

### The Broken Sugar Bowl

"What's the matter baby?" Charlie glanced over his shoulder at his fourteen year old daughter seated at the breakfast table. "Anything you want to tell your old man?"

Stone silence. His coffee cup gurgled while he poured from the pot. With his back to her, he heaved a silent sigh. Ever since his wife Peggy had died, he could no longer reach their daughter. Things had been easier when he was just the money man. The yes-dad to the no-mom.

"Bad as that, huh?"

"Ugghh."

Well, at least that was a reaction.

"How's school?"

"Okay." Serena deadpanned.

"And your friends?"

Serena rolled her eyes. "I got to get going Dad. I'll be late for the bus."

"Since when have you," Charlie checked the kitchen clock. "You're right. You better get going. Bye, baby. Have a good day. Maybe we can talk tonight when I get home. Huh?" He showed puppy-dog all over his face.

"Sure," Serena replied a little too easily. She grabbed her backpack and hustled out the front door.

Charlie could only shake his head. He had a few insurance appointments scattered throughout the morning and afternoon. Double checking his phone calendar, he made sure he had no evening clients. Maybe he could get Serena to open up.

"Hey, Hyena, how about your boyfriend?" Jimmy the Geek snickered at Serena as she ran the gauntlet to the back of the bus. He fist bumped Aaron, another loser who loved to taunt.

"Don't let them bother you, Serry, they're just garbage anyway," her bus friend Mel sympathized. Mel lifted her bag from the window seat and scooted over. She had been saving a spot. "Look at the way they eat. Makes me want to barf." Mel bounced a finger up and down outside of her throat.

"Yeah," Serena agreed as she watched Aaron sneeze into his hand and then dip into a bag of Doritos. He offered some to Jimmy who had no aversions.

"Watch out for the green stuff!" Mel shouted to the front of the bus. Unlike Serena, she had no fear. Serena wished she could be more like her.

"Don't have to. I don't have any pictures of you!" Aaron yelled right back. The boys on the bus giggled.

"Gross," Mel concluded and then ignored them. "What's going on today?"

"Who knows."

"What's been happening? You look so down," Mel asked, stealing a quick look at her. They weren't the closest of friends but they did share a bus ride together with the hairiest of creatures.

"It's nothing." Serena evaded the question. She didn't want anybody to overhear her troubles.

"Tired?"

"Tired of school." Serena exhaled.

"Yeah, me too." Mel agreed and Serena was grateful that she didn't press.

One by one, they unloaded in front of the high school. The juniors and seniors pushed right through them as they crossed the parking lot and stepped up to the sidewalk. One of the varsity football players jostled her hard enough to knock the book bag off her shoulder. He didn't stop. Barely into Serena's third month as a freshman, the days didn't get any easier.

Dreading each step more than the last, she passed the cafeteria and turned her back on the History hallway. Because of Sam.

She didn't want to look out for him or worse, pretend not to look for him and, yet, still look for him. She couldn't face seeing him. Not yesterday. Not today. And not tomorrow. It hurt too badly. Like a sick, searing pain, maybe like appendicitis, she almost doubled over and then, a tear rolled down her cheek. And another. Please, she told herself, not here. Not now. She turned to face a corner away from the other kids and acted like she had to sneeze. She crooked her elbow and was able to dab at her eyes without too much attention.

She had to stop at her locker for her math book but stopping made her vulnerable. Like an antelope approaching a watering hole, she looked for the big cats that could take her down. Left, then right, then left again. Safe. She dialed her lock and snapped it open.

"Look who's here. Got a date for the homecoming game?"

Serena nearly jumped. Her skin prickled like a cactus. Lorelei Addler, lioness number one, appeared at her side from absolutely nowhere. And the rest of her pride trailed after her.

Serena's eyes grew wide and her mouth dry. Lorelei leaned forward, expecting an easy kill. Backing Serena up against her open locker, the metal clanged against the neighboring locker.

"Excuse me," Jake Parnell, another jock, interrupted the girls and nudged Serena's door to get to his stuff.

"Jake," Lorelei oohed. She couldn't resist the muscle.

"Hey", he grunted and turned.

That gave Serena enough time to compose herself. She reached for her text book. "Not sure if I can go," she said, "I have a family obligation." Without waiting for a reply, she closed her locker and walked off as quickly as she could.

"Sure you do, sugar", Lorelei called after her, "with your pillow." The other girls' giggles followed Serena to her Algebra class.

She felt a million eyes all over her as she slid into her seat. Everybody knew. Serena and Sam. And now it's Serena and nobody. Fortunately, Mr. Perkins started with the day's material and Serena drifted into the clouds along with his monotonous voice.

"This is the first term of the polynomial, four 'x' squared. The second term is positive eleven 'x' and the third term is negative three." Serena glanced up long enough to see him circle the last number.

Unconsciously, she began doodling inside her notebook. An arc and another arc, joined at the bottom and then a jagged line through the middle, top to bottom. Serena and Sam. She added an arrow.

"Serena?"

She jerked her head up. "Uh?" She mumbled almost drunkenly.

"Could you tell us the second term?"

She shifted her eyes side to side as she heard the gibber of her classmates. Serena placed her hand over her sketching and stared ahead. There were several equations chalked on the board. Afraid to ask which one he was talking about, she chose the lower right equation and guessed. "Four 'x'?"

Puzzled, Mr. Perkins looked across the board and then understood the equation Serena had picked. "No, we already diagnosed that polynomial." More of the kids, especially the boys, chortled. "Now, now class. Over here Serena." Mr. Perkins pointed to the lower left.

"Yes, sir. Five 'x'."

"Negative five X. Don't forget the sign. Good, thank you Serena."

She stared at her notes and realized she had drawn a broken heart over 'Serena and Sam'. She scratched through it and flipped the page before anybody noticed.

On the bus ride home, she sat alone. Mel stayed late for play practice. Jimmy, Aaron and the other losers only teased her once as she passed to her seat in the back. She didn't reply. They were busy anyway, playing a game of Lie-rish poker, which was serious business for the boys.

Left to her thoughts, Serena pulled out her notebook and a soft charcoal pencil. She sketched a girl in a cloud burst with the hood of her raincoat drawn halfway over her face.

"Hey Hyena! That was your stop, dummy!" One of the boys yelled back.

Serena jumped up in surprise and raced to the front of the bus.

"Mrs. Jost, stop!" The bus driver snapped her head. Serena had tears in her eyes.

The boys kept taunting her. "Hey stupid!" "What a moron!" "I shouldn't. I can't memorize where everybody on the bus gets off," Mrs. Jost started to say. She saw a tear drop slide down Serena's cheek, "but I will." She pulled to the side and let her off.

As Serena walked past the windows, the boys slapped the glass with the palms of their hands and laughed. Even though she knew they looked like monkeys, somehow that made it worse. Her face turned red and she ducked her head. Luckily, she was actually closer to home than she would have been if she had gotten off at her regular stop. She sunk when she noticed her father's car in the drive. She needed to be alone. But she climbed the stairs to their front porch and turned the doorknob to go inside.

"Is that you baby?" Her father called from the kitchen.

Serena dropped her book bag and quickly tossed her notebook on top. She couldn't answer. She was too close to crying to respond as she raced up the steps to the bathroom and locked the door.

Charlie stepped to the hallway and saw her books. "I guess so," he mumbled to himself.

Serena splashed some cold water on her face and then stared in the mirror. She looked dreadful, she thought. Like a zombie. A smudgy mascara, black eyed, walking-dead zombie. She couldn't stand looking at herself in the mirror. Washed out and ugly. She wished she was dead like her mother.

There. She said it. She was sick of living. The pain was too much. Why did Sam leave her? She thought they were in love but then they had an argument before their morning classes in the History hall. She had heard that he liked someone else - Amanda Gellar. No big deal. There were always rumors. She thought she could just clear it up. At first, he laughed and shrugged. Then he denied it but something in his voice vibrated like a tuning fork and hurt her ears. So she simply repeated herself. Her chest pounded. Each word of the question was like a stab to her heart. "Do you like her more than me?"

He just got louder and sharper. "Why would you say such a thing?"

All of the kids stared at them. Deep down, because of his anger, she sensed the answer but she couldn't help herself. She had to hear it from him. "I just want to know, Sam," she almost whispered.

He kicked a locker with a bang. "Why don't you grow up?" He didn't make any sense. "Why do you always have to pick things apart?"

Her lip quivered. He blamed her. What did she do? She asked again, "do you like her?" and he looked over her shoulder, down at the floor and then over his own shoulder.

As he turned to face her, she saw his eyes grow cold, and she knew what was coming. Her cheeks and her eyes burned like red coals. "Yes."

"Serena, honey, are you okay?" Her father tapped and called from outside the door.

"Yes," her voice faltered with the word that had pierced her heart, her very soul. She bent over the cold water and splashed again. "I'll be out in a minute."

"Okay," her father answered as if he didn't believe her. "I brought home some sub sandwiches for supper. If you're hungry."

She wasn't but she replied, "I'll be down soon."

Charlie knew something bothered her. But he didn't know what. He felt as if it was something that he had said or something he had done but he couldn't think of a thing. It hurt him to see her hurting. She was his whole life. Peggy would have known what to do. Peggy always knew what to do. He was the bumbling one, the unfit parent.

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs to straighten up Serena's books. One of her notebooks had fallen to the floor and he bent to pick it up. He saw a drawing of a girl walking in the rain. The overwhelming color was sadness. Even without a full face, he knew the girl was his little girl. He turned a page and saw the broken heart. Serena and Sam. Then the answer opened up for him. He knew. She had scribbled through it but now he knew. He didn't know much about teenagers. But he knew a lot about heartache.

Fifteen minutes later, Serena walked into the kitchen. Charlie felt so sorry for her but he knew better than to pounce on her. "Hey babykins," he said as softly as he could. He asked, "How was school," only because he always asked.

She just shook her head. Her dad, she thought, had no idea. But she wasn't mad at him because he was clueless, just acknowledging a fact. She slumped into a chair.

"You hungry?"

"No," she said.

"Are you sure? Turkey bacon sub. Your favorite."

It was but she couldn't eat right now. Not when she felt like throwing up. How could he not know?

Charlie unwrapped one of the subs and sliced it in half. He placed the two halves on separate plates - each with a pickle slice and a glass of milk.

"Gotta eat sometime." He set her plate in front of her.

He sat down, across from her, and bowed his head for grace. He snuck a peek and saw her head down too.

In silence, Charlie grappled for a way to begin. He watched a maple leaf float outside in the wind. October already. Coming up on their..

"We'll be married twenty years, October tenth." Charlie paused, "We would have been." He muttered like he was talking to himself. Serena raised her head. "I loved your mother and it still hurts. Although she's been gone five years, it still hurts like a heart attack." He twisted his hands and rubbed them together. "Serena," he lifted his eyes and said no more.

She saw the chiseled lines in his face. His bright blue eyes were red. Surprised, she realized that he was close to tears. She felt sorry for him. She never saw him cry. At times she blamed him for no reason whatever for her mother's death when all it meant was she wished she could have her back. She didn't mean to shut him out. Her eyes clouded.

"Not a day goes by, not an hour, where I don't miss her." Charlie sighed, stood up and went to the cabinets. He pulled out a broken sugar bowl. "You know where we got this?"

Serena shook her head.

"It's your mother's, really." He turned it in his hands and studied the crack. "Her great aunt gave it to her as a wedding gift. Just like this, crack and all." He set it down on the table before her. "Kind of a strange gift, isn't it?" He sat next to her. "Old people can be strange."

A little smile came to Serena's lips.

"Your mom was Aunt Loretta's favorite so this gift was something special though it doesn't look like much."

The ornate enamel and gold trim tagged it as an antique.

"Aunt Loretta said her grandmother had given it to her as a wedding gift when she got married. Now, I'd say it's probably over a hundred years old. The sugar bowl cracked the night her grandmother died. The bowl just hopped off a shelf. Aunt Loretta called it a sign. And a family heirloom. A little treasure chest of love."

"Your mom often thought of her and though we never used it, she said she kept a dash of sugar in it to remind her of her great aunt and the story behind it."

Charlie shifted the bowl with his finger. "That's why I've kept it. And why there's sugar in it now. It reminds me of," a

tear dropped down his cheek as he put both hands around it, "your mother." His shoulders bobbed for a moment. "Sometimes love hurts so much, we think we're going to die. And we'll never recover. But little things like this remind us that the love was real and we're better for loving."

Charlie put his hand on Serena's hand and then pulled back. He pushed the bowl towards her. "I want you to have it. It will remind you of your loves." His smile was crooked. "Keep a little sugar in it."

As soon as the bowl touched her hands, she sobbed. Her dad draped his arm around her and she cried into his shoulder. She didn't know how he did it but she felt better.