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## Chapter 1

# Serious Stuff

“Okay, everybody, it’s time to have a party!” Billy stood in front of the class and yelled. He had watched Mrs. Hardy after she stepped out of the room. By now she was already at the other end of the hallway.

Mrs. Hardy was headed to the principal’s office. You didn’t have to tell my classmates twice that it was time to have a bit of fun. They went up to our teacher’s desk and turned on the radio. Sometimes she let us listen to it after our work, but it was never set to the station Trey had on. And it was never so loud either. I had a bad feeling that we were going to get in major trouble because of all this.

Brooke jumped up and reached her hand out to me. “Come on, Morgan. Let’s dance!”

I wasn’t trying to be a party pooper. I just knew we were supposed to be reviewing the last couple of weeks

before Christmas break. The big standard test was coming in the spring.

Yeah, Mrs. Hardy got called away to the office, which is on the other side of the floor. But who could say that we wouldn't get caught? She was known for sneaking up and catching people doing stuff they weren't supposed to be doing.

Brooke and I had just talked about being each other's friend. We had such an on-again, off-again friendship. This time we promised we were going to help each other do the right things. So I gave Brooke a look like, *No, Brooke. Don't dance around the room and get in trouble like everybody else.*

But Brooke was already up, and I could see it in her eyes that she was ready to have some fun. Even so, I wasn't going to fall for that this time. I just sat there, looking at her with my hands on my hips.

Finally, I grabbed my best friend by her long ponytail and said, "We are not doing this, okay?" To my surprise, she didn't even argue with me and just sat down.

After a few minutes of watching the other kids, Brooke was becoming upset. "See that, Morgan? We could've been havin' fun too. Mrs. Hardy isn't even back yet."

Alec heard what she said and called out to us, "Yeah, but the ones she catches are gonna be in trouble!"

"Come on, Alec, man. Have a little fun," Trey said, as he bobbed up and down like a jumping jack toy.

Alec didn't back down. "We're gonna have fun. When-

ever she gets back, it'll be time for recess. But the way you all are actin', you'll make sure we won't have any more free time this year."

"What are you doing? Are you about to tell on us?" Trey asked Alec, as Alec gently opened the classroom door and peeked out.

"No, I'm watchin' out for Mrs. Hardy since nobody's thinkin' about that," Alec said, sounding like the grown-up one.

"Good lookin' out, Alec! Party over here," Billy sang out, waving his hand around in the air.

I was really happy that Billy wasn't sad like he'd been acting lately. He and his sister and his mom had been living with his mom's aunt, Miss May. She was my grandmother's best friend and neighbor. Of course, since I wasn't an adult, they didn't tell me everything that was going on. But I think Billy's sister had been acting out because she was tired of moving around. My mom told me that some people just don't handle changes very well.

I know for myself that moving around a lot is a big deal. I remember when my parents got divorced and I had to move with my mom to a place I didn't know anything about. Once she got remarried, I moved back in with my dad. But then he got assigned to a naval ship off the coast of Africa to serve our country. When my dad left, I was so sad. At that time I had to go to a new school and move in with my mom, my new baby brother, Jayden, and Daddy Derek.

Since then, we haven't moved around anymore. I actually enjoy living with my new family. So everything turned out to be good after all. I was hoping the same would happen for Billy's family. But for now, I was just happy to see Billy smiling.

"Here she comes! Here she comes!" Alec yelled out and ran back to his seat.

Trey didn't listen. He kept the music going and half of the class didn't even sit down. None of them knew how close she was, and they didn't listen to what Alec said. They just kept doing the wrong thing.

"What in the world?" Mrs. Hardy said, as she walked in and **flicked** the lights on and off. "Who turned on that music?"

Suddenly, the class was silent. I sunk down in my seat because I didn't want her to call on me. If she did, I was going to have to tell and I didn't want to. I planned to keep still and to keep my mouth shut.

"You know what? I don't even want the answer. All of you students need to understand that this is not a time for play. I know Christmas is coming and you all are excited, but we have some important work to do. So, everybody settle down and let's get started."

I was so glad that she wasn't going to punish the whole class this time. Mrs. Hardy was a very smart lady and she knew what she was doing.

"First of all," Mrs. Hardy said, "the name of the standard test is the CRCT. Can anyone tell me what CRCT stands for?"

No one answered. Then Alec raised his hand. “Mrs. Hardy, I think CRCT stands for Criterion-Referenced Compare Test. I asked my brother Antoine about it because he had to take when he was in the third grade.”

“The word is not compare, Alec. It is **competency**, but that was very close,” Mrs. Hardy said.

“That sounds so confusing. I see why they just call it the CRCT,” Brooke added.

Mrs. Hardy went on to tell us more about it. “The test is very important because it’s going to tell how much you know. It is organized by subject and the content is based on the standards given by the state. The main purpose is to let parents know if their child understands the material they are being taught. Furthermore, it’s important that you pass the CRCT in the spring so you can go on to the fourth grade. If you do not pass the reading and math, you will have to repeat the third grade and possibly be in my class again next year. Now, how many of you want that to happen?”

No one raised their hand. I don’t think any of us wanted to be in the same grade over again just because we weren’t ready to take that test. Our friends would pass us by while we’re still in Mrs. Hardy’s class, learning the same things and doing the same things all over again. For me, I was going to do my best not to let that happen.

“I know that all of you are more than able to pass the CRCT. However, the conduct that I saw just now from some of you makes me think you won’t like your test results.”

The more Mrs. Hardy kept talking, the more we started feeling smaller than ants. I hadn't even done anything but I was shaking. Just the thought of not passing that test and having to repeat a grade made my hands sweat and my heart beat faster. As Mrs. Hardy said, if we had to take the test today, I knew I wouldn't do well. At the moment, I was really afraid that I wouldn't pass the third grade.

Because of all this, I didn't think we should have recess. But Mrs. Hardy asked us why she should care to give us extra work since we didn't seem to care about passing the CRCT. I wanted to stay in my seat and ask her to teach us, please! But she made us line up to go outside and play. And off we went.

During recess, Trey came over to Brooke and me. "What's wrong with you, Morgan? Why are you lookin' at me like you're mad?"

"Mrs. Hardy said we need to make this time count for something and now she doesn't even wanna teach us because she thinks y'all were playin' too much."

Alec walked over bouncing a basketball. Trey said to him, "Alec, tell her we have plenty of time to get this. If we let ourselves worry too much, then we'll all be too scared to do a good job."

"Yeah, that's true. We can't take it too serious, but we do need to take it serious enough so we have the skills to pass," Alec replied. Then he took a shot at the net, making it with a *swoosh* sound.

"And what are you worried about anyway?" Trey asked

me. “You’re gonna do better than any of us.”

Alec started coughing. “I guess I see a contest comin’ on.”

“He’s probably gonna do way better than me. I’m scared.”

“You’re scared, Morgan? Then I should be scared.” I could tell Trey was starting to think about it all.

“What? You really don’t think we’re gonna pass?” asked Billy. “My sister said part of it was pretty hard . . . but we still have some time before we take it. Right?”

“Well, I’m just worried about repeating a grade, okay?” I said to my friends before walking off the playground. I was pretty much in tears.



“Derek, you’re going to have to tell the church that you can’t be there this time. You know that I have a house to show and you said you would be here this time when Morgan comes home. Can’t you reschedule?” my mom asked, looking unhappy.

“But, honey,” Daddy Derek said, “we agreed that my job takes **precedence**. Someone else in your office can show those clients around.”

Mom stopped chewing and let her fork hit the table. She was pretty upset, but Daddy Derek wasn’t about to give up. The two of them kept talking about it, with both of them giving their points of view. I don’t know if they had forgotten that I was sitting at the dinner table or not. I was



just feeling so lost. I heard what they were saying, but I didn't care and I wasn't really taking it all in anyway.

I had a standard test to get ready for. I needed to study for it because I could not fail. The whole idea was really scaring me. Because Mrs. Hardy kept telling us how important the results would be, nothing else was on my mind. Not even eating my favorite meal that was right before me. How could I not enjoy this large plate of spaghetti and juicy meatballs?

Today had just been hard. I didn't even want to play with my friends at recess. And, by no fault of my own, now I was listening to adults talk. I don't know why they were acting like I wasn't sitting right there.

"Can I be excused?" I finally said, after just playing around with my spaghetti.

Both of my parents looked at my plate and then looked at me. Mom said, "Morgan, you didn't even touch your food besides moving it from one side to the other. What's going on?"

"We're not angry with each other, if that's what you think, Morgan," said Daddy Derek.

I didn't want them to worry about me. They had their own problems. My mom had just started her new job. Although Daddy Derek thought he wanted her to work, it had been causing problems ever since. I certainly didn't want to throw my **anxiety** over the test in the mix.

"I just have some homework I need to look over. And I'm not that hungry."

“Morgan, please eat a little more, okay?” Mom requested.

Then Daddy Derek said, “Honey, why don’t you just call your parents and have them sit over here until Morgan gets home?”

“Because they have something to do tomorrow and you said you were going to be here. I really have a problem with that.”

“I can be here by myself,” I said, surprised that those words just came out of my mouth.

“That’s not a bad idea. At her age, she should be able to stay home by herself after school for a while. We should try it.”

Mom just shook her head. She wasn’t even trying to think about it. I guess I didn’t like the fact that my mom still looked at me like her baby.

I spoke up, “Mom, I can do it. I’ll be okay.”

“I’ll be home an hour and a half after she gets here. I just can’t be here right away,” Daddy Derek said. “If she’s willing to try it and nothing is wrong with it, I think we should let her.”

“Morgan, I have to tell you to eat all of your food. You’re not ready to be here by yourself yet. It’s not that I don’t think you’re a big girl, sweetheart. I just don’t think it’s time for you to be home alone right now.”

I stood up from my chair and yelled, “That’s so unfair!”

“Morgan, sit back down. You need to check your attitude, young lady.”

She didn’t have to tell me twice because I already knew

that having an A+ attitude was way better than having a rude one. It's just that sometimes when you don't get your way, it's hard to hold back your feelings.

"Mom, I'm sorry you think I have the wrong attitude, but I'm tryin' to grow up and you won't let me. I don't want anything else to eat, so can I please be excused? Please?"

"Go ahead, Morgan. I'll be there in a little while to talk to you."

Walking to my room, I prayed, *Lord, please help me keep my feelings in check. Mom and Daddy Derek are the parents and they know what's best for me. It's just that I get told no when I really wanna do something. Help me to understand that when I don't get my way it's okay. And help me not to be so afraid. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

I finished praying and put on my nightclothes for bed. Just then I watched my door slowly open and Mom creep in. I might as well be ready for the major letdown of not staying home by myself. So I was just waiting for her to tell me who my sitter was going to be for that time.

"Morgan, may I have a hug?" she whispered.

I had no problem giving her one. I had just prayed and asked God to help me not to be angry with her.

"You're growing up on me, sweetheart. I'll call as soon as you get off the bus. And Derek said he'll be here not too long after you get home."

"Oh, my goodness, Mom! You mean you're gonna let me?"

“Now, I need you to understand that this is a big deal, Morgan. I want you to lock the doors behind you right away. And you need to turn on the alarm as soon as you get in. The only thing I want you to make is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich because I don’t want you cooking anything.”

“I know, Mom. I know.”

“Okay, then the answer is yes.”

“Thank you, Mom!”

“Just don’t make me sorry about it, Morgan.”

“Yes, ma’am, I won’t,” I said in a serious tone, as I gave her a big kiss on the cheek.



“What’s up, Morgan? You’re night and day from the way you were yesterday,” Brooke said to me when I walked into the classroom with my head held high and a smile **plastered** on my face.

“That’s because I’m not a little kid anymore,” I said.

Billy jumped in, “Well, the last time I checked, you were in third grade just like the rest of us.”

“See, it’s like this. Kids need someone to pick them up from the bus stop. Kids have to have someone with them when they get home from school. Some kids have to wait after school for their parents to pick them up, but big kids—like me—get to stay home alone,” I said with pride.

Trey started laughing. “What! You’re gonna stay home alone? Miss Chicken?”

“I won’t be home alone for a long time and I’m not even supposed to tell people that I’ll be home alone. But I’m growin’ up and I’m proud of it.”

Brooke walked up close and put her arm around me. “Are you sure you wanna stay home alone?”

“Yes, I’m sure. My mom trusts me and I don’t wanna let her down. I’m ready for this.”

Trey said, “Are you even old enough to stay by yourself?”

“You’re gonna be like Dorothy on the *Wizard of Oz*,” Billy added, “afraid of lions and tigers and bears.”

Then Trey sneaked up behind me and shouted, “Oh my!”

Even though I jumped when he did that, I said, “I watched the *Wiz!* I’m not gonna be scared.”

“Plus, you can call me if somethin’ happens,” said Alec.

“Oooh, you can call Alec,” Billy teased.

“I’m not gonna call anybody. You guys are supposed to be my friends. Believe I can do this. Okay? And stop tryin’ to scare me.”

“Well, you were our friend yesterday until you said we were all gonna fail the CRCT,” said Billy.

“I’m sorry about that.”

“I’m just sayin’, if you’re scared to take a little test, you’re certainly gonna be scared to be home by yourself. As soon as you hear a little noise, you’ll be jumpin’ around the house, tryin’ to hide somewhere. Don’t say I didn’t

warn you. Besides, I think you have to be in the fourth grade before you're allowed to stay by yourself," said Mr. Know-It-All Trey.

"Okay, class, sit down. It's time to start the day." Mrs. Hardy called us to attention. "Morgan, Alec, you two need to get your things and get on the Challenge bus. You have a morning session today."

After Alec and I got a seat on the bus, I asked him, "Do you think I'm too young to stay home by myself? You think I can do it, right?"

"Don't let anybody make you afraid. I like the strong Morgan who's cool about things and not easily **persuaded**. Stop sweatin' it. You're gonna find trouble if you keep lookin' for it."

Alec was right. I did have lots of doubts about everything. But the rest of the day went by too fast, and I wasn't ready to go home yet. And I was becoming more afraid of the lions and tigers and bears—even though I knew they weren't at my house. Billy and Trey had frightened me for sure.

Before I knew it, I was at my door, ready to go in. I reached into my book bag to pull out the key. As soon as I began to turn the knob, it started to thunder. No way did I wanna be outside, so I quickly pushed open the door and stepped inside. When I shut the door, the security alarm seemed to sound louder than it does when Mom or Daddy Derek come home. I rushed over to turn it off before the police came to see about me.

Everything seemed strange to me. The whole house looked extra dark. I knew it was because it was cloudy outside, but I was really scared! What if someone was waiting for me around the corner or down the hallway? Right away, I started thinking that someone would try and come in.

I should have felt safe, right? Wrong. The thunder I heard as I was coming in the door was just a warm-up because it got louder and louder. The rain was coming down hard and beating against the windows. I wanted to turn on the TV to drown out the noise, but I remember Mama telling me not to use the electricity when the weather was like this. I also thought about my friend Billy getting hit by lightning, so I was trying to play it cool.

The only thing I could do was sit in a ball and rock back and forth, praying,

“Okay, Lord, I’m scared. I need You to help me calm down. This wasn’t a good idea for me to be home alone after all. I don’t wanna be afraid, Lord.”

The phone rang and I jumped. What if it wasn’t Mom or Daddy Derek? What if it was someone I didn’t know who knew I was home by myself and they were coming to get me? I was making up all kinds of scary **scenarios**, and none of this was good for me. I ran into my parents’ room to get the phone and then the ringing stopped. As soon as it started back again, I quickly picked it up.

“Hello? Hello?”

I finally heard a welcome voice. “Morgan, are you okay, sweetheart?”

“Mama, please come and get me! I’m scared. It’s thundering and lightning.” The sky seemed like it was falling on the house! “I’m hearing all kinds of noises.”

“Calm down, girl. Papa and I are pulling onto your street right now. We’ll see you in just a minute.”

Before I knew it, my grandparents were standing at the front door. I turned off the alarm and flung the door open, wrapping my arms around both of them so tight.

“I told you we needed to be close by. I knew it wasn’t a good idea for her to be home by herself,” Mama said.

“Yeah, but it’s good we let her try. It’s all this lightning and storming that got her worried,” said Papa.

“I was so wrong. I shouldn’t have wanted to be home by myself,” I said, as I tried to calm down.

Papa took my hand and said, “I’m going to teach you Psalm 23. Say this with me, ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.’”

“Basically, it says we should have no fear,” Mama explained.



Something was going on with me and I was confused. I wanted to act older, but I was nervous about everything. Even so, I couldn't let my fears defeat me. Like Papa said, I had to remember the words to Psalm 23 because being afraid of everything just wasn't the right way to be. This was serious stuff.

## Letter to Dad



Dear Dad,

It was a bad storm and the lights scared me when they flicked off and on. I was home alone because Mommy's job took precedence over her being home this afternoon. I thought I was old enough to be home alone, but I'm not ready yet. I'm a little nervous about a lot of stuff.

Dad, I've got major anxiety about the test we're gonna take soon. "Not wanting to take the competency test" is plastered all across my face. Mama and Papa persuaded me to trust God and have no fear. But I need you to pray for the standard tests I have to take soon because the scenarios I have of failing them are creepier than that spider that crawled on me when I was five.

Your daughter,  
Scared Morgan

## Word Search

I N D I A N A S E N O J  
M X C Q S R I T X A D C  
P P R E C E D E N C E A  
O E B Z E Y W P H O R L  
R R G S N S A H W M E I  
T S J H A P L E M P T F  
A U S A R A K N G E S O  
N A F L I C K E D T A R  
T D U T O E L N V E L N  
M E R U S N O R E N P I  
T D R H A R D Y P C O A  
K E Y T E I X N A Y F D

**ANXIETY**

**COMPETENCY**

**FLICKED**

**PERSUADED**

**PLASTERED**

**PRECEDENCE**

**SCENARIOS**

## Words to Know and Learn

1) **flick** (flɪk) *verb*

To burn or shine unsteadily, such as a light.

2) **com·pe·ten·cy** (kɒm'pi'tən-sē) *noun*

Ability.

3) **prec·e·dence** ('pre-sə-dənts) *noun*

Priority.

4) **anx·i·e·ty** (æŋg-zɪ'tē) *noun*

A state of uneasiness.

5) **plas·ter** (plɑ'stər) *verb* **plas·tered** (past tense)

To smear a surface with a coating of some kind.

6) **per·suade** (pər-swād') *verb* **per·suad·ed** (past tense)

To cause to believe something.

7) **sce·nar·i·o** (sɪ-nâr'ē-ō', -nâr'-, -nâr'-) *noun* **sce·nar·i·os**

(plural)

A made-up idea of what could happen.





## Chapter 2

# The Helper

“Okay, class, I need to talk to you about something serious.”

It was the first day back to school after the Christmas break. Mrs. Hardy wasn’t playing either. She had changed the desks around so that we weren’t sitting by our friends anymore. She also had new rules on the board that meant she wasn’t going to put up with anyone acting up in class.

It was countdown time! Our teacher had already told us only 118 more days until the CRCT. I had a huge lump in my throat, not at all wanting to take that hard test. There was no way around it, though.

Maybe if I prayed every day until the big test, the Lord would help me get through it. So I prayed silently, *Lord, the standard test is the serious thing our teacher wants to talk to us about. I just need You to help me not be afraid.*

“Listen up, class. I’m not going to tell you all two or

three times to quiet down,” Mrs. Hardy said, before I finished my prayer. “As some of you may know, the Super Bowl is coming up in a little while and the National College Football Game is coming soon too. I am a big football fan and so I’m saying to you, it’s game time. Just like in the field of sports, we have to get ready to win. So when I say listen up, I don’t need all of the little rumblings through the class. I need you all to pay attention.”

Everyone got quieter than a kid playing hide-and-seek, not wanting to be found. Mrs. Hardy noticed it too, so she kept talking.

“Now, what I want to share with you today is the fact that we’re getting a new student. This student will not be in our room all the time, but at least half of the time each day. He’s not a brand-new student to our school. You all have seen him, but you haven’t attended class with him on a daily basis.”

We all looked around thinking, *Who is she talking about? What’s the big deal?*

“Tim Clark is going to be our new student.”

“That’s the boy everybody was joking about,” someone from the back of the room called out.

“And that’s exactly why I wanted to talk to you before he comes in here today. There will be no more talk like that. I’m going to let it pass this one time, but not a second. I don’t even want to know who said it. We are all special in one way or another. None of you are so smart that you don’t need a teacher to help you pass this grade. And yes,

though Tim is a special needs student, he's not alone. He's just different."

Billy raised his hand. "Why does he have to be in our class? We all might have special needs. But for real, Mrs. Hardy, people might tease him. Not because they're tryin' to be mean. It's because he does act different."

Mrs. Hardy's face got even more serious and I could tell she was getting very upset.

"I know this will be a growing experience for all of you. Learning how to accept people who are different is a big part of life. You will find that children like Tim have the same feelings as anyone else. Even though he has special needs, we all have the need to depend on others from time to time. That's why I plan to call on each of you at different times to assist me with teaching him. Many times when people pick on someone else, it's out of **ignorance** or fear. That's not how we're supposed to be. We're supposed to help each other in any way that we can."

Trey raised his hand. "I'm just sort of afraid of people like Tim. One time I helped out with my mom at a place for extra special people and they scared me."

"Trey, you know Tim," Mrs. Hardy said. "That is highly unlikely to happen."

"Yes, I know him. He's cool, but I'm just sayin'—"

"I just need you all to treat Tim like you would want to be treated. No one wants to be made fun of. Give him the same respect you would want. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hardy," we said together.



Shortly after our talk, the principal, Dr. Sharpe, knocked on our door and Tim came running in.

“Hey! Hey!” He darted behind Mrs. Hardy then stood still, moving back and forth in a **sporadic** manner.

“Tim, you’re going to have to settle down. We go out for recess in a little while, but right now it’s time for our lesson, okay?” Mrs. Hardy said to him.

“Yes, ma’am. Where do I sit? Where do I sit?” he asked, as he circled around her.

There was an empty seat next to me. I still felt like I owed Tim something. I hadn’t forgotten Field Day from last year when I joined in with the crowd picking on him. He saw me making fun of him and got really upset. True enough, I got in trouble. But even worse than that, I made him feel bad. Although I made it up to him by asking the class to throw Tim a big party, I still felt like I needed to do more. I raised my hand to let Mrs. Hardy know that Tim could sit next to me.

“Thank you, Morgan. That is a good idea. Tim, come this way.” She led him to the seat on my right.

Before Dr. Sharpe left the room, she said, “Class, I’m really proud of you all for making Tim feel welcome. Everyone has to pass the CRCT, and I expect you all to do your best. Mrs. Hardy is one of our top teachers, so with the great teaching you all are being **exposed** to, I’m sure I will see high marks soon.”

“Yes, Dr. Sharpe, I’m going to give the class a practice test when we come back from recess,” said Mrs. Hardy.

“They know more than they think.”

As the two of them smiled at each other, I started to worry all over again. It was the first time I knew about a practice test. We had just gotten back to school from the Christmas break. She had given us study sheets to look over during the break, but I didn't do them because it was Christmas. I was pretty sure no one else did any studying either because everyone else was looking worried too. As my head started hurting, all I could do was put my hand up to my forehead. This was really scary stuff.

Tim saw me and touched my hand. “My friend, Morgan. You'll be okay. You can do the test. You'll be okay.”

I took a deep breath. He was right, I could do it. I thought I was going to be the one helping Tim out, but just his kind words helped me so much.



“Okay, class. Let's line up for recess,” Mrs. Hardy said.

Every step I took, Tim was two steps behind me. “I'm stayin' with you, friend Morgan. When I get outside I'm playin' kickball. Kickball me, kickball you!”

“I thought we were playin' dodge ball, Morgan,” Brooke said. “Don't tell me we have to babysit this boy all of recess and for the rest of the year. Ugh!”

Tim might be different, but he was smarter than a lot of us thought. I guess we doubted him because he wasn't exactly like the rest of us. He heard what Brooke said and started shaking his head from side to side. “No dodge ball

for me. Kickball. Friend Morgan play with me.”

“You hurt his feelings,” I said to Brooke. I thought she had a soft spot when it came to Tim, but he could tell Brooke didn’t wanna play with him.

“I’m sorry,” she said, looking down at the floor. She felt bad.

As we waited for our teacher to lead the way, we had to be silent in the halls. Tim was superexcited to be in our class and I was surprised that he was acting so cool. We were used to seeing Tim in the halls, skipping and jumping. He was all over the place sometimes, but today in our class he stood in line just like the rest of us.

As soon as we got outside, all of the kids ran to get a spot on the blacktop. There was a bin that had the balls in it, and the boys rushed over to get the best ones.

Trey called out, “Come on, Brooke. We’re playin’ dodge ball over here.”

Tim was walking really slowly. I went to the bin and there was one ball left. I picked it up and held it out to him. “Kickball. Me and you?”

“Yes! Kickball! Me and friend Morgan!”

I saw a spot on blacktop where no one was playing. I thought it was best for Tim and me to be alone. I rolled the ball to him. He kicked it and then ran right to third base. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to tell him that you kick the ball, run to first base, second base, third base, and then to home base. Or maybe I should just let him play his way. So I stood there, scratched my head, and just watched him.

“You don’t know what to do, do you?” I heard a voice say. I turned around and it was Alec. “I’ll help you teach him how to play, if you want.”

“You’d do that?” I asked. I was happy for his help, but a little surprised that Alec would be so nice to Tim.

“Yeah. I think it’s kinda cool that you’re not afraid of him,” Alec said, telling me he approved.

“Well, he reminds me of my baby brother, honestly . . . Tim’s just another person who needs help. And he tries really hard.”

Alec said, “I just don’t wanna mess up and upset him.”

“You can’t be too hard on yourself. Relax. Stay calm and he’ll be calm. He doesn’t want you to feel sorry for him.”

“How do you know?”

“Because of the way Brooke acted toward him in the line. She said she was sorry, but he still didn’t want to play with her. The only reason he’ll play with you is if he thinks you really want to play with him.”

“I do want to, but I want him to play the right way.”

“Okay, then let’s teach him.”

Alec and I went over to Tim. “Hey, Tim, I want you to meet my friend, Alec.”

“Ummm . . . no. I only play with friend Morgan. No boys. Boys are mean. Me and friend Morgan only.”

“Tim,” Alec said, “I know boys are sometimes mean to you. I’m not like that. If I’m mean to you, just come out and tell me. Okay?”

“Okay. New friend Alec! Alec! I’ll play with Alec. Bye, Morgan!”

“Wait. Both of us want to play with you, Tim,” I said to him.

“Really? Play with me? I can cry.” Tim’s eyes watered.

He hugged me as the three of us started to play together. It was a real hug and it felt good. This was better than when I eat Mama’s brownies. I just felt all yummy on the inside.

I couldn’t say that everybody liked me, because there were lots of times when I was by myself. Last year, I was alone much of the time at school. I guess I liked hanging with Tim because I knew what it felt like to be **isolated**.

Alec explained to Tim how to play the game. Since I’m not the best kickball player, I spent the time practicing how to kick the ball while Alec was giving Tim a lesson. Before I knew what was going on, Brooke, Trey, and Billy were coming over to us.

Trey said, “Can we play with y’all?”

“You’ll have to ask Tim about that,” I said to them. I knew that my new buddy liked to choose the kids he played with.

When they asked him, Tim got super excited. All of us could have played better, rolling the ball faster and kicking the ball harder. But my friends cared more about Tim being happy than they did about winning a game. So we rolled slower and kicked softer. Before long, the whole class was cheering Tim as they watched and some others joined the

game. Tim was so happy that the class was playing with him. He was a part of it all. He was a star.

The sun was shining bright and I sort of felt like Jesus was saying, *You know what, Morgan? Good job!*



When it was time to line up and go inside, I wanted to stay outside and play. I wanted to pick up leaves that were stuck to the grass. I even wanted to watch ants crawl from blacktop to blacktop. I wanted to do anything that would keep me from going inside to take that practice test. Even if one of the questions was  $1 + 1 = 2$ , I was so **anxious** about it, I might put 10 for my answer. I knew I needed to get a handle on things. I could do this. But why did I feel I couldn't? Why was I so nervous?

When Mrs. Hardy let us take a washroom break, I said to Brooke, "I don't think I can pass."

"Why are you so afraid? You're the smartest girl in this class. My mom had me do some of the stuff over Christmas break on her computer. It's not even that hard. I know if I can do it, you can too."

I just had to be crazy. I thought no one did work during the holidays. Brooke had studied over the break? And she was more prepared than me? Something was wrong.

"Okay, class." Mrs. Hardy was ready for us to settle down. After she passed out the test papers, she said, "It's time to take a practice test. I want you to do your best. The first part is math and you will have thirty minutes to

complete it. When I say pencils down, I want your pencils down and your hands in your lap. Now, turn your papers over and go.”

When I turned over the test, the first questions were about adding like **denominators**.

$$1/12 + 4/12 = \underline{\quad}.$$

Well, I knew you were supposed to add the 1 and the 4, which equals 5. Then I thought about adding the denominators which would be 24. But that seemed like too much. With fractions, if you have the same denominator, you keep it the same. But I had to guess. When I looked at the choices, one of the answers was  $5/24$ , and another one was  $5/12$ . I didn't know which was right, so I circled  $5/24$ .

$$\text{Next, I came to } 11/12 + 5/12.$$

Now I was really confused, because  $11 + 5$  equals 16. Then I circled  $16/24$ . This was getting harder.

The next problem was  $10/11 + 1/11$ . And I circled  $11/22$ .

Later on after the test, we switched papers and graded each other's tests. The answer for  $1/12 + 4/12$  is  $5/12$ , not  $5/24$ , because when the denominator is the same, you don't add the bottom numbers. The answer to  $11/12 + 5/12$  is  $1 \frac{1}{3}$ . I had no clue how that came about until Mrs. Hardy explained it.

“This one is a little tricky. What you do is always keep the denominator the same, so 12 is the bottom number. For the numerator,  $11 + 5$  is 16. However, you have to find out how many times 12 goes into 16. The answer is one time,

so you put the 1 out front as a whole number. What you have left is  $\frac{4}{12}$ . But you can't leave it there. Some of you did and we'll work on that. The number  $\frac{4}{12}$  can be reduced down to  $\frac{1}{3}$ . That's because 4 goes into 12 three times. So the full answer is  $1\frac{1}{3}$ ."

I thought to myself, *Wow, how will I ever remember that?* But I was trying hard to keep up with Mrs. Hardy.

"Finally, with  $\frac{10}{11} + \frac{1}{11}$ , you keep the denominators the same and add the numerators, which is  $\frac{11}{11}$ . But anytime you have the same numerator and denominator, it equals what? Class?"

"One!"

"That's correct. It would not be  $\frac{11}{11}$ ; the answer is the whole number 1."

So then, I got all three in that section wrong. I wasn't happy about that at all. We moved on to grade the next part. And I didn't do any better with the English. The section was on **possessive** pronouns. Possessive pronouns take the place of a possessive noun. Instead of saying "Tracy's book," I could use the possessive pronoun and say, "her book."

The question was: I am going to see Jacob's new truck. I was confused again and got it wrong. Because of the 's, I put "their" truck instead of the right answer, which is "his" truck. The 's just meant it was Jacob's truck.

The next question was: Is that Mike and Sue's cat?

Because Mike was first, I thought it was "his" cat. Really, the answer was "their" cat because the cat belonged



to two people. I needed to study more because I kept putting down the wrong answers.

The last question: Did you see the peacock's feathers?

This one was really tricky. I didn't know if the peacock was a boy or a girl. Instead of putting "its" feathers as my answer, I put "his." I was all over the place. I got so much wrong, it was scary to even look at my paper. I just threw down my pencil and put my head down on my desk.

Mrs. Hardy came over to me. "Morgan, what's wrong?"

"I'm going to fail the CRCT. I'm not gonna do well because I messed up on my practice test. I'm gonna be held back in the third grade, Mrs. Hardy."

"We just need to find out what you don't know and work on that. So when the real test comes, you'll be ready."

"But what am I supposed to do?"

"I'm going to recommend you get tutoring."

"Tutoring? I can't do tutoring. That's for kids who have trouble learning."

"Okay. You just told me that you really didn't know the right answers. I watched you mark wrong answers on your test. Now, you can either go to tutoring and get some help, or you can fail your test because you didn't understand and refused to get help."

I bowed my head and said quietly, "Yes, ma'am. I need to go to tutoring."

"Now, that's the right attitude. And, Morgan, you don't have to worry about what anybody says or thinks. It's

## The Helper

about you understanding this material and knowing that you're smarter than you think. There's absolutely nothing wrong with staying after school to get extra help. You're always helping other people. Now it's time for you to let someone else be the helper."

## Letter to Dad



Dear Dad,

You would have been proud of my class today. We got a new student named Tim. At first, I thought that **ignorance** was gonna be a problem because some of the kids didn't want him around. He acts differently and makes **sporadic** moves. But, when we were **exposed** to his heart, we all cared. No one wants to feel **isolated**. Tim gets **anxious** too but sometimes we all do. I imagine you get **anxious** on your ship sometimes.

Also, I've got to get a tutor to help me with my **denominators** and **possessive** nouns.

Your daughter,  
Helper Morgan