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SOME
hope

1

“Alec Sylvester London! Dad wants you right now!”

There he goes again, I thought. My big brother, Antoine, was trying to scare me. To make things seem even worse, he was teasing me, knowing I didn’t like being called by my whole name.

“Oooh, I’m so glad I’m not you, man, because Dad’s gonna tell you somethin’ . . . and you’re not gonna like it.”

I wanted to ask him if I was in trouble or something. What exactly did Dad tell him that was making him grin from ear to ear? Antoine was two years older than me, but sometimes he acted like he was *my* little brother.

Boy, he gets on my nerves! I wish we could get along like brothers should, but Antoine acts like he knows everything. And that bothers me. After all, he just barely made it

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to the sixth grade and I'm in the fourth.

At first, I didn't like my new neighborhood. We used to live in a real cool area of Dekalb County, a few miles from downtown Atlanta. Then my dad lost his job and we had to move to another part of the county. Looking back, it doesn't seem so bad now. That's because ever since we moved, we've had nothing but problems.

"C'mon. You're walkin' too slow," Antoine said, while pushing me in my back. "You'd better get in there."

The next thing I knew, he was dancing all in my face. I wanted to push him away and tell him to leave me alone. I get so angry with him. He's always trying to do things to get me in trouble. But I have to say that sometimes it's my own fault, because I let him get next to me.

Two years ago, when I started going to a new school, I was nothing but a bully. Everyone hated me. See, when Dad lost his job, he took his anger out on all of us. He and Mom argued all the time. They haven't been happy, and my brother and I were getting punished for no reason. So when I was at school, I wanted to take out my anger on everybody else.

Then, one day this boy named Trey stopped me dead in my tracks. Trey got tired of me beating up on him, so he wanted to teach me a lesson. He stood up to me and was ready to take me on. While we were fighting, it made me think about how I had been hurting other people just because I wasn't happy at home.

I guess it also took this girl, Morgan Love, to get in my

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face and get me straight. She lives a few houses down from my family. It's not that I like girls or anything, but she's pretty cool. The thing I like the most about her is the fact that she loves God.

Her stepdad even works at a church. He came by one day and helped my dad turn his life around. Since then, Dad and Mom haven't been getting along all the time, but he does seem happier. When he went back to school to get his degree in education, everything was starting to look better.

Even though Antoine was standing in my way, I didn't say anything to him. I just brushed past him and kept walking. He might be my big brother, but lately I've been getting bigger and gaining on him.

"Hey! Don't push me again," he said, shoving me in the back real hard.

This time, I wasn't gonna let Antoine get to me, so I decided to ignore him. That made him even madder.

"Alec, don't you hear me talkin' to you. Turn around!"

I kept on walking and didn't look back. I was heading to our parents' bedroom. Unlike Antoine, I'm trying to learn how to keep my cool.

"There's my boy! Come here, son," Dad said when he saw me. He had a big smile on his face.

He was too excited and I didn't know why. But something was up. What did he have to tell me?

"Don't worry. You're not in trouble, Alec. Are you ready for another school year? You did a good job in the

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Challenge Program last year, and I want you to keep up the good work. Keep applying yourself in school. Okay, son?”

“I got you, Dad. Antoine said that you wanted to see me. Is this what you wanted to talk about?” I still wasn’t sure what he was going to tell me.

“Well, I couldn’t wait to give you the good news.”

“What good news?”

Maybe somehow he saw the class assignment list and found out that Morgan is in my class. Even though I don’t like girls, it’s okay to be in the same class with her. Morgan, Trey, and me having fun together another year sounded good to me. I was ready to hear that news.

I was so focused on my friends that I wasn’t sure I heard Dad right the first time.

“Huh?” I said really loud.

Giving me a chance to let it sink in, Dad slowly repeated, “I’m going to be your new assistant principal.”

“What? You mean, you’re gonna be at my school all the time?” I said with a big frown on my face.

Just then, Antoine rushed in the room and stood beside me. I’m sure he’d been listening at the door. Putting his arm around my shoulder, he said, “Yep! Dad’s gonna be at your school every day, watching every move you make. Isn’t that great?” Then, just to rub it in even more, he said with a big frown on his face, “I’m so sad that I’m going to middle school this year. Man, too bad for me.”

It took everything in me not to pay my brother any attention. He was trying to annoy me, as usual. As for Dad,

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I couldn't smile and fake like I was excited either. Folding my arms, I said quickly, "I don't understand. Why my school, Dad? That's not cool at all."

Just then Mom walked in and heard us talking. She'd been in the family room, folding clothes. My mother was such a good mom. Coming over to me, she said, "Oh, Alec, you'll see. It's going to be great. Your dad has found a job. Isn't that good news?"

"But—but, was this the only job he could find? I don't want Dad working at my school. The kids are gonna tease me like crazy. I can hear them giving me a hard time, saying stuff like, 'Your daddy is a principal. He's gonna be watchin' you all the time.'"

I couldn't help but be upset and couldn't hold it back. "Man! No way!" I shouted.

Then Dad cut in and said, "It won't be so bad, son. Besides, it's not about what you want. You need a roof over your head, clothes on your back, and food in your stomach. Right? Only God and money can take care of all that. God blessed me with this job and I'm going to take it. You'd just better get over it."

Mom was looking worried and said, "Okay, honey, let's just try and be a little more understanding." At least someone was feeling my pain.

"Please, Lisa. He's got to grow up. I don't have time to hear him whining like this is killing him."

After he said that, Dad quickly left the room. Since none of this seemed to matter to him, Antoine skipped out

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behind Dad. I just shook my head and sat on the chair, wishing I'd never heard this bad news. Wow! What a day!

"Mom, he doesn't care about how I feel. I know he needs a job and all but—"

Cutting me off, she said, "He does care, sweetie. I know you're having a hard time with the news, but just keep this in mind. At first, you didn't even want to go to this school. Now you don't want your dad to work there. Try and get used to the idea, and don't be so sad. It'll all work out."

She gave me a big hug and that made me feel a little better. I still wasn't excited about Dad's new job, but being in Mom's arms made it seem not so bad.



Later that night, things got even crazier. Because my parents told me that I couldn't lock my bedroom door, Antoine thought he could just pop in whenever he wanted to. He acted like he owned my room and everything in it.

"Man, this is not good," Antoine said, looking serious for a change.

He always wanted to brag or joke about something, but this time I could tell it was different. He came in and sat on my bed with tears in his eyes. I was used to him acting so tough. But now his mood made me sit up and listen to him.

"What is it?"

Antoine pointed toward the hallway. "Don't act like you can't hear that."

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He was right. I could hear the shouting. Mom and Dad were having the loudest argument ever. I wished my parents would stop doing this. Usually they cared when my brother and I were around, but this time they didn't hold back.

"You know, she's packing her bags," Antoine said in a broken-up voice, trying hard not to cry.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I saw her when I looked in their room. That's what this whole argument is about."

"No. No!" I yelled out.

I jumped out of my bed and ran as fast as I could to my parents' room. I opened the door and saw that Antoine was right. Three suitcases were packed and sitting on their bed.

I screamed, "Mom! What are you doing? Where are you going? Dad, tell her you love her. She can't leave us!"

Throwing his hands up in the air, Dad said to her, "You explain to Alec what's going on. Is this what you want to do to them? Is this what you want?"

Mom didn't answer him. She turned and said to me, "Sweetie, let's go and talk."

She was reaching for my hand, but I pulled back. "No. I don't wanna talk. I just want you to tell me you're not going anywhere." Not knowing what else to do, I went over to the bed and started taking her things out of the suitcases.

Mom raised her voice and said, "Alec! Stop that! We need to talk, baby." Turning to my dad, she said, "Andre, you need to tell him what's going on."

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“No,” Dad shot back. “You need to explain it to him, Lisa. If this is what you want . . . some acting job out in California . . . you tell him.”

My mom used to be an actress when she was much younger. She had some money saved up from her TV shows and that’s what my family was living off of when my dad lost his job a year and a half ago. Dad had some savings too, but that money was almost gone.

Now, with Mom planning to leave, it didn’t seem so bad now that Dad was getting a job. I didn’t get it. The only thing she would have to do is take care of the three of us. But, all of a sudden, she wants to take an acting job in California. What was she thinking? We’re in Georgia, for goodness sake!

I hurried out of their room and ran back to mine, locking the door behind me. I dropped to the floor and started to cry. My dad always told me that boys don’t cry. Somehow I was supposed to be able to handle this. Then why wouldn’t the tears stop falling? I couldn’t stand the thought of Mom leaving us. There’s no way I could pretend to be happy if we weren’t going to be a family.

Then, I heard Mom calling my name. “Alec, are you listening to me? Sweetie, open the door and let me in.”

“No,” I finally said.

“Please let me in. I have to talk to you.” There was a pause and then she sounded mad. “Alec, you’d better open up right now!”

Feeling like I had no other choice, I got up and opened

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the door. Then, I fell across the bed with my face in the pillow.

She came over to my bed and sat next to me. At first, neither of us said a word. *Why would she leave us? How could she?* I kept wondering, so I asked her a tough question. “You don’t love us anymore?”

“Of course, I do, baby.”

“But Dad has a job now. You said earlier today that everything was going to be good. How can you say that and you’re leaving?”

“Alec, it’s not like I’ll be gone forever. Right now it’s only a pilot program. That means we’re just doing one show for the networks to test and see if it works. We don’t even know if it will get picked up. I should only be gone for a few weeks.”

“I don’t care about any of that, Mom. We need you right here. Please say you won’t go.”

Mom tried to explain. “Alec, I have to go. Please try and understand. I can’t raise young men and tell them to follow their dreams and their mom doesn’t do the same. You guys are older now, you’re not babies anymore. Antoine is in middle school and you’re going to fourth grade.”

“But, who’s gonna cook for us? Who’s gonna wash our clothes? Who’s gonna get us up for school in the morning?”

“Your dad can cook. We’ve been sharing those responsibilities for some time now.”

“Yeah, but he burns things, Mom!”

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“Come on, Alec,” she said to me. “It’ll be fine. We all knew that I would be going back to work someday. I’m just sorry it’s so far away.”

“And, if I tell you not to go—because if you do, I won’t be able to handle it—would you stay?”

“Don’t talk like that,” she said, hugging me.

I pulled away. “Well, I won’t. Who knows what’ll happen to me?”

“Maybe someday you’ll be an actor. You know, sometimes you can be so dramatic.”

I didn’t even know what that meant, and I didn’t care either. So, I tried again, “You just can’t go, Mom.”

“I’ll be back before you know it. Remember, you’ve got a cell phone now. You can call me anytime. I know that things have been tough around here for some time. My being away for a while will help us all to clear our heads. Then—”

“Then what, Mom? Things will work out? That’s not gonna happen, and you know it. If you leave, you’re not comin’ back.”

She just looked away.

I put my head down. “When are you leaving?”

“I’m leaving tonight.”

“Then just go. Leave.”

She tried hugging me, and I moved away again. She tried kissing me on the cheek, and I turned my head. She told me that she loved me, and I didn’t say anything back.

About an hour later, a car pulled up to the driveway. It

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was her girlfriend, Miss Rhonda, who was coming to take Mom to the airport. Antoine came into my room and we both looked out the window, watching them load up the car. We had the same sad look on our faces like we did when we moved from our old house. At age ten, my life is not fun at all. The only thing I could do was pray, *“Dear God, please be with our mom. Be with us too.”*



“It’s the first day of school! I’m in the class with my boy,” Trey cheered. “Give it up, Alec!”

I didn’t say one word. Not because I wasn’t happy to see him, it’s just that my dad was standing right behind Trey. He looked like some kind of assistant principal monitor monster.

“All right, young men. Keep it down in the halls, and keep it moving.”

“Who’s he?” asked Trey.

Morgan walked up to us and said, “Hey, Mr. London.”

“You should call him *Doctor* now,” I corrected her. I was still upset that my dad was even in the building.

“Trey, that’s Alec’s dad,” Morgan explained. “He’s the new assistant principal.”

My dad spoke up, “You guys didn’t have enough discipline in school last year, but I’m here to change that. Now, keep it moving. And I don’t want to see any of you in my office. Miss Love, be very careful to stay out of trouble in class. And watch out for your friend Alec too.”

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“Yes, sir,” Morgan said with a smile.

“Dad!” I called out. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“I’m joking, son.”

Trey walked up to my dad and said, “Sir, I had no idea that you were going to be the new assistant principal. I promise I’m going to be on my best behavior.”

I just pulled Trey by his shirt, as my dad walked away. “Come on,” I whispered, “you don’t have to say anything to him.”

“But I don’t want him thinkin’ I’m a bad kid,” Trey protested.

Morgan spoke up. “I don’t know what I’m gonna do without Brooke being in my class this year.”

Morgan and Brooke were best friends. I couldn’t believe Billy wasn’t in our class this year, either. Trey, Morgan, Brooke, Billy, and I have been in the same class since I came to this school. Now, it was just us three. After the big fight we had two years ago, Trey and I have come a long way. He proved that I couldn’t bully him anymore. Now we were close friends.

Walking into our new classroom, there were only a few seats left. Everywhere Morgan tried to sit, girls were being mean and putting stuff down so she couldn’t sit next to them.

When Morgan walked toward the middle of the room, there was a seat next to a girl who was much bigger than her. That girl was acting mean too. She said, “No, you can’t sit next to me because I need another chair to put my stuff on.”

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“Okay,” Morgan replied and walked away.

“Oh, no. That’s not gonna happen,” I said. “Come on, Morgan. Sit down.”

“Yeah, Morgan. Sit down,” said Trey. The three of us knew we were gonna have each other’s back.

“I got it, boys. I don’t have to sit there.”

“Well then, I will,” Trey said, plopping down.

I noticed two empty seats in the very back of the classroom and pointed at them. *One for Morgan and one for me*, I thought. Morgan followed behind me. But, before I could get to them and sit down, a boy holding his lunchbox said to me, “Back up, bro. This is my seat.”

“Alec, just go and sit somewhere else,” Morgan said, as she sat in the next seat over.

“No. He wasn’t sitting here, and his stuff wasn’t here either.”

“I’m not scared of you,” said the boy.

“Well, you need to be, Tyrod.” I said, reading the label on his lunch box.

“No, you need to be,” Tyrod said back. All of a sudden, he pushed me and I fell over the chair.

“Oh, no!” Morgan said as she stooped down and asked, “Are you okay?” I jerked away without giving her an answer. I didn’t want a girl thinking I couldn’t fight.

Then Corey, another boy in our class, got up out of his seat. “Tyrod, you’d better leave him alone. His dad is the new assistant principal. I heard them talking in the hallway this morning.”

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“That don’t mean anything to me,” Tyrod said, right before he took a swing at me.

“Fight!” Corey yelled out, as some of the other students circled around.

Just then, our teacher, Mr. Wade, walked in. Tyrod fell to the floor, screaming like he was hurt.

“What’s going on in here?”

“He hit me!” Tyrod said, holding his arm.

I couldn’t believe this! He started with me and now he was changing the story around to make it seem like I was the bad guy. I just threw my hands up in the air.

“Come on, Alec London. You’re going to the office,” said Mr. Wade.

“Mr. Wade, that’s not what happened,” Morgan said. “Tyrod started the whole thing.”

Tyrod looked over at his friend named Cole and said, “What happened?”

Pointing to me, Cole said, “Umm, that, that boy, that boy over there hit Tyrod . . . I saw it . . . just like he said.”

“Alec, let’s go.”

I was mad that a teacher could judge me so quickly just because of my past. Mr. Wade used to teach the second grade, but now he was teaching our fourth grade class. He knew me when I was a bully and didn’t know that I’ve changed since then. So he thought that I was in the wrong. Before I knew it, I was in my dad’s office.

“I can’t believe it, Alec. This is the first day of school and you pulled this mess. What’s gotten into you, young

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man? How do you think it makes me look when it's my job to keep the whole school in order and my own son acts out? Did you get in trouble just because you don't want me to be here?"

I was speechless. My dad was acting just like Mr. Wade, thinking I was the one who did something wrong. Finally, I said, "Believe whatever you want, Dad."

"Are you getting smart with me?" Dad said in an angry tone, as he came from behind his desk. He got up really close to my face.

Super upset, I started sobbing. "I didn't do it. Don't you understand? Kids are gonna give me a hard time because you're here. I didn't do it, Dad. So, believe what you want, it really doesn't matter. The one thing I care about is that Mom is gone. I know that the only parent who cares about how I feel is not here. And I miss her so much!"

I just sat there with tears in my eyes. I'm so bummed out, and I need some hope.

Letter to Mom



Dear Mom,

You see, this is what happens when you leave a ten-year-old kid at home with his angry dad and his annoying brother.

Dad's new job is too much for me to deal with. He's judging me along with everybody else. I wish he didn't work at my school.

Everything that Antoine says to me is mean. He likes to tease me, and I'm tired of it. Mom, this is a problem for me. It's hard to get over the fact that you're not here. I know I sound like I'm whining, but I can't help it.

Things got even more dramatic when this kid named Tyrod took a swing at me. He said I hit him, but I didn't. Now Dad is acting like I did something wrong. He's looking to discipline me for something I didn't even do. Mom, I hope you aren't as bummed out as me.

Your son,
Sad Alec

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Word Search: Football Terms

Go to a football game—little league, middle school, high school, college, or pro game—and you'll hear some of these terms or see these plays on the field.

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

ENDZONE (End Zone)

SCORE

YARDS

HELMET

TOUCHDOWN

PADS

UPRIGHTS



GET
better

2

I kept staring at the floor, not listening to a word my father was saying. Here I was sitting in his office because I was accused of fighting. This was such a yucky situation, and I was so angry that I didn't even care what my punishment was going to be.

Dad tugged on my shirt and raised his voice. "Listen to me. Are you crazy?"

I guess I was crazy. I guess I was angry. I guess I was asking for trouble. I guess I was ready to get a spanking. He opened the door, peeked out into the hall, and closed the door tight.

"Are you trying to get me fired? You know I just started here."

I just rolled my eyes and folded my arms, as he kept on going.

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“What is wrong with you?”

I was beyond upset and mad with him. Was this really happening? I didn't do anything wrong. But, my dad is more focused on his job and worrying about me getting him in trouble. Guess we both knew what was important to him.

“Uh, uh . . . listen, boy. Do you hear me talking to you?” From the sound of his voice, I could tell that he was boiling mad. The more I listened to him stumble over his words, I just shook my head. Now my own father can't even remember my name. What else was I supposed to think, except, *does he even care?*

“Look at me when I'm talking to you,” my dad said when I turned away. “Why did you do it?”

Happy that he asked, I let out all my steam as if I were a roaring engine. “You might as well join in with everyone else who thinks the worse of me. You're taking the side of a boy who is tryin' to get me in trouble. You're my dad, and you don't even know me. Everybody remembers me from the way I used to be. If I'm gonna get in trouble, it should be for something I did and not for hitting some boy in my class who I don't even know and didn't even hit.”

He took a minute to think about what I said. Then, in a calmer voice, he told me, “Okay, okay, Alec. I believe you.” Reaching for a pen and paper, he started jotting down something. “You know, son. You can talk to me anytime,” Dad told me.

But, I wasn't so sure. Still worried, I told him, “I just

did, and you keep writing away. You're trying to put me on in-school suspension, aren't you?"

"What? Alec, no. I'm writing a note to your teacher. I still have to record this in your file, though. I also have to talk with the other young man. But, don't worry. I'll make it clear that you weren't to blame. Son, you're trying to get over something that you did last year. You know, it's going to take a while."

"No, Dad, not *last year*. That happened when I was in second grade. Now I'm in the fourth. I had a great year last year, but some people won't let go of what happened two years ago. Now that you're here, it makes things even worse. The only person who cared about me was Mom. Now that she's gone, I don't know what to do or who to turn to," I said, pretty much in tears.

"Come here, son," Dad said. He looked like he wanted to hug me.

I just turned away from him. I was confused. I didn't know how to deal with all of this, and I didn't want him hugging me. Although I had to obey him, this was not the place or time for him to try and be my dad.

"Come here, Alec," he said, bringing me close to him. Even though I tried to stop him, I finally gave in. Dad let me beat lightly on his chest to ease my anger. "Get it all out. It's okay."

He was right. I was holding it all in, and I guess that was my problem. I needed to get it all out, as Dad said. I didn't want to worry anymore, but things have been

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going all wrong for me.

“I don’t want you to think that your mom and I don’t love you. The problems we have are not because of you or Antoine.”

“So, are you guys gonna be okay?”

“Honestly, son, I hope so. But I pushed your mom a little too hard. You deserve to know the truth, and I’m going to keep it honest. She needed some air. She needed to get away.”

“If you love her, then why won’t you tell her to come back?”

“I don’t want to keep her from her dreams. I want her to do what she wants to do. You have to allow people time to make their own choices.”

“But, she’s your wife.”

“Yes. And I want her to be happy. We should pray for her TV show to work out. There’s nothing wrong with giving her a chance. We need to give her some space. Maybe you can do the research and tell me later how far California is from Georgia.”

I thought to myself, *Now he’s making this about a school lesson.*

“Why?” I asked.

“Because if you do the work, you’ll learn a lot more. That’s why I want you to find the answer on your own. You’re in the Challenge Program for a reason. I may have helped your brother too much. Giving him all the answers instead of letting him figure some things out by himself

hasn't helped him to grow. But that's another story."

I smiled because I was beginning to understand.

"That's my boy. Just know that, as your dad, I love you, and I'm proud of you. But, as your assistant principal, I need you to go back to class and take this note to your teacher. If you don't, your dad will have some discipline for you when we get home. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

When I got back to class, everyone just stared at me with sad faces. I walked up to Mr. Wade's desk and handed him the note from my father. As he started to read it, he said, "Okay, young man. Take your seat."

On the way back to my seat, Morgan jumped up and hugged me so tight.

"Let go," I said, pulling away from her.

"I'm just happy to see you. I thought you were in detention—or even worse. You didn't do anything, Alec, and Mr. Wade knows it now. He gave me a chance to explain after he took you to the office. He said he would talk to your dad after class."

"She really did stick up for you, man. That Tyrod doesn't know who he's messin' with," Trey said, "but we can get him straight."

Morgan looked at him and said, "Stop sayin' that, Trey."

"Nah, I'm just playin'. But for real, people gotta know they shouldn't mess with us."

Then Morgan turned back to me and said, "Mr. Wade is giving us some time to start planning for our science

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project. We're supposed to pick a partner. Do you want to be my partner?"

"No," I said, as I sat down.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I'm gonna be Trey's partner."

"Oh, yeah," Trey said in an excited tone. Teasing Morgan, he said with his hands stretched toward her, "Step back. Step it on back."

"Fine," she said, with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, boy, did I hurt her feelings?" I asked myself in a low voice.

Trey heard me and said, "Who cares what the girl thinks."

I did, but I said nothing. Something inside of me was making me feel different again. Morgan was my friend. But now we were like oil and vinegar, and I wasn't making it any better. I'd probably regret it, but I couldn't help how I felt. I just wanted to hang with my boy, Trey.



It had been two weeks since Mom had taken off for California. In that time, she'd only called twice. I didn't phone her, and Dad had only said two words to her himself. It was Antoine who called her all the time. He talked and talked, making it seem more like she was with us.

He told her everything. Even though I didn't want to chat with her, I was sitting in the next room, listening really hard. I was only pretending not to care, but I really did.

GET BETTER

All three of us missed her in so many ways. My brother didn't hold back on how much he missed Mom's cooking.

"For real, Dad? Another bologna sandwich?" I heard Antoine call out. "I can't eat this. I'm gonna throw up. If it's not a bologna sandwich, it's a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, or a hamburger skillet dish. And then you burn the hamburger meat."

"Boy, please. You act like you go to bed hungry," said Dad.

"I'm just sayin'. Can't a brother get some takeout every now and then?"

"Who do you think you're talking to? Middle school got you thinking you're too cool. You must be losing your mind. You'd better sit there and be thankful you have something to eat," Dad said, before leaving the kitchen.

Antoine said under his breath, "And I might need to call Mom and tell her what you're feedin' us."

"What did you say?" Dad called out.

"Oh, nothing, Dad," my brother quickly took back his words. Then he got mad because I was laughing.

"What you laughin' at?"

"You."

Frowning, he said, "At least I tell them how I really feel."

With a smile, I corrected him. "No. You didn't tell him how you feel. He's not even in the room."

"So," he shot back. "At least he knows I'm tired of eating this mess. You don't say a word."

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“Don’t you think he’s havin’ a hard time bein’ Dad and Mom? What would complaining about anything do?”

Swatting his hand at me, he said, “Whatever. Go ahead and make me look bad.”

“I can’t make you look bad. You do that on your own.”

“Watch it, Alec,” he said, as he took his fist and put it in my face.

“I’m not scared of you, Antoine.”

“Just because you got a few inches over the summer don’t mean I can’t take you down.”

“*Doesn’t* mean you can’t take me down, not *don’t*,” I said, happy to correct him again.

“What are you two in here arguing about now?” Dad asked, coming back into the kitchen. “Go on and get ready for bed.”

“Dad, I told you we don’t have any clean clothes. You haven’t washed since Mom’s been gone. How long does it take to wash?” Antoine asked. He was talking too much as usual.

“Your mom wanted a fancy machine. I don’t even know how to work the thing. I’m cooking and cleaning . . . you all are fussing. Now, get up from the table and clean up your dishes!”

The sound of his voice made his point loud and clear. “In fact,” Dad continued, “when I get back, I want this place to be clean from top to bottom! No video games. No Xbox. No TV. Nothing! Got it? I’m going out and I’ll be back later.”

“Yes, sir,” we said.

We knew not to dare ask where he was going. We were used to Dad when he got really upset. It was best to just leave him alone. It reminded me of when he first lost his job. He and Mom constantly argued about how the bills were gonna get paid. But when the argument got too heated, he knew it was time for him to leave. Dad would storm out of the house and dare anyone to question him about where he was going.

Then it all changed when he let God in his heart. Dad was much better. He treated Mom better. He went back to school to get his degree and now he has a job. It’s at my school, but at least he’s working. The pressure he had been under finally started to lift and it kinda shows.

That’s why, even though I’ve been angry at him because he didn’t stop Mom from leaving, I also have to respect him. I know it wasn’t easy for my father to be out of work with a family to care for.

But I still feel like we weren’t in a good situation, with Mom being away. So I just looked up and prayed, “*You know, Lord, my family is struggling. Are You gonna help us, or what?*”

About an hour or so later, Dad returned. But he wasn’t alone. Our grandmother was with him.

“All right! I’m here to get this house in shape.” The voice of our grandmother rang loud throughout the house. “Antoine? Alec? Boys, where are you? Come on in here and give your grandma a hug.”

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Antoine looked at me and said, “Oh, no.”

I looked right back and said, “Oh, no.”

Her voice was over the top. Our father’s mother was the opposite of the house being a mess. A few years ago when our parents went on vacation, Grandma stayed with us. She would cook lots of food, and then she’d sit there and watch until we finished it all. If she wasn’t happy with the way we did something, she would keep on us until we got it right. Everything had to be perfect. That was our grandmother.

Antoine went to her first, and she squeezed him real hard. When he started coughing, Dad told him to stop playing. I knew Antoine was serious because I know how hard Grandma can squeeze. This wasn’t a good surprise, and it wasn’t going to be easy with her living here.

Dad didn’t even prepare us and let us know she was coming. All I could think was, *Why couldn’t Mom be here with us?* He has his mom, why couldn’t we have ours?

“Come on over here, Alec. Give Grandma a big hug.”

I couldn’t face her. I just shook my head, turned around, and walked away.

“Boy! Didn’t you hear your grandmother talking to you?” shouted Dad.

I guess I shouldn’t have been rude. It wasn’t Grandma’s fault that my mom wasn’t here. She was only trying to make us feel better.

With her hands on her hips, Grandma called me again, “Come here, Alec. And, look at you. You’re so skinny.

Don't worry. I'm here to fatten you right on up. Andre, go ahead and get the groceries out of the car." Then, looking around her, she said, "Y'all are gonna have to work on keepin' this house clean."

"Mom, your grandsons can do that. Boys, go and bring the groceries in."

As we walked to the car, neither one of us said a word. Our faces showed our grief. We were gonna be on lockdown and neither one of us was happy about that.



I was so excited to see my mother! Her arms were wide open, and she had the biggest smile on her face. It had been so long since I'd seen her, and I wanted to be with her so bad. I started running toward her, but before I could get to her, another little boy beat me to her. The two of them were laughing together and having a good time. The boy in her arms wasn't me. And there I was calling out to her.

"Mom! Mom! Don't you see me? Don't you love me? Don't you want me?" I yelled out.

Then I woke up and sat straight up in my bed, looking around the dark room. Slowly, I realized it was a bad dream. I had tried to be brave for so long, holding back the tears. But I couldn't hold them any longer. Three weeks had gone by, and it was bothering me in every way. I wasn't eating. I wasn't sleeping. I wasn't hanging out with Trey and Morgan. I'd been acting like a real brute. I didn't know what to do.

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“What’s going on? What’s up?” Antoine asked, busting into my room.

He had heard me shouting, but he must not have heard me calling out to Mom. Good! I didn’t want him being upset just because I was upset. We both missed our mom a lot. I also didn’t want Antoine teasing me about crying over a dream either.

So I just told him, “I’m okay.”

All of a sudden, the light went on in my room. “You’re not okay,” my big brother said.

“Turn that light out!”

I looked toward the wall so he couldn’t see my face. He switched off the light but didn’t leave.

“Go!” I shouted.

“Okay,” he said, but he still didn’t leave the room. My brother walked over to my bed and sat down. Putting his arm around me, he pulled my head over so it could rest on his shoulder.

“It’s okay if you miss Mom, Alec.”

The tears began to fall. “I had a dream, Antoine. Mom was with another boy. She was so happy. I don’t think she’s ever comin’ back. How am I supposed to not miss her? How am I supposed to be okay with this?”

“Don’t worry, she’ll be back. But, maybe it’s time we stopped getting on each other’s nerves. We need to think about other things. Football season will be starting soon,” he said, trying to cheer me up in his own way.

I just hugged him really tight. Antoine could be the

niciest person when he wanted to be.

“You need to drink some water or something. You’re sweating all over. Change your shirt too. See you in the morning,” Antoine said, sounding like the brother I knew he could be. We really do love each other.

When he was gone, I slid out of bed, dropped to my knees, and prayed, *“Lord, be with my mom. Help her out there in California. I want her to be happy, but I also want her to be home. I don’t know. I guess this is the way I’m supposed to pray. I hope You know that this is me, Alec, and not Antoine. Okay? Amen.”*

I got up to go downstairs and get some water. When I got close to the kitchen, I could see that the light was already on.

I heard Grandma talking on the phone. “Dot, I can’t believe she hopped all the way to California to chase after some dream. She needs to be here teaching these boys how to clean up and take care of themselves. They’re so spoiled. My son mixed the white and dark clothes together and messed up the whole load. Girl, everything is red.”

Her sister, Aunt Dot, must have said something she didn’t like about my dad because Grandma caught a quick attitude. And I mean quick!

“Okay then, whatever. Maybe I was supposed to teach him how to wash clothes the right way. But, that don’t excuse her. She still needs to be here instead of out there in Hollywood, or wherever she is.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I didn’t mean to listen, but I

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didn't wanna hear my grandma talk about Mom either. It wasn't a secret that the two of them didn't get along so great. I don't know why, and I never asked. I just know that whenever we went to Grandma's house, Mom always seemed so shy and nervous. I heard her tell Dad that Grandma wasn't easy to get along with. That meant everybody had to go the extra mile just to please her.

I stepped right into the kitchen and said, "Why are you talkin' about my mom like that? You're supposed to love her. You're not supposed to be like that."

"All right, girl. I gotta go and deal with this child. Bye," she said, hanging up the phone.

"What's going on in here?" asked Dad, as he came into the kitchen.

"Ask her," I said.

"Andre, you know how we get to talkin', and—"

"She was talkin' bad about Mom. It's not right, Dad, and I'm not gonna take back the fact that I think she's wrong."

"Mom, please tell me you weren't?"

I cut in, "She was, Dad. And it's wrong."

Not wanting to stand there a minute longer, I ran to my room and slammed the door. Sadness was taking over now, and I kept thinking, *Things just have to get better.*



Letter to Mom

Dear Mom,

I had a dream that gave me much grief. At first, I was excited that you had come home, but then another boy ran to you and hugged you.

Are you and Dad going to be okay? If you're gonna be away for much longer, I'll need to do some research on how to keep the house clean. You see, Dad can't cook, clean, or wash clothes. That way I can help out more.

You remember Morgan, don't you? Well, for no reason I haven't been nice to her lately, and I hurt her feelings. I didn't really mean to. I also want to make sure I never have to get an in-school suspension for doing bad things. So, I need to do some personal maintenance.

Oh, Grandma and I got into it too. I heard her talking over the phone to Aunt Dot about how you ought to get your priorities together, come home, and take care of your family. You know what, Mom? It made me mad, but I agree with her. I've been truly upset that you aren't here. I worry about you all the time.

Your son,
Upset Alec

MAKING THE TEAM

Word Search: Football Positions

Neither team can have more than 11 men on the field at one time. They play different positions, and all are important. Here are some of the positions in the game of football.

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

KICKER

LINEBACKER

QUARTERBACK

RECEIVER

RUNNINGBACK (Running Back)

SAFETY

TIGHTEND (Tight End)