



Anne Schraff



MEET THE



Tyler

Age: 9

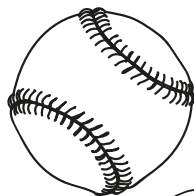
Hidden Talent: can communicate with animals

Favorite Food: lobster

Secret Wish: to one day live on the moon

Best Quality: cares about people's feelings

CHARACTERS



Brandon

Age: 15

Biggest Secret: does yoga every day before school

Dream Vacation: dogsledding in Alaska

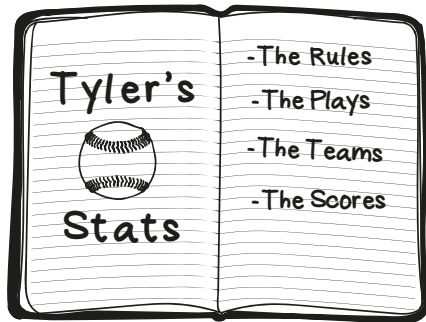
Career Goal: to be a professional gamer

Best Quality: creative

LOSING IT

“Mom! Have you seen my ball? It’s not here!”

Tyler Hughes loved baseball. Actually, he was obsessed with it.



The nine-year-old played on a team every summer. He was a catcher. Someday he hoped to go pro.

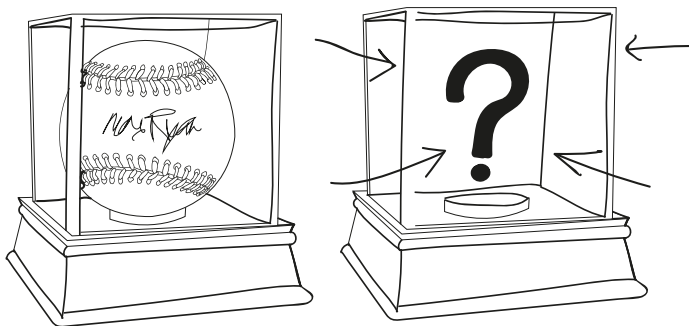
It was almost the end of baseball season. Tyler had been watching the games on TV. He was rooting for his favorite team. They were called the Riverside Stars.

There was one player Tyler really liked. He was a rookie named Dominic Ryan. Everyone just called him Ryan though. This young pitcher had talent. It would be amazing to meet him.



One day, it happened. Tyler and his mom went to a Stars game. Afterward, they met Ryan. He shook Tyler's hand and signed his baseball.

The signed ball was special. Tyler wanted to keep it safe. His mom got him a case to keep it in. This sat on Tyler's dresser. But now, the ball was missing. It had been there when he went to bed. How did it just disappear?



Tyler's mom came into his room. She looked at the case.

“Did you take the ball out? Maybe you put it down somewhere and forgot.”

“No,” Tyler said. “I didn’t touch it.”

Someone took the ball, and Tyler thought he knew who. There was only one person mean enough. That was his stepbrother, Brandon.

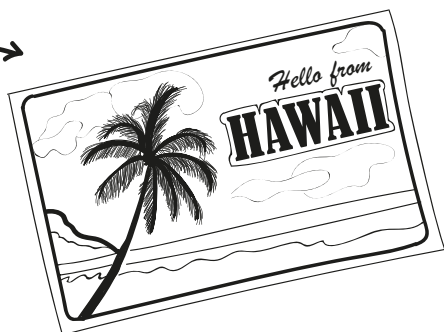
Should I tell Mom? Tyler wondered. Brandon would get in trouble. But Tyler figured he deserved it. His stepbrother wasn’t nice. It was too bad. Tyler really liked Brandon’s dad, Steve.

Tyler’s real dad had been in the Army. He was killed in combat when Tyler was four. For a long time, Tyler and his mom were sad. They both cried a lot.

Two years later, Tyler’s mom met Steve Sims. He made her happy. She could finally smile again. Tyler didn’t even mind when

they got married, and his mom changed her last name. “Mrs. Sims,” he’d said with a grin. “I like it.”

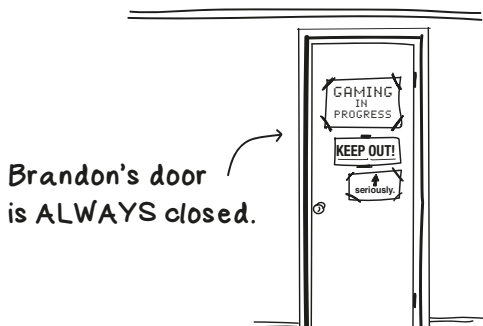
Where Mom and
Steve got married.
It was AWESOME!



Steve had a son. Brandon was 13. At first, Tyler was excited to have a big brother. They could play catch! But it wasn’t like that.

Brandon mostly stayed in his room. All he did was play video games and skateboard. It seemed like Brandon was always mad. Sometimes, he caused trouble.

It wasn’t too bad at first. Brandon only did little things. He slammed doors and stayed out late.



Then Brandon started to get mean. Once, he pushed Tyler. Brandon said it was an accident. But Tyler knew better.

Last week, some money went missing. It had been in Mrs. Sims's wallet. "I must have lost it," she said. But Tyler saw Brandon right before that. He had been near her purse.

Now, Tyler's ball was missing too.

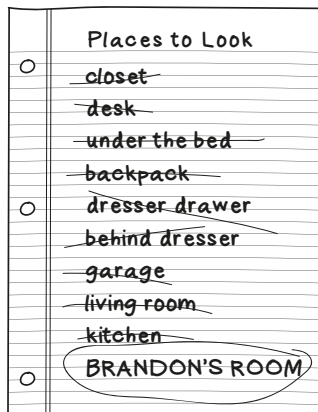
He looked at his mom. She seemed to read his mind.

"I know what you're thinking, Tyler. Search your room first. Did you look under the bed?"

“It’s not there, Mom.”

“Then where else could it be?”

Tyler didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure what to do.



The next morning, Mrs. Sims asked Tyler about the ball. “Did you find it?”

“I’m still looking,” he said.

After breakfast, she drove him to school. Tyler hurried to class. He wanted to tell his best friend, Josh, about the missing ball. But there wasn’t much time. The first bell would ring soon.

Tyler saw Josh ahead. “Wait up,” he yelled.

Josh stopped. Tyler ran over.

“My baseball is gone,” he panted.

“The one Ryan signed? You lost it?” Josh asked.

“No!” Tyler shook his head. “It was in the case. Like always. Now it’s gone.”

The only other
explanation...



2

WHAT BASEBALL?

Tyler thought he knew the truth. He wanted to tell Josh. But his friend could *not* keep a secret. Telling him would be too risky.

That's because Josh's brother Gabe went to high school with Brandon. Tyler could see it now. Josh tells Gabe. Gabe tells his friends. Word gets around. It eventually reaches Brandon. Then Brandon goes nuts.

Mrs. Sims called this gossip. "Gossip is dangerous," she often said. "Like throwing a match on gasoline. Just like fire, gossip

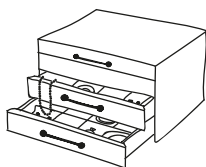
spreads fast. It's hard to stop. A lot of people can get hurt."

"Did someone break in? That happened to us once," Josh said. "Our TV was stolen."

Things that weren't stolen . . .



My laptop



Mom's jewelry



Our big-screen TV

Tyler shook his head. Maybe it would be okay to say something, just this once. "Brandon—"

Suddenly, the first bell rang. Tyler and Josh went into the classroom. They turned in their homework and sat down. Then the second bell rang. The boys didn't get a chance to finish their talk.

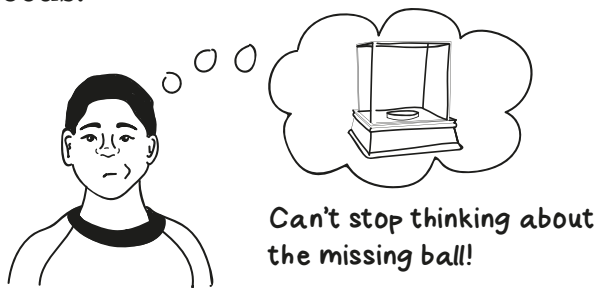
Mr. Cruz said good morning. The kids



knew the routine. They sharpened their pencils and filled their water bottles. Then Mr. Cruz read the daily agenda.

Today was Friday. They had music class. It was also cleanup day.

Tyler started his morning work. It was a math activity. The theme was fun facts about baseball. This made it hard for Tyler to focus.



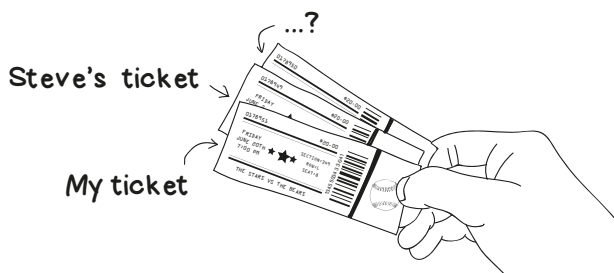
In music class, the students made their own instruments. Tyler made a drum.

Back in the classroom, Mr. Cruz put on the radio. The kids cleaned until it was time to pack up. At 3:30, Tyler ran to the bus.

Brandon was home when Tyler got there. He was upstairs in his room. Tyler could hear a video game blaring. That wasn't surprising.

Tyler went into the kitchen. Steve was at the table. It would be so easy to say something to him about Brandon taking the ball. But that might make him mad. Then his mom would get upset. It could ruin everything.

"Hey, Tyler." Steve grinned. "Check it out! Three tickets for the next game."



"Three?" Tyler was confused.

“Yes. I got one for Brandon too.”

“Um—” Tyler began.

“Brandon,” Steve called out. There was no answer. “Brandon!” he shouted.

“What?” Brandon yelled back. “I’m busy.”

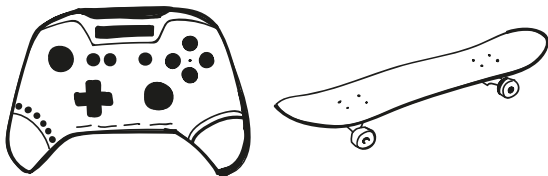
Steve stood up. He walked to the bottom of the stairs. “Can you come here? It will just take a minute.”

The video game noise stopped. Brandon came out of his room. “What?”

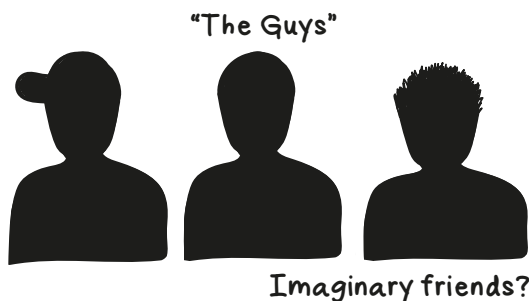
“There’s a ball game tomorrow. Tyler and I are going. We want you to come. It’ll be fun.”

“I hate baseball,” Brandon said. “I’ll be skating anyway. I’m meeting up with the guys.”

The only things Brandon cares about...



The guys? Tyler thought. Brandon didn't have friends. Everyone knew that.



"You plan to skate all day?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Brandon said.

Tyler glanced at Steve. He could tell his stepdad felt bad.

What is wrong with Brandon? Tyler wondered. *Why not just go along with it? It would make his dad happy.*

Steve turned to Tyler. "Were you going to say something?" he asked.

Tyler shook his head.

The Brothers

Mom remarried. Now
I have a big brother.
Too bad he's a jerk.



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