeks.

Pitch after pitch aimed at the right spots, and I was on my way to a career high number of strikeouts. With two outs in the seventh inning, I breathed deeply, trying to let go of the pressure. I hadn’t let anyone get a hit the whole game, and I just needed to finish it off now.

The batter fouled off the first two pitches. I threw the next pitch just off the plate for a ball. As Dax gave me the sign for a slider to the outside, I took in a deep breath and threw. Time slowed down, and the ball seemed to inch toward the plate. The batter leaned over and swung, missing low. I waited to see if Dax still held on to the ball, meaning it was the third and final out of the inning and of the game.

My teammates rushed to the mound, piling on top of me and yelling.

“Dude! A perfect game! You threw a perfect game!” Jake was yelling right into my ear.

I finally made it out of the pack, excited about the achievement that few pitchers record.

As we waited for the awards to be given, I stood on the third baseline, staring into the crowd. I saw my mom and dad, with Daniel clapping right next to them. My mom looked like she was crying, and for once, my dad’s smile in my direction looked genuine. But the one person I wanted there, sitting next to my family and cheering me on, wasn’t.

“What’s wrong, man?” Dax asked out of the corner of his mouth. “You were lights out. I bet you’ll remember this forever. I know I will.”

I glanced over at him before turning my eyes back to the announcer, trying to figure out what to say. With a nod, I forced a smile. “I’m just...” I let the words trail off, still unsure of how to phrase it. This was one of the moments I’d worked so hard for, to achieve something like this, and yet, it still didn’t feel like enough.

After all the hours of practicing, all the time spent thinking about how to get better and what drills I needed to do, all to get to this moment. It didn’t have the same thrill I thought it would, and the disappointment was so strong, making it hard to breathe.

But as I raised my gaze to look back into the stands, the weight of the quest for perfection pressed down even more. I’d given up a job I excelled at and a girl I loved to chase this dream, and now I understood how much I’d lost because of it. And it needed to change.

There was no way I would ever be able to live up to my dad’s legacy of valedictorian and all the other things he’d accomplished in his life, but I didn’t want that. I wanted to go back to playing the sport I loved but in a way that didn’t consume all my free time. I missed working at the clinic. Sitting behind a desk for the rest of my life was not something I could do day after day.

And I wanted to get Serena back, needed to get her back and tell her that I’d been an idiot to think that perfection was the only way she’d accept the real me.

“You miss her.”

“Huh?” I turned to look at him.

The corners of Dax’s lips twitched upward as he focused on the reporters. My buddy wasn’t one I’d felt comfortable talking to about my relationship with Serena. He’d always seemed more like a big goof that avoided responsibilities of any kind, especially when it came to girls. “You’ve seemed off since the two of you broke up. I never thought I’d say this to anyone, but I think you need to get her back, man.”

I chuckled softly as they started giving awards at the beginning of the line for our team. “When did you get so sentimental?”

He folded his arms, trying to puff his chest out to look more masculine. “Believe it or not, the Daxinator can change. Maybe I envy you for all you’ve gone through with this girl, how you got over your stutter and asked her out.”

“You’re saying if I get back together with Serena, you’ll get the guts to ask out a girl? Don’t you go out with girls all the time?”

He shrugged and opened his mouth to say something, when the presenter handed each of us a small medal. I stared at the engraving on the back. First Place. I’d need a lot more than a medal to win back Serena, but for the first time in almost two weeks, I grinned. I’d channel the need for perfection into a plan that would win her back.

Thirty-Three

Serena

“I go! I go!” I called out, running to get under the ball. I set the ball behind me, the perfect shot for Sasha to slam it down onto the court. We were playing our first home game of the season on the second day of school, and while the gym was never packed like a guy’s basketball game, it seemed like more people were there than usual.

We’d lost the first game of the night, but this second one we were playing together better.

We rotated around the court, getting into position as Courtney served the ball. It zipped over the net and landed in the middle of three players. I clapped and cheered, checking the scoreboard.

Game point.

Courtney served again, the ball moving faster than the girl on the other side was prepared for, and a pass came back on our side. Sasha passed it to me, and I was ready to send it back, when I spotted a hole out of the corner of my eye. Doing my best to fake it to my teammate, I tipped the ball over, landing it just behind the blockers.

“That was awesome!” Mary said as we came to the middle of the court. We were all tied up now, 1-1.

Our coach waved us over, and I wiped my forehead with the hem of my jersey. He went into some of the weaknesses of the other team and what he wanted us to do differently this game.

I turned around, walking back onto the court and glancing up at the crowd. My heart nearly stopped as I saw my parents in the stands. I frowned, wondering how they’d

even known I had a game tonight. I'd avoided telling them so I wouldn't be so disappointed when they didn't show up.

My gaze moved down a few benches and caught on Ben, his smile widening when he saw me looking at him. Butterflies took off in my stomach, and my chest tightened, making it difficult to breathe. I didn't want to admit it to myself, but I'd missed him.

"You gonna play?" Mary asked, pointing to the court.

"Uh, yeah. I'm ready." I broke my gaze away from Ben and focused on the ball coming my way. Something about seeing him there sent a rush of adrenaline through me. I reacted to the ball, moving around the court where I needed to be to set up my teammates, his presence there in the back of my mind the whole time.

The last game was a battle, but we were able to win on a smash from Sasha. After shaking hands with the opposing team and a quick wrap-up speech from my coach, I shoved my shoes and knee pads into my bag, trying to figure out what I'd say to the three people I'd been avoiding for the last two weeks. The fact that they'd all shown up tonight made it harder to be as mad at them as I wanted to be.

"Rena, that was awesome, doll."

I turned around to see my parents approaching. My dad stepped forward and pulled me into a hug.

"Thanks, Dad." I hated the fact that a rock formed in my throat.

He stepped back, and my mom replaced him. "You surprise me all the time, Rena," she whispered. When she pulled back, I raised an eyebrow, curious as to the compliment.

I stared at her for a few seconds and finally asked, “Surprise you how?”

“For all you’ve been through this summer, for putting up with the lousy excuse for parents you have, and for being as excited about volleyball as I am about my clothes.” She dipped her head a moment, and when she spoke, her voice had more emotion than that day in the van when I’d modeled for her. “I’m sorry for not putting you first. And I learned from Ben that you’ve been looking for a job.”

I glanced behind them to where Ben was standing a ways back, surprised they’d had time to talk about anything with Ben since he seemed uneasy around many people.

“It’s not in the medical industry, but I’m looking for an assistant. After all the feedback you gave me after the fashion show, I want you to help me with this. What do you think?”

It took a moment to realize my mouth was hanging open. “Um, are you sure? Because I won’t be promoting the old-lady look.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

Both my parents burst out laughing, and I couldn't help but smile.

"I wouldn't have it any other way." She looked behind her, and when she turned back, she said, "Go easy on him. He's a good kid."

"See you at home, doll," my dad called out over his shoulder as he and my mom walked away. How long had I waited for all that to happen between me and my parents? Now that it had, I wasn't sure I was actually awake. I could only hope that by working with my mom, we could be as close as most moms and daughters were.

I waited a few seconds before dragging my eyes back to the tall guy I knew I was standing in front of me.

"Hey," he said, giving me a hesitant smile.

"Hey." I waited a few seconds, trying to think of what to say next. "Did you tell my parents about the game?"

He nodded, his eyes pleading. "I figured you could use some people on your side. I, uh, I just wanted to say I'm sorry, again, for everything that's happened between us. And I wanted to say I miss you. We won our championship game this weekend, and all I could think about was you not being there in the stands to cheer me on. So I knew I needed to be that person for you."

I lifted my bag and slung it over my head and across my body. "You want to be that person now?" I couldn't help the load of sarcasm that came out with the words.

Ben pinched his lips together, nodding his head. "I know I was an idiot. I, uh, threw a perfect game this weekend."

I raised an eyebrow, not sure what he was getting at by using an apology that bragged about his talents. "What's a perfect game?"

He smiled, looking down at his feet before raising his eyes back to mine. "It's when a pitcher, with an awesome defense behind him, doesn't allow anyone on base the entire game." He paused, and I thought he'd finished.

"Okay, that still isn't a good example of how you were an idiot."

He held up a hand and laughed. "Just give me a minute to explain. I've been working harder than ever to get it so my pitches work and so I'm perfect in the things I thought were important. After achieving the perfect game, I realized that it came at a significant cost and one I don't think was worth it." Emotion choked the last few words. "I've been trying to live up to this ideal my dad has always held up for me. But you were right. I need to follow what I want, follow my dreams."

"And what are those dreams?" I asked, the delivery not punching like I wanted it to.

"Oh, getting a scholarship, but also spending a lot of time with a certain brunette volleyball player." He grinned for several seconds before his expression sobered. "I'm sorry I tried to offer you lame gifts for your birthday. I should have actually thought about things and realized all you really want is time. So, I wanted to know if you'd go to the homecoming dance with me?" His smile shook a bit.

I laughed as tears sprang to my eyes. "I'd rather have you here than gifts any day." I reached forward, putting my hands on his neck and pulling him toward me. Without waiting to think about it, I pressed my lips to his in a quick kiss.

When we pulled back, his eyes were glazed, and I laughed. “That—went better than I imagined. So will you go with me?” he asked.

“Yes, Ben Clark. Dancing with you at my first school dance is the best birthday gift you could give me.”

Epilogue

Serena

The past few months had been a whirlwind, and while nothing was absolutely perfect, I was happier than I’d been in a long time.

I’d finally gone to my first dance in a dress my mom and I designed and created. Ben had made the night magical, but nothing would ever replace our first date in my mind. He’d relaxed on the amount of baseball practicing he did, allowing us to experience the fun, and heat, of Texas in the fall. And he was back working at the clinic. After a long discussion, Ben explained that he needed to follow his own dreams. His dad finally came around, and had even attended more of the fall ball games Ben’s team had played.

We’d made it to the second round in the state tournament for volleyball, and it was an adjustment not having practice and games as often. I’d been filling my time working with my mom in her boutique. With all the changes we’d made, tailoring the clothes to a younger audience and using my knowledge of social media to get it out there, we were busier than ever. We’d even started looking for larger warehouse space to accommodate all the orders.

My parents were now sharing a lot more with me, and adding Ben to my life made the loneliness go away.

We were sitting in the box suite at my dad's game against the Dolphins, and Ben kept looking around as though he'd never experienced anything like it.

"I can't believe we're here. This is amazing."

I laughed and shrugged. This was the first game I'd been to in a few years, but being there with my mom and Ben made it seem just about perfect.

"Ouch!" Ben said after a bone-crunching hit my dad laid on the guy in front of him. The player was slow to get up, and we watched the replay a few times on the big screen.

"I think I've finally decided where I'm going for college." Ben's voice was almost giddy, and I turned, curious to where he'd be heading next fall.

"Which school has convinced you to grace them with your presence?" I laughed.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:07 am

Ben shook his head, rolling his eyes at the words. “I’m staying local, going to Texas Southern.”

I threw my arms around him and hugged him tight. “What happened to Alabama?” I asked as I pulled back.

He shook his head, smiling. “They didn’t offer me as much, and I wouldn’t get to pitch for the first year or two. I want to play, and sticking around here has its benefits.” He leaned down and captured my mouth with his lips.

“Okay, kids,” my mom said, laughing. “Let’s watch the game.”

I pulled back, biting my bottom lip as my cheeks warmed. I slipped my hand into Ben’s, feeling the calluses of his fingers on the back of my hand.

Who would have thought that a feisty, sarcastic girl like me would end up with one of the sweetest and nicest kids at Rosemont? We weren’t without our arguments, but we knew how important it was to have each other there, cheering no matter the activity. We were the epitome of imperfect people, but somehow we made it work. One day and one game at a time.

* * *