

A Different Diamond

By Jody Studdard

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Brooke Conrad was excited. The first game of the high school softball season was only a week away and everything was falling nicely into place. She had already won the starting shortstop position during tryouts the week before, practices were going well, and the team was starting to gel as a unit. Her school, Silver Lake High, was a traditional softball powerhouse, having won the past five Western Conference South championships in a row, and this year looked no different. They were loaded with talent at every position. Another WesCo South title, and possibly a state championship, were within reach.

It was a routine practice at first. A little stretching and light running to warm up, then various hitting drills in the team's batting cages, then some infield work. Infield work was Brooke's favorite part of practice. Like all great shortstops, she played defense with a passion. She loved fielding the ball and whipping it to first as hard and as fast as she could. Nothing made her happier than hearing the sound of the ball as it exploded in the first baseman's mitt.

But then she noticed something unusual. Silver Lake's baseball coach, Daniel West, was standing along the softball field's first base foul line, about twenty feet from the first baseman, with one of his top assistants. He was watching Brooke carefully.

Brooke glanced across the softball fields at the neighboring baseball fields. Silver Lake was a big school, and it had a series of athletic fields next to it, and the boys'

baseball fields, both varsity and JV, were within eyesight of the girls' softball fields. The only thing separating them was a small parking lot. At first Brooke thought the boys must have been done for the day, since Coach West was normally with them during their practices, but the boys were still practicing. They were at various stations running drills with other coaches.

Coach West was a tall, lean man in his mid to late forties, with short, well-kept, graying hair and deep brown eyes. He wore white baseball pants and a sweatshirt with the school's mascot, a silver shark, printed on the front. He spoke softly to his assistant, but even at this distance Brooke could hear what he said.

"What do you think?" he asked. There was a hint of excitement in his voice. "I think she can do it."

The assistant hesitated, thinking about what he had been asked, then nodded.

"She looks good to me," he said. "Can she bat?"

Coach West nodded. "I watched her yesterday," he said. "She's got good power and she hits the ball consistently to all parts of the field. As far as I'm concerned, she's exactly what we need."

Brooke's softball coach, Sarah Jennings, called a break, and Brooke and the rest of the girls trotted off the field. They rounded up their water bottles and congregated in their dugout.

"What's up with that?" Faith Alexander asked, motioning toward Coach West. Like Brooke, Faith was a junior. She was their starting second baseman and leadoff hitter. She was a small, thin girl with short, cropped hair and bangs.

“I don’t get it,” Naomi Smith said. Naomi was a senior, one of the oldest and biggest girls on the team. Compared to Faith, she was a giant. She had dark skin and long, ebony hair. “He’s been here all day. The boys’ team must be boring him, so he came over here to watch some real talent for a change.”

They laughed.

“It’s something more than that,” Faith said. “He’s fixated on one of us in particular.”

They all turned to Brooke.

Brooke didn’t know what to say, but she had noticed it, too. Coach West had been watching them all, but he had been watching her by far the most. What was up with that? Why was the coach of the school’s baseball team interested in her? She wasn’t even certain he knew her name.

Almost on cue, Coach Jennings walked up to Coach West and they began talking. They were on the far side of the field, and Coach Jennings had her back to them, so Brooke and the other girls could only hear bits and pieces of their conversation.

“Yeah,” Coach Jennings said, answering one of Coach West’s questions. “She’s one of my best players. I don’t see why she couldn’t. I’m not certain she’d want to, though. It’s a pretty unusual request. What? Of course you can talk to her.”

She turned and walked back to the dugout, where the girls were finishing their break and putting their water bottles back into their bags. “Everyone back on the field. Except you, Brooke. Coach West wants to talk to you.”

“What’s up?” Brooke asked, a bit of apprehension in her voice. There was no hiding the fact she was nervous. She had no idea what Coach West would want.

“I’ll let him tell you,” Coach Jennings said. “He has a proposition for you. It’s a little unusual, but you’d be wise to give it some thought. It’s a unique opportunity to say the least.”

Brooke still didn’t know what to think. She had known Coach Jennings since her freshman year, and she’d never known her to speak in riddles. Like most coaches, she was straightforward most of the time.

Coach West smiled warmly as she walked up. “I’m Daniel West,” he said. “This is my assistant, Hugh Weller.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Brooke said. Like everyone at Silver Lake, she knew who Coach West was, and she had heard he was a really nice guy, but she had never met him in person.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard or not,” Coach West said, “but the shortstop for my team, Dwayne Harper, got kicked off the team.”

Brooke’s eyes widened. Dwayne Harper was one of the star players on the school’s baseball team. He was a senior, and last year he had been selected to the WesCo South All-Conference team. He had led Silver Lake to a fifth place finish at the state championship tournament. Word had been going around school something had happened involving him, but no one knew exactly what.

“Dwayne got caught smoking marijuana,” Coach West continued. “The athletic director suspended him for the season. So now I need a new shortstop.”

Brooke raised an eyebrow. She still didn’t know how this involved her.

“The only shortstops I have are too young. They’re both freshman. They need at least a year on JV before they’ll be ready to play at the varsity level. So I need you to play for us this year.”

Brooke’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. She couldn’t believe what she had heard.

“Me?” she asked. “I’m a girl.”

“Shortstops are shortstops. I don’t care if you’re a girl or not. I need someone who can get the ball from short to first as quickly as possible, and as far as I’m concerned, now that Dwayne is gone you’re the best shortstop this school’s got. And I’ve been watching you the past couple of days and that’s a great arm you’ve got. Better than most of the boys on my team.”

“Are you serious?” Brooke asked. “A girl can’t play on a boys’ team. Can she?”

Coach West shrugged. “I don’t see why not. And I think you’d like it, if you gave it a chance. But I realize this is an unusual request, so if you want some time to think about it that’s fine with me. But you’d be doing me a huge favor if you did. We have a great team, with a legitimate shot at winning the state title, but we can’t do it without a shortstop.”

“But my team,” Brooke said, “the softball team, we need a shortstop, too. I can’t play on both teams.”

“True,” Coach West said. “I’ve already talked to Coach Jennings and she says you have a capable backup who can fill-in in your absence. She’s not as good as you, of course, or I’d be talking to her right now, but Coach Jennings says she’ll get the job done.”

Brooke nodded. It was true. Her backup at short, Casey Morgan, was a year younger than Brooke, but she was a good player nonetheless. She was solid on defense and could hit the ball almost as well as Brooke did.

Coach West smiled. “Did I mention I’m willing to make it worth your while?”

Brooke raised an eyebrow.

“You girls have felt mistreated for awhile now, right? You feel like the baseball team gets all the good equipment and the nice fields. In the meantime, you get the leftovers.”

Brooke nodded. Everyone knew the boys’ teams at Silver Lake were treated better than the girls. That was a fact of life. It had always been like that.

“I’ve already talked to the athletic director and authorized him to transfer the bulk of our budget to the softball team this year. That way, you girls can get that scoreboard you’ve wanted.”

Brooke’s eyes widened. She could hardly believe what she had heard. The softball field at Silver Lake had a small, electronic scoreboard, but it was old, rusty and rarely (if ever) worked. The girls had wanted a new one for years, and they had had several car washes to raise money, but they still didn’t have nearly enough.

“Really?” she asked. “We get your money for the year?”

“Only on one condition. You play for me.”

Brooke didn’t know what to say. Her mind was on overdrive, trying to process all the information she had been told. She wanted to help the softball team get its scoreboard, but playing for the baseball team? Could she do it? Was she good enough to

play for a boys' team? And how would the boys react? Would they even want her on their team?

This was a big decision. She needed some time to think about it.