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True Winner

1

Standing in front of the class with a wide grin on her face, we could feel Dr. Richardson’s excitement when she asked the big question, “Okay, class, who is going to be the next fifth-grade class president?”

Morgan was smiling from ear to ear. They was beaming as if he could see himself in the White House. Even Tyrod was excited, thinking maybe he had a chance. They could have it. I had no interest in running for any kind of office.

“First, we’re going to lunch and then out for recess. Later, when we come back, we’ll take a vote. Remember, only one person from our class can put his or her name on the ballot with the nominees from the other classes. So really think hard about who you want to elect to represent the entire fifth-grade class.”

During lunch, I was eating my cheeseburger when I noticed all my friends looking over at me. They were sitting across the table, smiling and whispering like they had some kind of plan.

TAKING THE LEAD

It wasn't just Morgan and Trey, but Zarick was sitting with us. To have Zarick in on something with my buddies was very interesting because the two of us had just become friends.

You see, he had been picking on me since school started, following his buddy Tyrod's direction. Then, after we found out Tyrod was stirring up trouble on purpose, Zarick and I actually got to know each other. Tyrod wasn't happy about it because he didn't want the two of us to be friends.

Anyway, I was really glad to see Zarick in school. Last weekend, he called and told me there was trouble at his home. As it turned out, his mother's boyfriend was being abusive. I told my father what was going on and Dad called the police. Thankfully, the police and fire department got there just in time.

Seeing Zarick with a smile on his face made me jump right into a conversation with him about how things were going.

“So everything's good?”

I didn't want to be fake or phony, but I had to take the lead in this conversation. It was important for me to make sure my friend was okay. Ever since we became friends, Zarick had made me promise not to tell anyone about his situation. But when I found out how bad the problem was, I couldn't keep that promise. Once it was all over, he told me it was all right that I told my dad.

I was super glad that I did too, because when we got to his house, it was in flames. My heart stopped for a minute

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when I saw that scene, but thankfully his family was okay. Still, that didn't necessarily mean everything was all right with him.

When Zarick was taking too long to give me an answer, I said, "So talk to me! Tell me, what's up?"

He leaned in and said in a low voice, "Everything's good, thanks to you, Alec. I'm really glad you said something. My mom told me that I can always talk to her, but I wasn't saying anything because I thought she was happy with that guy. She said that I should come to her from now on with my concerns. My mom definitely wants to know if someone is mistreating me or my sister."

It all sounded good to me. Then Zarick hesitated a second and added, "BUT . . . we may have to move."

"Huh?" I said, hearing what I didn't want to hear.

"She's not sure yet. We might go and live with my grandmother."

"Where is that?"

"In Macon, Georgia," Zarick replied. I could tell he wasn't too happy about it either. "It's an hour from here," he added.

Just when I made a new friend, I might lose that new friend. Not cool. But I guess it was a fair trade-off if Zarick, his mom, and little sister were going to be safe.

"So enough about all that," Zarick said to me, smiling again. "What are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna finish eatin'," I responded. But I wasn't really clear on exactly what he meant.

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“Oh, so now you got jokes?” Zarick said, giving me a smirk. “You should be the nominee from our class tomorrow. You’d make a great fifth-grade class president.”

“Huh?” I replied. He might as well have been speaking a foreign language. “Why would you say that?”

“Because you care about others, you’re smart, and you’re cool. If I do get to stay here, I want the fifth-grade activities at the end of this year to be really slammin’. Last year’s class didn’t do anything, and everybody said it was because they didn’t have good planning. I don’t want that to be the case for us. We’ve waited a long time to be in the fifth grade. Now that we’re here, we should have a big celebration.”

Morgan and Trey kept on eating and didn’t say a word. I guess they thought Zarick was doing a pretty good job of trying to convince me.

Actually, he was right. I remember two years ago when my brother, Antoine, was in the fifth grade, they did a lot of stuff. They had a whole week of celebration, and it ended with them going to Six Flags. Antoine wasn’t the class president, but he bragged a lot about the people who helped put it all together.

But me? Running for office? No way. I wasn’t interested and that’s exactly what I told Zarick.

“If I didn’t think I might have to move, I would do it,” Zarick said, looking at me. I could tell he was still trying to challenge me.

Because I wanted him to stick around, I responded,

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“Oh, man, that’s a good idea! Maybe you should talk to your mom about it. That way, if you get the position, you won’t have to move.”

“Boy, please, like me bein’ fifth-grade class president is gonna keep food on our table. Just run already, Alec.”

About twenty minutes later, we were outside on the playground. Morgan and Trey still had sly looks on their faces. When they approached me, it was about the very same thing.

“I still don’t understand why you won’t run, Alec,” Trey said, after I repeated the same answer I gave Zarick.

“Like I’ve been sayin’, I don’t want to,” I added, with as much emphasis as I could gather. Then I asked bluntly, “Why don’t you run?”

Looking me square in the eyes, Trey said, “Because I won’t win. You’re the one who can get the support of all the fifth-grade classes. We’re askin’ you to do it. If you’re the leader, we can get behind you and help make this year great.”

Not being able to come up with another excuse, I turned to my other friend and said, “Morgan, all the classes would support you too.”

“No, there are some girls in those other classes who roll their eyes at me every day. Even though I don’t care about that, it won’t get me many votes. Maybe you could put some things in place for all the classes to get along. If somebody else wins, they’re only gonna care about their own class. Please, Alec, why won’t you do it for us?”

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“Okay, sure, whatever,” I said, just wanting them to leave me alone. However, that didn’t keep me from hoping that someone else in our class might want to run.

Later, when we got back to our classroom, my plan was to get everybody to support someone else and this would all be over. It was a great idea and probably would have worked, until I saw Tyrod raise his hand to nominate himself. So when Morgan nominated me, I accepted—and it was on.

I had no other choice. There was no way I could let a guy who liked to make people feel small win class president. Even though the representative from our class had to run against people from the other three classrooms, I didn’t want Tyrod to have a chance.

It was just the two of us running against each other. No speeches were necessary. Everyone wrote the name of their candidate of choice on slips of paper and passed them to our teacher. After twenty minutes, Dr. Richardson announced the winner. Tyrod jumped out of his chair when she said, “Alec London.”

The class roared with cheers. But, of course, Tyrod made it known that he wasn’t happy. My take was, if he wanted people to like him and vote for him, maybe next year in middle school he’d think about how he treats people. Too late for now, though, because I won!



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“Pass those greens, that potato salad, and the yams,” Grandma said, as she licked her lips. Looking at the delicious spread, who could blame her?

We were all smiling and happy. I was especially glad when Grandma came out of her room. It was good to see her so cheerful and acting like she had a ton of energy.

“Why y’all lookin’ at me like I don’t have nothin’ to be thankful for? The Lord allowed me to see another Thanksgiving. I’m with my son, his beautiful wife, and my grand boys.” Looking at Antoine and me, she smiled and said, “And, y’all aren’t babies anymore.” Grandma was beaming like the sun when she added, “Yes, thank the Lord . . . being with my family is like heaven on Earth. I feel fine!”

“Oh, Mom, we love you too,” my mother said, as she got up from her seat to give Grandma a great big hug.

After they hugged for a second, Grandma held on to Mom’s hand and said, “It’s just good to have you home, Lisa. I’ve been tryin’ to take good care of your men, but I can’t do it like you. And me being a little sick and all hasn’t helped. Now, pass the turkey, son.”

“Antoine, how are your grades?” Dad asked, as he passed the platter to Grandma. He noticed how quickly Antoine was gobbling up his food so that he could be excused.

I know my brother. Whenever he tried to eat really fast, it was because he didn’t want anyone to ask him any questions—particularly about school. Dad understood that fact too and gave Antoine a tough glare, as he waited for an answer.

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“Mhhh umm. Ummm hum ummm hmmm,” Antoine moaned with food stuffed in his mouth.

“Boy, you’d better hurry up and chew that food. Don’t play with me. Your mother told me that she went on the I-Parent website and checked on your progress. Your grades are below average at best.”

“Honey, we can talk about that later,” Mom spoke up, as she leaned in closer to Dad.

“No, no, we can talk about this right now. You know your son is trying to avoid answering questions about school. Antoine’s eating his food too fast; he’s acting like he’ll get a gold medal if he finishes before anyone else.”

“Well, there’s no need to ruin Thanksgiving dinner, talking about the tough stuff. Can we just enjoy each other for a while?”

“Yeah, you mean before you’re gone again?” Dad blurted out.

“Oooohhhh! Please pass that cranberry sauce and those string beans,” Grandma jumped in, picking up on the tension in the air between my parents.

Even Antoine noticed things were getting a little hot. So he tried to bring them back to his poor school performance. He figured that would be better than hearing our parents argue over their personal problems. With Mom being gone most of the time, there’s been too much distance between my parents.

Antoine started, “Dad, I know I gotta work on my grades. Right now, they’re not so good, but I’ve got exams

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comin' up and I'm gonna study real hard. Besides, I'm gonna do a really good job on a couple of papers that are due soon. My grades are gonna get better, Dad, you'll see."

At that point, our father wasn't showing any interest in what Antoine had to say. His attention was on Mom with a real serious look on his face. I don't know if she was using her acting skills or what. Mom kept eating her food slowly and coolly. You could almost see steam shooting out of Dad's ears, but she wasn't letting it get to her. She was ignoring him, and it was making him more furious.

"See, why are you going to do this? Why are you going to mess up a perfectly delightful dinner?" said Dad.

"Are you kidding? You're the one all hot under the collar, raising your voice and bringing up things that aren't pleasant. If anyone's ruining Thanksgiving, it's you. Don't blame me!"

"Now, just calm down, you two," Grandma said to my parents.

"No, he wants me home so badly. But when I'm here, this is what he does."

"Yeah, because you didn't come to stay! When are you leaving? You haven't even told us that."

Mom said, "Andre, you know I have to go back and shoot the last episode."

"No, you don't have to do that. That's a choice you're making. You used to have an excuse. We were behind in some bills. I wasn't working. Okay, there was more pressure on us then."

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“Oh, and that’s gone now?” Mom said sarcastically. “Maybe my coming home was a bad idea.”

She got up from the table and put down her napkin. When she dashed away, Antoine looked at Dad like he had broken his heart. I didn’t know how to feel, but I do agree with Dad. Mom was making a choice to be away from us by being an actress in Los Angeles. We needed her here.

However, after I visited her in California, I knew it was her dream. It just didn’t seem right to ask her to give it up. I love them both, and I love my family being together. There had to be a way all this could work out. “*God, please help us,*” I prayed silently.

“May I be excused?” I asked, as I started to get up.

Dad said firmly, “No! Just sit down and finish eating. She’s not going to ruin this Thanksgiving for us.”

“Oh, let the boy go on and talk to his mama!” said Grandma.

Dad mumbled something and told me that I could leave. Having his permission, I got up from the table and went to knock on their bedroom door. While waiting for her to answer, I listened for a minute and could hear her crying.

“Mom, it’s me. Alec. Please let me in. Please let me talk to you. Please open up. I care about you, Mom.”

“Not right now, Alec. I don’t . . . I don’t want to talk right now. Okay? I’m sorry, baby.”

It was really hard to accept that she was hurting so much. Even so, I couldn’t blame Dad, because he was

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really going through a lot too. I could only imagine what he was thinking. He could lose both Grandma and his wife for good.

Thinking about the turkey and dressing on my plate, I went back to the dining room table. Everyone was looking at me like, “that was quick,” so I said, “She wants to be alone.”

“Urgh!” Dad grumbled, as he got up and left the table.

Mom told me that she wanted to be alone, but she was his wife. So Dad figured he should try and talk to her. Hopefully, they were going to work things out. Forgetting about the food in front of me, I held my head down and prayed, “*Lord, we need you.*”

Sensing what I was doing, Grandma said, “Good! That’s right, baby. Give it to the Lord.”

“What good is that gonna do?” Antoine spoke up.

Grandma said, “Chile, God can fix it . . . and don’t you forget it.”

“Alec’s been prayin’ for God to fix it for a long time. Our parents still can’t get along. Don’t y’all see that? They hardly like each other, much less love each other.”

“Oh, that’s not true, Antoine,” Grandma said. “You’re makin’ it sound worse than it really is. They do love each other, or they wouldn’t be tryin’ to work through all of this.”

In her own way, Grandma then tried to explain something to us. “You boys are gettin’ older now. I don’t know how much longer I’m gonna be around, but one day I do know y’all are gonna be somebody’s husbands . . . ”

“Ewwwwww,” Antoine said.

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“That’s right. Doesn’t sound so good right now, does it? And, believe me, you should take your time. But like I was saying, one day I know you will . . . and your granddaddy went on to be with the Lord when y’all were little. Ooooh, he was a good man! And there’s one thing he always did right—he led the Lord’s way.”

“I don’t understand, Grandma,” I said.

“God wants the man to be the head of the household. That’s why I’m lookin’ at my son like he’s done lost his marbles. There’s a way to lead and there’s a way to show your frustration. I just want you young men to know that if you put God first, even when you think there is no hope, God can work it out. So always remember that. Keep prayin’, and keep believin’. Have faith in God, and take everything to Him in prayer. God will always help you. He can truly do anything but fail.”

Our grandmother wasn’t just saying empty words to us. She meant what she said, as tears fell from her eyes. We knew she loved us, but now it was plain to me that she loved God more. And she wanted us to have a strong relationship with God too. I don’t really know what leading God’s way means, but I was determined to find out some day.

One thing I did know. There was no need to worry about my parents. Their marriage was in God’s hands—and I had no need to fear.



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“Okay, so you’ve got your cupcakes, lollipops, flyers, and posters. You’ve practiced your speech and it sounds great. You’re all set,” Mom said, as she took inventory before dropping me off at school. It was Monday morning and the holiday break was over.

Pulling up to the walkway, she said, “That’s a lot of stuff, Alec. Do you need me to help you carry it in?”

“No, Mom. I’m okay. “

Dad had gone to talk to Antoine’s teachers, and I needed to be at school early. It was time to get ready for the election. Thankfully, Mom drove me, but I didn’t want her to hang around.

Morgan, Trey, and Zarick all stuck by their word. They wore red T-shirts just like we agreed. I gave each of them a bunch of stuff. As kids came into the school, they were supposed to pass out the lollipops and flyers.

The cupcakes Mom baked were just for the fifth graders. I was hoping they would be an important part of helping me to win. At first, I didn’t really want to do this. But now I’m kind of into it, and I definitely don’t want to lose. It’s just that knowing the fifth-grade class president is supposed to lead all the students was making me very nervous.

In fact, a lot was at stake. I wasn’t doing this because someone else put me up to it anymore. Now I’m running because I have a purpose. We need unity in our school. Since my dad became the principal, he’s done a lot to change things for the better. Kids are caring more about their grades. But there’s always room for improvement. I

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believe a strong student leader could help make a difference. The scary thing about it is, if I lose, what would happen to my vision then?

Zarick came up to me and said, “We have to hang your posters.”

“My posters are up,” I said to him, wondering why he hadn’t seen them.

“No, they’re down on the floor. People are steppin’ on them and everything.”

I rushed down the hallway to see what he was talking about. Sure enough, my posters were lying in the middle of the floor. After we put them up again, I stood by the lockers and watched. Sure enough, Tyrod didn’t see me, and he was about to take one down.

“What are you doin’?” I said to him.

“I’m just readin’ your sign. Get out of my way.”

He pushed me back.

“No, you’re takin’ my signs down.”

“You don’t have any proof of that. What you gonna do? Turn me in to your dad for nothin’? Get me all in trouble because you don’t like me?”

Just then, I heard someone say, “Eww! Uhhh, yuck! There’s an ant on my cupcake!” A girl screamed out, and Tyrod started laughing.

I went over to her, and she told me that Tyrod gave her one of my cupcakes.

“I’m not votin’ for you, Alec London! You’re tryin’ to make people sick!”

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I was headed back over to Tyrod to straighten him out, but Zarick held me back.

“No, no. Don’t even waste your energy on him.”

“Ants . . . on my cupcakes . . . really?” I was too upset.

“What?” Tyrod explained. “I just set the cupcake down . . . can’t help it if a little ant crawled on it. I didn’t want it, so I gave it to that girl. I told her to look out.”

“Don’t be mad because the class picked me to run. This is crazy. You’re tryin’ to sabotage my campaign,” I told him.

“Whatever. You might’ve beat me, but you’re not gonna win class president. I’m gonna see to that,” Tyrod argued.

Zarick tugged me away. “Alec, ignore him. Just come on. Morgan is in our classroom. She wants to help you practice your speech one last time. And Trey already went to tell Dr. Richardson what’s goin’ on with Tyrod. No need to worry about him.”

I just threw my hands up and hung my head low. This wasn’t good. I felt beaten before the voting even started.

“Don’t let Tyrod get to you!” Morgan said to me. “Zarick told me everything that’s been goin’ on. That boy’s just jealous.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not cut out for this.”

“Why are you sayin’ that?”

“Because I wanted to punch him and that’s not how leadership should act.”

“But you didn’t punch him.”

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“Yeah, only because Zarick held me back.”

Morgan tried to convince me. “You’ve got good people around you who wanna see you succeed. We voted for you to be our leader. You can’t back out now.”

“Yes, I can.”

“Okay, you’re right. Yes, you can. But what purpose would that serve? We believe in you, Alec. You care about people, you’re strong. Besides, deep down inside, I know you want this.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well, you wouldn’t be doin’ it in the first place, if you didn’t want to. Nobody can push you into anything. Alec, you have to pray about this, and do whatever God tells you to do. For real, forget what the rest of us want. I already know you can do it, but you’ve gotta know that for yourself.”

After giving me good advice, she walked over to her desk. Still, I was having second thoughts because this was a lot. There were three other candidates, and I didn’t know any of them. Maybe it was their time. Maybe one of them was supposed to be chosen to lead the class. Maybe it wasn’t for me.

I sat down at my desk and continued to think it over. Then, a strange feeling started taking place inside me. Something was making me excited about this whole thing. Something was telling me that I was cut out to be the class president. Suddenly, I began to feel like I wasn’t supposed to back out.

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Immediately, I took Morgan's advice and prayed, *"Lord, right now, I'm a little frustrated and a little nervous, but I'm excited at the same time. Am I supposed to do this? If so, can You show me? Can You make it plain? Can You make it clear? Can You help me? In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen."*

When I finished praying, the thought of Mom helping me to make my posters came to mind. I remembered Dad listening to me going over my speech. I remembered Antoine helping me to pick out a fly outfit to wear. And I remembered Grandma giving me hugs and kisses, telling me I was going to be great. All that happened to give me confidence, to assure me that at least I needed to try. If I gave my all and did my best, then it wouldn't make a difference if I lost because I had done my part.

An hour later, when it was time for the four candidates to give our speeches, I confidently walked up to the podium and said, "Hi. I'm Alec London, ready to take the lead and be elected class president. We are the fifth-grade class, and together we can all learn to take the lead in life and in our education. I want to be class president because I care about all the students here—even the ones who need to understand that it's not cool to bully anybody. I care about the ones who are here for the right reason too. Those who are smart and getting As can take the lead in helping other students. And for those who are just trying to find your way, I want to help you."

I really felt like I was saying what the class needed to

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hear. My stomach didn't feel so nervous anymore, and I kept on talking. "I had a speech. I practiced it and rehearsed it, but standing in front of you right now, I feel like I just need to speak from the heart. Yeah, you guys know that my dad is the principal of this school, but that has nothing to do with why I want to be class president. He's doing his part, and I want to do mine. If I'm elected, I won't let you down. At the end of the year, we're going to have a very cool fifth-grade carnival. On Field Day, we'll have it going on too. So, elect me, Alec London, and let me help you take the lead."

The crowd cheered with excitement. As the students dropped their ballots in the box, I had a good feeling. Then, at the end of the day, when Dad gave the afternoon announcements, he declared the winner. "Your next class president is—Alec London!"

My class was thrilled. Zarick gave me a high five. Trey started doing a dance, and Morgan hugged me. Seeing my friends acting so happy made me feel like a true winner!



Letter to Mom

Dear Mom,

Dr. Richardson announced that we had to choose a nominee from our class to run for 5th grade class president. My friends kept telling me I should run. At first I wasn't for it, but then I realized I might like the job.

I am so happy you were here to help me get my campaign materials together. I want to make you and Dad proud. I was a little nervous about the speech, but once I prayed, God helped me to deliver it.

Mom, your son won the election! Today, 5th grade class president. Tomorrow, president of the United States of America!

Your son,
Hopeful Alec

TAKING THE LEAD

Word Search:

Track and Field Terms

Study the terms below that are often used at any track meet.

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

DECATHLON

DISCS

HEPTATHLON

JAVELIN

PENTATHLON

POLE VAULT

SHOT PUT

Personal Pride

2

“Son, I’m really proud of you,” my dad said to me, as he drove me to school. He had just announced the day before that I was voted class president.

“First of all, to get your class to vote for you as their representative was a big deal. Then you ran a good campaign and gave a great speech. I heard about some of the stuff that was going on with that young man Tyrod. Dr. Richardson took care of that and put him in his place. But Alec, I’m so glad you took the high road. You are a difference-maker, and you took the lead. People support you. I know you won’t let them down.”

I was waiting for Dad to say something else. He was setting me up too high to keep me there. Also, the way he was dragging it out, I knew there was more he wanted to tell me.

Finally, he said it. “BUT just make sure you don’t get the big head. Remember, the qualities that got you elected

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are attributes that you need to keep. You understand?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, looking away, a little dejected.

A part of me was wondering if he really was proud of me, or if he said all that just so he could add that last part. I sighed. I didn’t want to let anyone down. Maybe I wasn’t the right person for the job after all.

Picking up that something was wrong, Dad touched my shoulder and said, “Son, really, this is awesome. It’s a very impressive accomplishment—better than ten touchdowns in my book. You did something amazing here, and I’m not trying to take anything away from that. I’m your dad, and I always want to tell you things to help keep you on the right track. Son, always do what’s right.”

I heard him and wanted to say, *Yeah, but Dad, you talk about doing what’s right, and you’re going around the house being extra tough and yelling all the time. You can’t even see how you’re pushing us away because of that.*

Instead, I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want him to get mad at me. When we pulled up to the school, it was time for me to do safety patrol duty. So we shook hands and went our separate ways.

“There he is, class president!” Trey called out when he saw me. He sounded like I was some kind of a star.

“Please stop. I’m the same old Alec,” I said to him. In the back of my mind, I remembered my dad’s words he just spoke to me about getting the big head. At the same time, I didn’t want other people to inflate my head either.

I wasn’t about to change, and I certainly didn’t want

PERSONAL PRIDE

my friends to change around me. When Zarick stood in front of me and started bowing, it really started to irritate me.

Feeling uneasy, I said, “Okay, so what’s up with all of that? Why you gotta go there? Being class president isn’t that big a deal. It’s just me. I’m just class president. Please calm down, or you’re gonna make me quit already.”

“I’m just teasin’ you, man,” Zarick said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

Trey took it a little personal when Zarick came up and cut into our conversation. He jumped in and told Zarick, “Yeah. Alec was sensitive like that with me too, but I was standin’ here talkin’ to him. Didn’t you see that?”

Zarick didn’t back away. “What? I can’t talk to my friend?”

Trey stepped to Zarick and said, “Your friend? He’s my friend!”

“Okay, okay, guys . . . ” I said, getting in between the two of them. “I’m friends with you both. What’s the big deal?”

“Fine, just be his friend then,” Trey shot back at me and stormed away.

Then Zarick teased me, “I didn’t mean to get you in trouble with your girlfriend.”

“Okay, see . . . why you got jokes?” I asked him, shaking my head.

“Because he’s such a wimp. Man, I don’t even know why you like hangin’ out with Trey anyway. He whines all

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the time. He's not tough like us."

"I'm not tough like you and Tyrod," I said, a little defensive that he was getting on Trey.

"Oh, so why you gotta throw me in the same category as Tyrod . . . what you tryna say? You'd rather be a baby than a man?"

"Okay, who's the man?" I said to Zarick.

"Forget it."

"No, no, no, no, no," I said, before he walked away. "If we're gonna be friends, we have to be able to talk about what we both feel. You can't get sensitive and neither can I. You talkin' about Trey bein' a wimp? As soon as I come at you with how I feel, you wanna walk away. Wassup? Don't take it personal, I'm just tellin' you how I feel. Trey's my boy, and I don't like you pickin' on him or sayin' bad stuff about him. At the same time, you'd best believe I'm not gonna let him say anything about you. It's just how I roll. So don't walk away."

Zarick turned around and nodded. Then he said, "Cool. That's wassup. I hear you, and I respect that."

"Cool, then. I've gotta go, or I'll be late for my safety post. See ya in class," I said to my friend.

Fifteen minutes later, when the final bell rang for class to begin, it was time for us to go to P.E. We had physical education class once a week, and Coach Braxton was tough, but very cool. Everyone liked him.

The coach told the class, "Today, young people, we're doing the forty-yard dash. I'm looking for the best times.

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Remember, you have to stay behind the line until I blow the whistle. Then, when it's time to go, I want you to keep accelerating until you cross the finish line down there," he explained, pointing at the other end of the gym. "Any questions?"

Trey raised his hand.

"Yes, Trey?"

"If we mess up . . ." Trey said, scratching his head, ". . . do we get to do it over?"

Coach Braxton replied, "Yes, I will allow you to do it over. Now, if it's excessive, then I'm not going to let you keep doing it over. I think we can all listen for the whistle and get it right the first time. But don't stress if you need to redo. I've got you."

"Thanks, Coach," said Trey.

Tyrod jumped on the line first and nobody wanted to stand beside him. If there was one class Tyrod excelled in, it was P.E. I found that out last summer when we were on the baseball team together. The boy was an outstanding athlete.

"Come on, Zarick, get right here," Coach Braxton called out, pointing to the spot next to Tyrod.

Zarick didn't want to, but he obeyed. Tyrod was smiling from Georgia to Florida, and that's a long way apart. As soon as Coach blew the whistle, Tyrod had Zarick eating his dust.

"Whew, Tyrod! Four-nine. Zarick, five-nine."

Coach Braxton called on some other people. Then, at

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last, it was my turn. Standing with Trey, we waited for the whistle to blow. Trey leaned over and said, “Don’t make me look bad.”

“I’m just runnin’, what are you talkin’ about?”

I hadn’t been timed in the forty, so I didn’t know what I could do. When my time read four-nine, everybody started oooing and aaahing. Tyrod wanted a match.

“Oh, you saw how I made Zarick look bad. I’m really gonna turn the heat up now,” he said to me.

Coach Braxton and the rest of the class were waiting down by the finish line. “All right, you guys, listen up! On your mark, get set . . .”

When he said go, something inside of me just kicked into another gear. I took off and didn’t look to the side to see what Tyrod was doing. I just got fired up and felt like that little bird, the Road Runner. I was gone.

“Wow, that’s a four-eight.”

Tyrod was right behind me with another four-nine. He wasn’t pleased and complained to Coach. “I didn’t hear you say go. He took off before he was supposed to . . .”

Tyrod was making all kinds of excuses, but Coach Braxton wasn’t hearing it. It didn’t matter to me that he was upset, because it really felt good that I’d done my ultimate best. The icing on the cake was that I got a super time!



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Back in the classroom, Tyrod came over to me and said, “Next time, I’m gonna beat you.”

Oh, so now I’m supposed to be scared of him. Stepping in his face, I said, “Please. Any day, any time.”

Dr. Richardson saw us arguing and before the class could crowd around, she said, “All right, everybody sit down! We have some serious work to start preparing for. Today, I want to talk to you about literary terms. Take out your notebooks and let’s write down some words and definitions. The first word is, allegory, a-l-l-e-g-o-r-y. Definition: an extended metaphor in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative are compared with a meaning that lies outside of the narrative.”

We all looked at Dr. Richardson like she was speaking Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese all at the same time. The definition of an allegory was something we didn’t understand, and it went way over our heads.

She got that and said, “Okay, an allegory is a story with two meanings. It has a literal meaning and a symbolic meaning. For example, we could make up a story with Alec London as the main character, maybe a superhero. It could be a fable or a tale that takes place in historical times, like way back in the thirteen hundreds during the Middle English period when the superheroes of today didn’t exist. We won’t deal a lot with allegories. For now, you just need to know something about what they are.”

Whew! It seemed like the sound of relief came from everyone in the room.

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“The next word is ballad, b-a-l-l-a-d. A ballad is a narrative composition in rhythmic verse that tells a story. Basically, that means a written story that is put to song.”

Morgan raised her hand.

“Yes, Morgan?”

“My mother loves ballads, especially the ones by this guy named Luther Vandross.”

Dr. Richardson said, “Yes, so do I. Okay, moving on. The next word is drama, d-r-a-m-a. It is a composition made up in verse or prose that tells a story using dialogue and involves conflicts and emotions. A drama is intended to be acted out in a theatrical performance. Basically, it’s a made-up story acted out by characters.”

For a second, my mind wandered. That definition made me think of the drama that is sometimes a part of my life, and I wondered if I could write a play about it.

“Next, an epic, e-p-i-c, is a long, poetic narrative that usually has a hero as the main character. It is a work of art composed with a series of great achievements that highlight the character’s heroic acts.”

Tyrod raised his hand.

“Yes, Tyrod?”

“So, is Superman an epic?”

“Some consider it one, but epics are more of a historical nature. Think of stories about the Greek god Zeus, or the movie *Clash of the Titans*.”

Tyrod looked like he was a little confused. He’d probably seen the movie, but I think he wanted to ask a question

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about the Greek god our teacher mentioned.

“Lastly, an ode, o-d-e, is a lyrical poem that typically creates an expressive feeling or enthusiastic emotion. An ode is a more serious type of poem. So right now I want you all to take some time and just be creative. Don’t think too hard about it and write a ballad or an ode.”

Zarick asked, “Do we have to rhyme?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Richardson said, “You have forty minutes.”

“Do we have to read them out loud in class?” I asked.

“I want you to write as if you would have to read them in front of the class.” Hearing some sounds from the class that she didn’t like, our teacher said, “Young people, I don’t need you to complain, I need you to buckle down and get this. It’s time to expand your writing skills and take it up to the next level. We haven’t even talked about fables and satires, or rhymes, limericks, and sonnets yet. We’re going to get there, but right now I want you to take this exercise seriously. So get to work. If you need to, raise your hand, and I’ll come around to you individually.”

After ten minutes of looking at my blank paper, words just started to flow. I wrote a ballad to my mom, telling her how much I love her and miss her when she’s gone.

When I turned in my paper, Dr. Richardson handed me a note. I couldn’t wait to get back to my desk and open it. It was from Coach Braxton and read:

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Dear Alec,

You did a really good job today. I talked to your dad, and he said that I can speak to you after school. Please come directly to my office in the gym. Thanks.

Coach Braxton

I wondered what he wanted to talk to me about. So many questions were running through my mind. Did he want to retest me? Did he believe that I started too early after all? Was my foot over the line and that means my four-eight time in the forty is invalid? Maybe his watch was broken and he wanted to do it over for that reason. Or maybe, just maybe, there were other people that he wanted me to run against. And if that was the case, could I do it again? I had to admit, the thought of beating Tyrod and hushing him up definitely made me excited.

When I got down to his office, the coach wasn't there and his door was locked. Just as I was about to sit down by the door, I heard an annoying voice.

"Why are you here?"

I turned around, and it was Tyrod.

"Why are you here?" I asked him back. I didn't need to give him any explanation.

Then he held out a note. It was just like the one Coach Braxton sent me. At first, I thought maybe I'd dropped mine and he had it. But Tyrod's name was at the top of his. I reached in my book bag, pulled out my note, and showed it to him.

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“He asked you to come too?” I was stunned.

Being difficult as usual, Tyrod said, “That’s what the note says, doesn’t it?”

I didn’t want to get smart with Tyrod, so I gritted my teeth and looked away. He always got on my nerves, trying to act like he knows everything. Even though I didn’t know why Coach Braxton wanted to see me, I definitely didn’t want to be here with Tyrod. I didn’t want to race him again. I didn’t want to be around him.

Picking up my book bag, I was getting ready to leave when Coach Braxton walked in. “All right, boys, settle down. I could hear you halfway down the hall.”

When he unlocked his office door, Tyrod and I didn’t move. Coach gave us a tough look, and the three of us went inside.

Coach didn’t waste any time. He started, “Sit down, boys. It’s ridiculous for the both of you to be so talented, so athletically gifted, and you don’t even realize the power of what teamwork could do with such skills.”

“We’ve been on the same team before, sir,” I said quickly.

“Yeah, and ummm, I tried to teach him lessons back then,” Tyrod said, like I ever needed his help. “He still doesn’t appreciate my skills.”

“Whatever,” I said under my breath.

“Well, I don’t know what you all did before, or what coach you had. I can tell you that I’m coaching an elite track team, and I want both of you young men to be on it.

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I've talked to your parents and they're for it. So really, you don't get a choice—"

After that, he didn't say anything more. He just stopped mid-sentence and looked at us. What did he expect me to say? If I really didn't have a choice in whether I'd run track, then I had no response. Tyrod was quiet too.

"I'm just kidding, you always have a choice. Your parents do want you to participate because track and field is another one of those sports that could lead to a great scholarship one day. And since you guys are only in the fifth grade running a forty under five seconds, I need to be working with you both. Can you put aside your differences so we can take your game up to a whole new level? I care about both of you young men. I think if I work with the two of you, I can help build your character," Coach said, as he looked at me.

Then, looking right at Tyrod, he finished with, "And instill even better attributes in you. So what do you say?"

Personally, I didn't know what to say. I looked at Tyrod and, with a nod, we both said, "Okay."



At long last, it was Christmas morning. To my surprise and joy, I got everything a young boy could want. New kicks, the latest clothes, updated video games, a bigger bicycle, and money.

Well, I guess I got everything I wanted, except for one thing—a peaceful household. My parents were locked in

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their room, arguing. I guess they thought Antoine, Grandma, and I couldn't hear them. Although I couldn't make out every word, it's pretty clear they were having trouble sharing the same space. How much longer could this go on? I opened up my door when I heard my grandmother standing at their door.

"Open up! Open up this door, let me in here!"

Dad came out and said, "Mom, we're talking."

"I understand that. You've gotta understand that the boys and I can hear everything. Now you two are grown, and I can't tell you what to do. But I'm old, and I'm gonna speak my mind anyway because I love you all. This is Christmas day. It's the day that we're supposed to celebrate the fact that God sent His only Son to be born into this world to save us all. And I'm not gonna spend this special day havin' my heart racin' because y'all are makin' me feel uncomfortable!"

"All right, Mom, all right."

"No, no, no, it's not all right and I'm not finished. Y'all givin' these boys a whole bunch of stuff, and they don't need no more stuff. They need their parents sittin' down with them, spendin' some time with them. That's what wrong with parents nowadays. You give these kids everything, but you don't give them yourselves."

Antoine opened his door wide and shouted, "I don't need them talkin' to me."

"Oh hush, boy. Yes, you do. You sittin' around here moping worse than your little brother."

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“I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize we were that loud,” Mom said, as she came out of the room.

“Well, you were that loud, honey,” Grandma told her gently.

At that moment, the five of us were standing in the hallway of our home. We were looking at each other, not knowing what else to say. So I just began to silently pray, *“Lord, I know it’s hard for parents to make ends meet, to handle all the big adult problems in the world and all of the stuff they’ve got to deal with. I used to think that I couldn’t wait to be grown one day, but now I see I don’t have it so bad as a kid. My life isn’t perfect, but I don’t have big people problems. And for that I’m thankful. I need You right now to help us. Help us get along, help us heal, help us just be a close family. Grandma is right, everything’s not wonderful. But this is a special day, and we should only be focusing on what’s good.”*

“Antoine, Alec, I’m sorry. We’ll try and do better. I promise. How about playing some games right now?” Mom asked, as my prayer ended.

Getting excited, I said, “Games, yeah, that’ll be fun!”

“Games . . .” I heard Dad mumble, as he went back into their room.

Mom, Grandma, and Antoine headed to the kitchen table to play Monopoly.

I stepped into the room with Dad and said, “Can I speak to you for a second?”

He looked at me, sat down on the edge of the bed, and

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put both his hands on his head. “Yes, son?”

“Is it okay if I really, really share with you from my heart? I don’t want you to get mad at me or anything.”

He took a deep breath and said, “Sure, talk.”

“You’re always tellin’ me things that could help me be a better person. I know that’s your job because you’re my dad. And as your son, I want you to know I try and take in everything you tell me. I wanna be the best Alec I can be.”

“What’s on your mind, son? What do you want to share?”

“A couple of years ago when you were out of a job and going to school for your doctorate, do you remember how things were around here?”

“Well, it wasn’t my finest hour. I will say that. Honestly, I felt like I’d let you guys down. Without having a job, I wasn’t able to provide for you the way I’m supposed to . . . and there were bills to be paid. It was just a lot. I’m sorry for how I behaved.”

“Well, I know, Dad. But the thing is, Mom cried a lot, and you were really a different, not-so-nice person. I was glad when that person finally left. But these past few weeks that person has been tryin’ to come back. I know it’s because you want Mom to stay home. I want her to stay too, but I just don’t ever want you to be that mean person again.”

Dad’s eyes started to tear up. “I hear what you’re saying, son. It takes a strong person to come and talk to me about these things. Your Mom and I do love each other. It

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may not seem like it, but we do. She's a strong lady when she makes up her mind."

I smiled. "You can say that again."

My dad said, "But I do know that God has called me to lead this family. In doing so, He humbles me because I'm not always right. So I'm going to do a better job of listening to your Mom and your Grandma and you boys too. I'm going to get this thing together. We're going to be okay."

He hugged me really tight. God made the difference. We played games and ate some of Grandma's good cooking. Besides, every game we played, I came in first place. Beating everyone in my family, especially Antoine, gave me some personal pride.

Letter to Mom



Dear Mom,

I was amazing in P.E. I can run super fast. Tyrod used to be the fastest at our school, and now he's mad that I've taken that honor.

Coach Braxton was so impressed with both of us that he's asked us to be on his elite track team. Mom, I'm not sure if I want that. Dad thinks it will be good though. I would ask you to talk to him for me, but, honestly, it's been tough hearing you two argue.

I'm glad Grandma convinced you both to stop fussing. It's Christmastime and we should be happy. Are you happy, Mom? I know that I'm happy you're home.

Your son,
Satisfied Alec

TAKING THE LEAD

Word Search:

Track and Field Items

If you attend just about any track meet, there are certain items that will be present. Here are some of the important items that you will find around the sport.

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

BATON

GUN

HAMMERS

HURDLE

MEDAL

RIBBON

SPIKES