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# In Charge

## 1

**“Okay, class, so** listen up. Three more events to go and the fourth grade can win Field Day! Remember, every one of you will get a ticket to Six Flags. We can do this, class,” said Mr. Wade. I could tell how much he wanted our class to win.

“Now, it’s time for the three-legged race. Tyrod, Alec, I need my strongest guys to back up the team,” our teacher continued.

Trey called out, “Why do you think they’re the toughest and the strongest? *I* just won the sack hop. Whatever . . . I don’t wanna race with Tyrod anyway. My foot and his foot tied together. No way!”

“Your feet aren’t gonna be tied together,” Morgan called out to Trey. My friends Morgan and Trey were always competing with each other about something. Now she wanted to point out that he didn’t know everything. “Your ankles will be tied together, not your feet,” she corrected him.

“Whatever,” Trey responded. “I don’t wanna be tied to him.”

## GOING THE DISTANCE

This wasn't going right. The whole class started arguing back and forth. It's like nobody was keeping the bigger prize in mind. First-place team wins Six Flags tickets! Didn't they just hear Mr. Wade? Didn't they want to win? The title was almost ours. But even though we were in first place, one of the other three teams could still beat us.

As if Mr. Wade were reading my mind, he called out, "Listen! You all are getting off track! Didn't you just hear me? Six Flags tickets for the winners! Plus, I really want us to win. This is my first year as a fourth grade teacher. The other teachers talk about competing at Field Day all year long. So, do it for me! Come on, guys, didn't we have a good school year?"

"All you did was yell all the time and scream at us," Tyrod mumbled.

Hearing that remark, Mr. Wade immediately responded. "No, I stayed on you guys. And all of you, including you, Tyrod, passed the CRCT standard test. So, I'd say we had a great year. Yeah, I might have been tough on the class, but that's because I care."

About a month ago, if you had asked me if I thought Mr. Wade cared, I would have told you no way. Tyrod was at least right about the fact that every time we turned around Mr. Wade was fussing about something.

He even took me to the office a couple of times. And that was the last place I wanted to go because my dad is the assistant principal. That means I got into trouble at school and at home. But then our teacher pulled me aside and told

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me that he thought I was bright and had a lot of potential. He told me the reason he was on my back all the time was because he didn't want me to take shortcuts. He pointed out that going the distance is what's important. Mr. Wade helped me know that hard work pays off in the end. And, believe me, the whole fourth grade year wasn't an easy one for me.

For one thing, it was the first year that my mom wasn't home with us. Besides the fact that she and my dad were having problems, Mom is an actress with a television show out in California. When she first gave us the news that she was leaving, Mom didn't think she'd be there long. Although she had come back for a short visit, the whole year was going by and she still wasn't home for good.

I really miss her and can't wait until she comes back to stay. You see, there's way too much stuff going on with my older brother, Antoine. Sometimes I wish he wasn't my older brother at all. When it comes to sports, we're very competitive with each other. At times, I do a whole lot better than him and that causes tension between us.

On top of it all, this was also the first year my father has been working at my school. At the beginning of the year, kids teased me for being the assistant principal's son. But that didn't mean my dad treated me like I'm special. In fact, he was super hard on me. He told me it was because he has high hopes for me. Dad always gives me pretty much the same message as my teacher. They both say how it's important to give my all in everything I do. It's called "going the distance."

## GOING THE DISTANCE

Because I'm so competitive, I really want to win Field Day. It's a big end-of-the-year fun activity, and the big prize makes it even more worth it. Actually, if there wasn't something cool at stake, I'd still want us to be the winning team. I just want to be the best. But it's not just up to me. If our class wants to win, we have to get focused.

So everyone could hear me, I shouted out, "Quit trippin', everybody! Let's do this! We're almost there! Come on!"

"Hey, don't act like you're our leader or somethin'," Tyrod said crossly, as he stepped in front of me. "I don't wanna be tied to you and I'm not racing with you. If I'm your partner and we win, you're just gonna say it's because you did it. So, you need to run with your little friend, Trey. When y'all trip and fall, you'll wish I was your partner."

Mr. Wade looked straight at the guy who was getting on my nerves. "Tyrod! You don't get to decide who'll be partners! I'm running this. Shavon and Lacey, you go first. Gilmer and Trey, you go next. Tyrod and Alec, you bring it home."

As soon as Mr. Wade tied our bandanas and walked away, Tyrod bent down and loosened ours.

"That's gonna come off," I said.

"Well, it can't be as tight as he made it."

"What's your problem, man?"

"What's your problem?!" Tyrod shot back at me.

"I'm tryin' to win. I don't have a problem." Then, I paused and added, "Well, I guess I do. You're my problem."

## IN CHARGE

We were so busy fussing that we didn't even know the race had started. There's no doubt about it, we aren't friends. When it was our turn to take off running, we were still arguing and didn't move.

Mr. Wade called out, "Boys! Quiet! Now, go!"

At first, our class was in the lead. But, because Tyrod and I had wasted precious time, the other teams were gaining on us. Then it happened. The bandana holding us together wasn't tight enough, and it soon came apart. The other teams quickly passed us by. Before we knew it, we were disqualified.

Mr. Wade was not happy. "Boys! What happened? I tied that bandana tight; how'd it come loose?"

Tyrod tried to blame me, but Mr. Wade wasn't hearing it. The other kids in our class were mad too because now we were in second place.

It was time for the basketball toss. A team of four people from each class has fifty seconds, and the class with the most baskets wins. When it was our turn, we were all pushing and shoving each other. The time was quickly winding down and we didn't have any baskets. We were now in third place.

Before the last event, Mr. Wade took us all over by the big oak tree so we could rest. As we sat underneath the tree drinking water and cooling off, he told us, "You guys don't seem interested in going to Six Flags."

"Yes, we are!" Trey and some of the kids yelled out.

"Well then, act like you're competing for something.

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Put your heart into it and give it all you've got. Even if it's not about winning the prize, it should be about doing your best," Mr. Wade reminded us.

"What does our heart have to do with this?" Tyrod asked, trying to challenge Mr. Wade.

"By that, I mean it's about your character. You guys were all excited and looking forward to Field Day. You have to remember that every time you compete, it's about going the distance. It's almost over, and you should want to finish strong. You already passed the CRCT, and you did well academically. Now, you're ready to go on to the fifth grade. You made the grade with the books, and you can do the same thing with sports. If you learn how to go the distance and finish strong, it will be a trait you can carry for the rest of your life. Even when things get in your way, you can go on out there and win. So, let's do this!"

Mr. Wade lined us up for the tug of war game and made me the anchor. Tyrod didn't like that, so he wouldn't pull. It was no surprise that because we didn't work together, we didn't win. But we were all disappointed anyway.

"If I would've been at the back, we would've won," Tyrod said, trying to get under my skin.

I was so glad that this was the last day of school and I wouldn't have to see him for the rest of the summer. Tyrod always talked a lot of junk. But if he would've pulled his weight, then maybe we could've won.

It didn't get any better when a couple of the other teach-

## IN CHARGE

ers came up to Mr. Wade and teased him about losing.

“Sorry, guy. Hope things work out for you next time!” one teacher said with a quick laugh.

“You didn’t think you were going to come to the fourth grade in your first year and claim the Field Day prize, did you?” asked another teacher.

“Okay, go on and talk about me. I can take it. Next year, I hope my class will work harder and win,” Mr. Wade said to the other teachers.

Then he called the class together one more time and said, “I just want you guys to understand that being tough isn’t about having a lot to say or flexing your muscles. Don’t forget, it’s about your heart and your character. You didn’t give me your all today. You didn’t give each other what you needed either. Every one of you guys needs to look deep inside. I know it’s been a tough fourth grade year. There was a lot of material to learn, but you did it. Now go on and make your fifth grade year even better. If you ever need to talk, I’ll be right down the hall. Remember, I’ll be there for you. Have a good summer.”

Morgan and the other girls in our class rushed up to Mr. Wade and gave him hugs. The guys just looked on, taking it all in—even Tyrod. It seemed like everyone was thinking the same thing. If we could go back and do those last few events over again, we would give it our all for Mr. Wade. He was right. We would have to remember his words from now on. People with character don’t quit. People with heart endure to the end and finish strong.



## GOING THE DISTANCE



“The house looks real nice, Dad. Mom’s going to be so surprised,” I said to my father as we finished decorating. We were getting ready for my mom’s birthday and homecoming celebration all rolled into one.

“What time does her plane land? What time is she supposed to get here? Do we have to pick her up, or is she takin’ a taxi?” my brother asked, just as excited as I was.

“Andre, son, I must admit you’ve got the house lookin’ mighty nice. Your missus is going to be very happy,” Grandma said to my father. She was letting us know we had done a good job of cleaning our home.

“Tell me, Dad . . . what time is she comin’?” Antoine asked again, unable to hold back his excitement.

Dad patted him on the shoulder and said, “Calm down, son, I know you’re anxious to see her. She’s not supposed to arrive for another couple of hours. A car service is bringing her home, so all we have to do is wait.”

Grandma started sniffing like she was trying to detect something. “I don’t smell anything. What about the food? Who’s cookin’?” she asked with a knowing smile.

The three of us didn’t say a word. We just gathered around her with sad eyes and pitiful faces. We needed her help. She knew we were trying to ask her to fix something.

“I guess y’all like my cubed steak, yellow rice, greens, and cornbread. I can cook that up.”

“Well, you know it. Come on, Mama, let me take you

## IN CHARGE

shopping. Lisa will be here in a little while.” Dad grabbed his keys, Grandma got her purse, and out the door they went.

“Okay, so you know we need to get along,” Antoine said to me when we were alone.

I just looked at him because I wasn’t the one who got our rough cousin to beat him up. No, he did that to me. Sure, he felt bad about it later on. But, I was never really sure if Antoine was done with causing problems between us.

“You’re the one who had an issue with me,” I said to Antoine.

“I’m past all that. You forgive me, right?”

I did forgive him, but it hurt that things even came to that. Some nights I still remembered getting a bloody nose when Lil’ Pete threw a basketball at my face. The only thing worse was finding out that my own brother told him to do it. That was harder to swallow than having a bad sore throat.

But Antoine was right. We didn’t need to be arguing and carrying on when Mom came home. Everything needed to be peaceful. Nice and fun.

Antoine stuck out his hand and said, “Truce?”

I figured I’d let the past be the past. So I stuck out my hand and shook his. It was important for Mom to come home to a stress-free place.

Then I got an idea. I took a piece of pink construction paper and some crayons and went outside. I sat down on the curb and tried to think of what I could say on a card for Mom. Just thinking about her coming home after all this

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time, I wanted to cry. But I wanted to be strong for her even more.

“What are you doing?” I heard a familiar voice say. I looked up and saw it was my friend Morgan.

“Hey,” I said, surprised and happy to see her. “I’m makin’ a card.”

“Yeah, it looks like that’s what you’re supposed to be doing, but . . . uh, the paper is blank.”

“I know,” I replied. “My mom is comin’ home today, and I wanna say something super special. This is a happy time, and I don’t wanna write anything sad. I don’t wanna put somethin’ down that doesn’t mean anything either.” Then I let out a sigh and said, “I just don’t know what to say.”

Morgan got off her bike and stooped down to dust off a spot on the curb. Then she sat down next to me. *Man*, I thought as I watched her, *It’s just a little dirt*. It’s not like it was gonna hurt her or anything.

“Just speak from your heart. Have you prayed about it?” she asked.

I shook my head and Morgan didn’t waste any time. She grabbed my hand and prayed, “Lord, please bless Alec. He’s real excited about his mom coming home. He’s trying to write her a special card. Please give him the words to say. We love You and we thank You. Amen.”

I added, “Amen.”

“Maybe after you finish with your card you can ride with me. I’m going around the block four times.”

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“How do you know it’s going to take me that long to think of something?”

Morgan said, “See, that’s not what I meant. You shouldn’t think negatively. Remember, what I always say—keep a positive attitude.”

I laughed at that, knowing she was just messing with me. But, she did have a point too. Just as she took off, I closed my eyes and started thinking about what I wanted to say.

When Dad and Grandma came back from shopping, I was still working on it. A little while later, I finally finished and placed my card on the table next to the cake. I thought it looked pretty good. As soon as Antoine saw it, he wanted to make one too. But it didn’t take him long to write his and it wasn’t on construction paper. He just ripped a piece of notebook paper out of his book and wrote, “Mom, I’m glad you’re home.” Dad and I just looked at him.

Folding it over, he put the pitiful card next to mine. “Mom doesn’t care. She just wants to know how I feel. This is good,” said Antoine.

Just then I noticed Dad pacing back and forth. Mom was supposed to have arrived by now. Another hour went by, and we were still waiting for her to show up. I could tell Dad was getting worried. Grandma had finished cooking and had gone over to her sister’s house. So the three of us were left wondering when Mom would come.

Then Dad’s cell phone rang. He hurried to pick it up and quickly said, “It’s your mom. I’m sure she’s just running late.”

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But as their conversation went on, Antoine and I stood watching him. We could tell it wasn't good news. Dad paced back and forth for a few more minutes, huffing and shaking his head over and over again. It seemed like it was taking forever for him to finish talking.

"Guys, I've got some bad news and some good news," Dad said when he finally laid his phone on the table.

Antoine spoke first. "She's not comin' home."

Dad went on to explain, "No, the network picked up their show. In addition to the eight episodes they finished taping, they want to tape eight more."

"So the bad news is, she's not coming," I added. "What's the good news?"

"She asked if we could come out there in July. That's pretty good, right? Spending some time as a family in Hollywood sounds good to me," Dad said, trying to sound upbeat.

I looked down at the floor and Antoine looked away.

"Aw, come on, boys," Dad said, trying to keep us encouraged. "We can do this. The time will go by quickly, you'll see. Before you know it, we'll head out to California and stay with your mom for a whole month. Then maybe after that she'll be coming home for good."

In spite of Dad trying to stay on a positive note, this was hard news to take. I wanted to take the cake and toss it across the room. I wanted to take my card and rip it to shreds. I wanted to take the decorations and tear them down, but I knew that wouldn't change things. Besides, this wasn't just hard on me. Dad and Antoine were sad

too. Right then I decided I was going to try if Dad was willing to try.

Somehow finding the strength, I said, "This is gonna be okay."

"Yeah," said Antoine. Surprisingly, he was being tough too. Letting out a big sigh, he said, "Hollywood here we come!"



"Alec? Hey, baby, I'm so sorry I'm not there," Mom said when I answered her call.

"I'm sorry you're not here too, Mom, but Dad talked to us. We ate your cake and Grandma cooked us a good meal. So I'm okay . . . and . . . happy birthday!"

"Thank you, Alec. It really means a lot to me to hear you sound so positive. Mommy would be there if I could."

"I know, Mom. My friend Morgan talks all the time about how good the premier was when we saw your show. She wants to be an actress one day. I don't know why she thinks acting is so cool. Anyway, I'm glad you guys got more episodes; and Dad said we're going to come out there in July."

"Yep, for a whole month. I can't wait," she said happily.

"Me too. Where are we gonna fit?" I asked, remembering how small her place was.

"I know, right? Well, I've gotten rid of the studio apartment," she said with a little laugh. "I've moved into a two-bedroom condo, so it'll be enough room for all of us."

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“That means I’ll have to share a room with Antoine?”

“Don’t worry. Your room has twin beds,” she said. “Plus, I thought you two worked out your differences.”

“Yeah, we have,” I said quickly. I didn’t want there to be any issues that would keep her from wanting us to come.

“So, what are you going to do for the rest of June?” she asked.

“Well, the pool opens tomorrow. Remember when you took me to the YMCA for swim lessons?”

“Yeah, you learned pretty quickly. For someone your age, you had one of the best backstrokes the instructor had ever seen.”

“Well, I’m just excited about going to the new pool and having a chance to get some swim time. It’ll feel great to relax. I mean, I’m still gonna do some studying on the Internet and everything. I’ll be learning new words and reading some of the books on the summer reading list. But, mostly I’m gonna chill, Mom, until we come out there to California.”

“Now, that does sound good. And when you come to L.A., we’ll go to the beach in Malibu. We couldn’t go when you came for Christmas because there wasn’t enough time, but you’re going to love it. And I’ve got some special people I want you to meet. You know, I grew up here.”

“Yes, ma’am, you were born there,” I said. That’s about all I knew about it because she never talked much about her family. “I’m happy that the three of us are coming to see you, Mom.”

## IN CHARGE

“Well, in the meantime, keep writing me those letters. They get me through. Now, put your brother on the phone for me. Love you.”

“Yes, ma’am. I love you too.”

After Antoine took the phone, I got on my knees and prayed, “Lord, today is my mom’s birthday and although we’re not spending it together, I know we’re together because she is in my heart. Thank You for helping me to realize that it’s not totally a bad thing that we’re apart from Mom. My whole family’s going out there in July. This could be the best thing that’s happened to us. Oh, and thank You, Lord, for taking care of my mom so far away. I love You. Amen.”

Early the next morning, Dad woke us up. He wanted Antoine and me to ride with him through Stone Mountain Park.

“Dad, it’s too early in the morning,” Antoine complained. “This is our summer break and we wanna go to the pool a little later. Can we can ride our bikes through Stone Mountain another time?” He was definitely speaking for both of us.

“Boys, did you guys think you were going to do whatever you want to all summer? Your grandma and your aunt are going to visit your uncle in Alabama for a couple weeks. I’m off today, but most days I’ll still be working at school.”

“It’s the summer. Why do you have to work?” Antoine asked.



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"I'm the assistant principal all year long. I don't get a break. Besides that, I'm not going to just leave you boys home alone all day."

Antoine said, "I'm in middle school! I can take care of things around here!"

"You and your brother have been fussing off and on this whole school year."

"Yeah, but we'll be okay, Dad. I promise we don't need a babysitter or anything," I jumped in and said.

"I'm not saying you need a babysitter, but I'm not leaving you here either. You boys need to be up doing something positive. So I put you in a summer camp. I'll be able to drop you off and pick you up afterward."

"A camp? Dad, I need a break from learning!" Antoine said forcefully.

"That comment makes no sense. You never need a break from learning. Even when you reach my age you should continue to learn."

"But I don't need a big education, Dad. I'm going to the sports league," said Antoine.

"Son, I don't want to kill your dreams. You're a great athlete, but everyone needs a backup plan. Even if you play in the NBA, you still need to train for something else. Besides, someday you'll retire when you finish with your career. If you're fortunate enough to make a lot of money, you'll need to be able to manage it. Only a solid education can teach you how to do that. Now come on, the bikes are loaded up. Let's go."

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Stone Mountain Park was nice, but I probably would have cared more about it if it wasn't seven o'clock in the morning. Then, once we started on the path and woke up a bit, we enjoyed it.

When we got to the top of the mountain and looked out over Georgia, Dad said, "Boys, I know it's been a rough year for you. It's been hard not having your mom here. You guys are growing up, and you've had your differences. Plus, I've pushed you to take on more responsibility with keeping the house clean. With all of that going on, I want you to know that I'm proud of you. I know you're also getting applause from heaven."

"What does that mean?" asked Antoine.

"That means God is proud of you too. I remember when I was your age. When things didn't go the way I wanted them to, I had to learn that I could still make the best of every day. You can always take something sour and make it sweet!"

"So what kind of camp are we going to?" asked Antoine. Neither one of us was convinced that it was the right thing to do.

"Come on," Dad said, as we followed him back down the hill.

When we got to the car, Dad hitched the bicycles on the back. He took out a baseball and gloves and started tossing around the ball.

"You mean, we're going to a baseball camp?"

"You've got it. Isn't that going to be fun?"

## GOING THE DISTANCE

“No way. I’m not goin’ to no baseball camp,” Antoine protested.

Although my brother was being rude, I wanted to say, *Me neither, Dad. Neither one of us likes baseball.* If he would have said football or basketball, we’d have been okay with it. But baseball . . . well, it just wasn’t our sport.

“Listen here, young man, you’re not going to tell me what you’re not going to do. Camp starts on Monday, and you will be there. Plus, we’re all going to church tomorrow. I am the man of this family, I run the show. I know what’s best for you guys, and you all are going. That’s final.”

Dad was a little angry that we weren’t excited about his plan. He took the ball and gloves and tossed them into the trunk of the car and told us to get in.

Antoine didn’t like the idea about playing baseball and neither did I. But it didn’t take long to find out that what we wanted didn’t matter. We were going to camp because our dad had laid down the law. His plan was the one we were going to go with because he was still in charge.



## Letter to Mom

Dear Mom,

We lost the field day event because the class couldn't get along. At first we were happy that we were winning, but when the tension took over and arguments broke out, we were disqualified.

Even worse than that, I had to endure another letdown. When I thought you were coming home, I was so excited that I made you a card. But when we got the news that you weren't coming home right away, I had to make the best of it. Being me is still tough.

Your son,

Disappointed Alec

## GOING THE DISTANCE

### Word Search: Baseball Terms

At any baseball game—little league, middle school, high school, college, or pros—find the terms below that are often used.

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

**BATTERY**

**BUNT**

**CLEANUP**

**DIAMOND**

**HOMERUN**  
(Home Run)

**PITCH**

**RELAY**

# Can't Quit

## 2

**“Dad, do we** have to go to baseball camp?” Antoine asked, after we got up early Monday morning.

Antoine looked over at me and motioned for me to jump into the conversation. He wanted me to help convince Dad we didn’t need to go. Really, we just wanted to sleep in. It had been a long time since my brother and I agreed on anything. Whenever I wanted burgers, he wanted hot dogs. If I wanted to watch a basketball game, he wanted to watch wrestling. If I asked for vanilla ice cream, he wanted chocolate. Bottom line: we just didn’t agree.

Today was different, though. We both wanted to chill. We both needed our dad to change his mind.

I had to think of something in a flash, so I said, “Hey, Dad, the best dad in the whole wide world . . . your pancakes . . . mmm. I can’t wait to eat them. By the way—”

“Yes, Alec?” Dad stopped me before I could even get out what I really wanted to say. “Would this little ‘being

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nice' routine have anything to do with me changing my mind about baseball camp? If so, you can forget about it."

"But, Dad!" I said, stomping my foot. I was angrier than ever.

"Boy, please. I'm not even trying to hear that," he said, looking at me with a steady, strong glare. He didn't even blink. "The answer is final. You're going to this camp. And if the two of you give anyone at the camp any trouble, you're going to wish you hadn't."

"But why, Dad? Why do we have to go? I know you said so, but with no disrespect, we just wanna relax," Antoine said, still pleading our case.

After a long pause, Dad said, "Baseball is a great sport. I played it when I was your age."

"Yeah, but that was a billion years ago, Dad," Antoine said, not helping our cause.

Dad didn't even get upset about that not-so-smart comment. He just laughed and shook his head. I guess he had to agree that it was a long time ago, and a lot has changed. For example, when our dad was young, they didn't have cell phones.

As far as I could tell, he had to know that the things that made up his childhood are now extinct! Whatever he did over the summer when he was our age didn't matter to us. Nowadays, we want a real vacation.

"Baseball is America's game," he told us. "I want you boys to experience good things. I'm not saying that I want you to play major league baseball, but I do want you to at

## CAN'T QUIT

least enjoy this camp. I have a lot of respect for the coach too.”

An hour later, Dad dropped us off and drove away. The great coach he had bragged about was already barking orders.

“Quit looking at me! You boys drop down and give me twenty, right now! I’m going to get you in shape before this is over.”

The five boys who got there before us were already doing sit-ups. It looked to me like they were out of breath and about to pass out. I didn’t think we were ready for this. This was only the warm-up. If we didn’t get practice right, did we even have a chance at playing the game?

I looked over at Antoine, and he was shaking his head. In a low voice, I heard him say, “Oh, man! There’s Jelani.”

“It’s cool. Don’t even worry about him,” I said to Antoine. I knew he felt bad about acting tough with Jelani in basketball earlier in the year. Now he didn’t want to face him.

But I quickly found out that I spoke too soon to my big brother. Right after I encouraged him, my mouth almost dropped to the ground. There was Tyrod! This day was going to be worse than I thought!

The coach was trying to wear us out. He made us run three miles, do a lot of stretching, and a bunch of other exercises.

“I hear a whole lot of groaning, and I’m not up for it. Let me introduce myself. I’m Coach Riley, and I don’t play.



## GOING THE DISTANCE

Your parents sent you to me this summer because they know you're in good hands, and you'll get good training. I don't babysit, so if you thought you could get away with whining like babies, just know this is the wrong place. I'm not the one to whine around."

"Excuse me. I thought this was supposed to be a fun camp," Tyrod spoke up boldly. He was ready to be difficult as usual.

"Young man, you need to raise your hand. When I call on you, then you can speak. Yes, we will have fun if everyone acts right. Now, for talking out of turn, drop down and give me twenty push-ups."

Tyrod frowned and hesitated. "But I didn't know your rules."

Coach "No Nonsense" Riley groaned and said, "Okay, now make it thirty. Got anything else to say?"

I couldn't hold back a chuckle. That's just the kind of treatment that Tyrod needed. Then, before I knew it, Coach Riley came and stood in front of me.

"Funny man, join him. Thirty for you too."

The two of us went over to the side. I didn't even say anything to Tyrod. I just knew this camp thing was going to be even worse than I imagined. Not only was I not going to have my mom with me for a while, I had to put up with Tyrod. Ugh! I can't even catch a break!

I could tell we were in for a long haul, so I prayed, *"Lord, help me to get along with others and treat people the way You want me to. Even though I forgave Tyrod for being*

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*mean to me in the fourth grade, he still doesn't get it. I don't want to see him in the fifth grade, much less this summer. Since I have no choice but to deal with him, help me to stay calm before I say something that I truly will regret. Amen."*



Finally, it's our chance to enjoy the new community pool! The sun was shining brightly, and our entire neighborhood was having a special pool party in honor of Father's Day. I was pumped up and ready to have some fun.

"Y'all ready?" Dad asked, wearing the ugliest swim trunks I've ever seen. They were covered with stripes and polka dots in every color of the rainbow.

Antoine was laughing so hard that he had to grab his chest and gasp for air. I was in shock, not knowing which was worse—his trunks or the straw hat that Dad was wearing. It was the size of a big Mexican sombrero.

"What? I don't look cool?"

"If that was the look you were going for, Dad, you really messed up," I said.

"Well, these are the only ones I have," said Dad, pointing at his trunks.

"Yeah, we know," Antoine said, as he shoved a box at him.

"Pops, open this. Last week, Grandma took us shopping, and we bought you a few things for Father's Day. When we told her that the pool was opening, she said we

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should get you some new swimwear.”

Dad ripped the box open, and he grinned from ear to ear. He’s a big fan of the Falcons. To his surprise, there was a pair of long, black trunks with a red stripe and the Falcon’s logo going up the sides. “Oh, boys, thanks . . . this is what’s up!”

“Open mine, Dad,” I said in a hurry, as I passed him my gift. When he opened the box and put on the pair of sunglasses, he definitely looked way cooler than before.

“This is great! But, you guys didn’t have to get me anything.”

“Wait! We got you one more thing. This is from both of us,” Antoine said, handing Dad his last present.

It brought tears to his eyes to see a brand-new Bible with his name “Dr. Andre London” engraved on the front in gold letters.

“Wow. Now this is special,” he said in a serious tone.

“We’re proud of you, Dad,” Antoine said. “Sometimes it scares me when I think I won’t excel in education because you set the bar so high. I don’t know. I just don’t wanna fail, and I don’t wanna disappoint you.”

“Son, don’t you ever feel like you have to compare yourself to me. As long as you’re trying and you’re giving your all, I know you’re going to succeed. Just don’t lower your own bar because you’re scared you can’t jump over it. There were times when I was younger when I was completely off track and should have been focused. When the recession hit and I lost my job, I wasn’t prepared with a

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backup plan. I'm glad you're proud of me, but when you give 100 percent and have the right attitude, you'll go far. What do you want to be when you grow up?"

We just stared at him, listening hard. This was such a serious conversation. Yeah, we wanted to get to the pool. But we just froze in our tracks with our towels, goggles, and beach ball in hand. The thing about it is, I'm only in elementary school. I haven't been thinking about what or who I want to be. My brother is two years older than me, so maybe he had something in mind. But he looked just as clueless as me.

"I challenge you guys to take a good look at yourselves this summer. I know you're young, but if you don't have any goals or ambitions, then what are you striving for? I mean, I know you both desire to play pro sports. However, the odds aren't in your favor. So think about what drives you. What motivates you? What other interests do you have?"

"I like sports, and I watch ESPN all the time. Maybe I could be on TV as a commentator or something," Antoine said.

"That's great. With all the cable channels and TV shows that they have now, you could own your own sports network. I'm sure your mom would really like that. Alec, what about you?"

"I like to argue my point and fight for what I believe in. But I don't know."

"That sounds like you could be a great attorney. Maybe even a Supreme Court justice someday. And remember,

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the most important thing is to keep the Bible close to our hearts. If we all get in God's Word and obey Him, we'll be on the right course. Together we can ask the Lord to give you boys a plan to help you achieve your goals."

"I love you, Dad," Antoine said, as he reached over and hugged our father.

"I love you, too, man. You both are going to be great men someday. Come here, Alec," Dad said, as he rubbed my head and gave me a hug.

Twenty minutes later when we pulled up to the pool parking lot, it was full of cars.

I asked, "Do all of these people live here? There's no place to park."

When we first moved into the area, there were only a few families. A while ago, I heard Dad say there were over fifty.

As we kept driving until we finally found a space, Dad explained, "The pool area is only for residents in the subdivision. That's why there are only so many spaces. But it'll be all right."

"The pool looks crowded too," I said.

"Go on in," Dad told us, after he finished parking the car.

I was feeling good because our father was with us and we just had a meaningful conversation. He made us believe that we're going to be someone important someday and that felt awesome.

It was good to spend time talking to Dad, but I kind of

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wished we could have gotten there sooner. When we walked into the pool area, all of the chairs were taken. A few minutes later, Morgan's stepdad called everyone to eat. Antoine and I were glad because most of the people were coming out while we were jumping in.

When I came up from diving, I was surprised by the sight as I took it all in. I couldn't help but feel a little sad too. There were all these families huddled together. Mothers were drying off their little kids. Husbands were hugging their wives. We were the only ones there who weren't a complete family, and it didn't feel good. My brother didn't seem to care. He just kept splashing around and swimming until Dad called him out and told him to dry off and get a plate.

When Morgan looked my way, I was feeling bad. It was like I'd stepped into an ant bed or something. She came over and said, "Aren't you gonna get somethin' to eat?"

"No, thanks." I was hungry, but my appetite had gone away. Although I just wanted her to go away, Morgan knew me too well.

"What's wrong, Alec?"

I let it out. "Everyone is havin' so much fun with their families, except for me. Okay? My family is split apart, and it's hard to watch. Can't I be upset about it?"

"You can, but not today. It's Father's Day, not Mother's Day. And you have your dad sitting right over there. Be thankful and enjoy that. My stepdad is here, but my father's gone back on the Navy ship, sailing who knows

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where. I wish I could be with my dad. So quit trippin’.”



The tough conversation Morgan had with me really sank into my brain, as if it were a sponge. She was right. My dad was in my life every day. It was okay if I wanted things to be perfect, but I needed to be thankful for all that was right in front of me. So for the rest of the time at the pool, I made up my mind that I would enjoy my dad. That night when we returned home, I whipped up a special milkshake for him.

The next morning, he didn’t even have to tell me it was time to get up. I woke up bright and early to make him breakfast.

“What is this?” asked Dad. He came into the kitchen looking surprised.

“Waffles for you, Dad,” I replied, as I pulled out the chair for him to sit.

“Watch out, Dad. He wants somethin’,” Antoine walked in and said, rubbing his eyes.

“I just want to show you how much you’re appreciated,” I added, making a fist at my annoying brother.

“It’s not like you did anything special to make them. You just popped the waffles into the toaster,” Antoine said, trying to be a smarty and showing me two fists back.

I shot back at him, “So! You didn’t pop any waffles in the toaster for Dad. And if you wanna eat some, the box is in the freezer. You can pop some in for yourself.”

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"Boys, calm down. I don't want you taking any of this hostility to camp. I'm serious about this."

Antoine said, "I'm just sayin', Dad. He's always gettin' under my skin."

"I'm not doing anything to Antoine, Dad. I'm trying to do something good because I want to, and he's picking on me. He gets away with everything."

I was so mad. I put Dad's plate on the table and went up to my room. A few minutes later, I was getting dressed when Dad called me back to eat breakfast. I was super upset because my waffles had gotten cold. On top of that, I didn't want to sit across from Antoine, who was on me like a tick on a dog. Sadly for me, he was hard to get away from.

"Antoine, go and get dressed," Dad told him. Then he told me, "Son, it's my job to parent both of you guys. You may not like my tactics, but just because I didn't reprimand your brother doesn't mean I don't care. I've always told you that you can talk to me. So don't ever storm off from me like a two-year-old who can't have his way."

"You don't even wanna hear what I have to say."

"Don't think that and don't tell me what I'm not going to do, young man. Now, get your attitude together and finish eating so we can go."

Minutes later, we were off to camp. As we rode along in the car, there was nothing but silence. I kept looking out the window, thinking about how upset I was. As far as I was concerned, I didn't have anything more to say to Dad or Antoine.



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When we arrived at the park, I got the biggest curve ball of all. What happened at breakfast was nothing compared to what happened next. In my wildest dreams, I never thought that my brother would become friends with a kid who gives me so much trouble.

As soon as we got to the camp, Antoine said good-bye to Dad and jumped out of the car. He jogged straight over in Tyrod's direction, and the two of them hung out all morning. I couldn't believe it. They were acting like they'd been friends forever.

At lunchtime, Jelani was sitting across from me at the picnic table. We couldn't even eat in peace with Tyrod and Antoine laughing so hard.

"Is it really that funny?" Jelani asked. I shook my head, feeling completely fed up with them both.

"Dude, you're cool," Tyrod said to Antoine in a loud voice.

I guess it should be no surprise that they were really getting along. They were so much alike. Tyrod wanted to talk loud and that made Antoine talk louder. They tried to outdo each other by seeing who could hit the ball farther. The competition kept heating up, and neither of them would give up.

Then it suddenly came to me. The thing they had in common was trying to get under my skin. As long as they could beat me at everything, both of them were happy. I had to stop letting them see me sweat.

When I went to the water fountain, Tyrod came over to

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me. As I bent down to drink, he said, "I don't understand why you're not like your brother. But that's okay. We're gonna show you how to get things done."

Later on in the boy's washroom, Antoine said, "You really don't think Tyrod is cool, do you? But you're wrong."

"I never even talked to you about Tyrod before, so what are you talking about?"

"Yes, you did. That time when you went to Dad's office because of him."

"I went to Dad's office more than once because of him."

"Man. I'm just teasing you. You don't know how to take a joke. I overheard you and Dad talking about him. Don't worry, Tyrod and I are gonna ease up on you."

Now wasn't the moment to bring up the time when he and our cousin Lil' Pete ganged up on me. Back then, Antoine told Dad that he was going to be good. So why hadn't he squashed all that?

I walked away and just prayed, *"Lord, I don't think Tyrod and Antoine need to be friends. Why did we have to come to this camp? I don't want to see them laughing and playing all the time. I'm trying to be the bigger person, but they're making me feel small. How am I supposed to put up with their constant teasing? Help!"*

When I was waiting on Dad to pick us up, Coach Riley came over to the bench where I was sitting. "Young man," he said to me. "You know this camp is about baseball, but it's also about helping you boys grow up. I've been

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watching you. You can't always avoid your brother and your friend. You guys need to work together."

"Sir, Antoine is my brother, but Tyrod is not my friend. And when they act out, I don't want to be around either of them."

"You're letting them get under your skin. You're letting them take too much control over you." He was telling me something that I was already figuring out for myself, but I found myself saying, "No disrespect, sir, but I don't even wanna do this camp. I'd rather not be around some of these people."

"Well, your brother lives with you, and doesn't that Tyrod boy go to your school?" He was right, but I didn't answer.

"All I'm saying is you're always going to have to deal with people who give you a hard time for no reason. Just hold on tight. Don't let people get the best of you. In this life, you've got to keep going until the end. You can't quit."



## Letter to Mom

Dear Mom,

Once again I can't seem to get away from that troublemaker, Tyrod. Can you believe he is in the same baseball camp with me? In a strange way, I laughed when I found out. I think it will do him some good because the coach won't put up with his tricks. Tyrod had better watch himself.

To make things worse, Antoine and Tyrod have become good friends. They both like to get under my skin, and basically the coach told me not to let them see me sweat. I'm trying to get over my bad feelings because Dad wants me to give my all.

But, Mom, my ambition is not to become a good baseball player. The strong tactics the coach uses to motivate us makes me not want to play even more. I hope you understand because I'm like you, Mom. Neither one of us likes baseball.

Your son,  
Mad Alec

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### Word Search: Baseball Positions

Every team must have 9 players on the field at all times. Some of the positions in the game of baseball are hidden in the puzzle.

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

**BASEMAN**

**PINCHHITTER**

**(Pinch Hitter)**

**SHORTSTOP**

**CATCHER**

**PITCHER**

**OUTFIELDER**

**POWERHITTER**

**(Power Hitter)**