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Chapter 1

All Better

“Where are you going? I just know you don’t think you’re going with us, Morgan.” My new cousin Drake, who was my stepdaddy’s nephew, was acting like I had the **plague** or something.

Placing my hands on my hips, I said back with attitude, “Yes, I’m going. That’s why I’m getting my coat. Can you tell Daddy Derek to hold on a second, please?”

Since it was December, I also needed to grab my gloves and hat to keep warm. Just as I was heading quickly to my room, I felt somebody behind me stepping on my heel. I knew it was that rude Drake, and he didn’t even say that he was sorry.

“No. I won’t tell him that,” Drake said, as he continued to follow me.

“Ouch!” I yelled out. I turned to face him after he stepped on my heel a second time. “What’s your problem?”

Drake jumped in front of me so I couldn’t move. “You need to stay home. Okay? This is a time for me and my uncle to spend together. It’s called ‘man time.’ We’re going to the hardware store to get some paint, and that’s not a place for girls. Just stay here and wait for my sisters to wake up. Maybe y’all can bake cupcakes, or Christmas cookies, or something.”

“He doesn’t even know what color I want for my room, Drake. Get out of my way because I’m going,” I told him, as I pushed him to the side and went into my room.

“Ugh! You’re always ruining stuff,” Drake huffed, as he came into my room uninvited.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

I was in shock. I couldn’t believe it. Of all people, Drake was the one to talk about me messing up something? This was my first Christmas with my new brother and my new stepdad in our new house. And, because of him and his sisters, we weren’t alone. My new cousins were staying with us, and they were crowding my space.

Drake, who was two years older than me, was a pain worse than a loose tooth being pulled out. Samantha, who liked to be called Sam, was ten. She thought she was the next Teen Miss America. At first I used to admire how cute she always looked. But when she started taking up extra time in the bathroom every day, her primping was not cool. Sadie was a year older than me and we got along just fine.

The only thing was, she liked playing with dolls all the time. There were more things that I wanted to do, that I wanted to try, and that I wanted to learn.

“Just forget about tagging along, I told you. He knows what color pink to get for your room. Your mom wrote it all down. Now we’re ready to go and we figured out everything last night when we talked about our ‘man plan’ for today. You were nowhere in it, Morgan. Stay home!” Drake headed out of my room and slammed the door.

I backed into my bed and sat on it. My feelings at the time told me to put both of my hands under my chin and pout. I wanted to cry, but because I was a big girl, I decided not to.

I couldn’t do anything. I sure was mad at the fact that Drake was going with Daddy Derek and I wasn’t. At Thanksgiving dinner, Drake had been feeling **insecure** about not having his uncle in his life the way he wanted now that Daddy Derek had a new family. So I was the one who went out of my way to make Drake feel special.

And now that I wanted to be included in what they were doing, he didn’t want me to be. And that wasn’t fair. It wasn’t really okay, but I had to tell myself that so the tears wouldn’t come. I was holding them back pretty hard.



The only thing I could do was wait until Daddy Derek came back. Then we could have some special time of our own. Now, three hours had passed and I was becoming

impatient. I mean, what did they have to do, mix the paint too? Did they get lost trying to find the paint store?

Fifteen minutes later, I learned that wasn't the case because the two of them walked into the house with smiling faces. They had bags filled with items to do work in the yard and the house, along with tons of paint.

Daddy Derek called me over to see the paint sample for my room. When I saw the pretty shade of pink he bought, my mouth stretched with excitement from ear to ear. But then my smile quickly dropped when I wondered if I were going to be able to help paint it. If not, I wouldn't enjoy my room as much.

I followed Daddy Derek outside. "I can help you guys."

"Thank you, sweetheart, but I don't want you to have to do any heavy lifting. Drake and I can handle it. You go on back inside and help your mom," Daddy Derek said, patting me on the head.

Drake looked over at me and stuck out his tongue. I wanted to yank it, but I just walked back into the house. I thought about my dad, my real dad, who was serving our country in the U.S. Navy off the coast of Africa. I missed him so much, and I knew that if he were here, then he would let me help. Daddy always told me that girls could do anything guys can do. There were women serving in the Navy with him.

What did Daddy Derek think would happen? That I would break a nail or something? I was strong and just needed a way to prove it.

Throughout the day, I was told no every time I wanted to help. I couldn't help put up the fence. I couldn't help spread the pine straw. I couldn't help plant the flowers. I couldn't help organize the shelves in the garage. I couldn't help. I couldn't help. I couldn't help! What was the big deal? I wasn't going to get hurt or anything.

Pretty soon I got tired of trying and just gave up. The minute I walked in the house, Mom sent me right back out to get the mail.

Walking past the guys, I saw they were sweating from head to toe from all the hard work they were doing. Daddy Derek looked at me and said, "Hey, Morgan. I know you're glad you're not out here working this hard." I just stared at him.

"Uncle Derek, I'm thirsty," Drake said.

"Morgan, can you go and grab us a couple bottles of water?" Daddy Derek said to me, as if all I was good for was being the maid.

I ran to the mailbox to get the mail and went back inside. Mom was tending to Jayden so I laid the mail on the table beside her. Then I went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator to grab the two waters. Running back outside, I handed one to Daddy Derek. I really wanted to throw Drake's water at his head because he had a smirk on his face. He was probably thinking that since I was a girl I had to be his servant, but I gave him the water anyway. It just made me so mad. I walked away feeling worse than a kid nobody wants on their team.

Later that night at dinner, I said nothing. My parents and cousins were talking so much they didn't need to hear my voice anyway. As soon as I was done eating, I asked to be excused from the table. Mom had taught me good manners so I asked if I could leave the table instead of just getting up and walking away.

A few minutes went by and Mom came up to my room. She looked at the finished walls and said, "Morgan, the paint smell is too strong. You don't need to sleep in here tonight. Your room looks great, though. Do you like it? I think it's a bold pink, but it's cute."

In an **uninterested** way, I said, "It's okay, Mom."

"Okay? Morgan you've been wanting this color for weeks. What's wrong? I know it's a lot having three extra kids around your age in the house, but it'll work out."

"I know, Mom. Their mother is a single parent, and she wanted to get away for the holidays. I understand that our present to her is to keep her kids. I'm fine with it and that's not what's bothering me."

"Well, what is bothering you?" she asked, stepping closer to me.

I stepped away from her. She was my mom and parents were supposed to know all about their kids—forward and backward. She must have seen me all day asking to help Daddy Derek and Drake. A part of me thought she'd tell Daddy Derek to let me help. But she didn't. And because I didn't wanna cause any **friction** between them, I just told her what she wanted to hear.

I said it again. “I’m okay, Mom. Just tired. Everything is cool.” I said it, knowing deep in my heart it wasn’t true.



The neighborhood we moved into was new and we were the first family to stay there. When we saw a moving truck parked outside, we got excited at the thought of new neighbors. My mom was thrilled to think she might find a new buddy and I was hoping they had kids my age. She had told me not too long ago that the **recession** was turning around and more people were starting to buy new homes.

When Mom and Daddy Derek went down the street to greet the family, Sadie turned to me and said, “I guess you’re bummed out, huh?”

“Why do you say that?”

“I know you were hoping for them to have daughters but they’ve got boys.” She twisted her face as if boys had diseases.

I really just wanted them to have kids, period. I didn’t need any other girlfriends because I had Brooke and Chanté at school and Sadie and Sam at home. I did want to have some adventure and play outside more. Sometimes girls don’t want to play rough. I don’t mean wrestling or anything like that. Just somebody to play a game of kickball with or go bike riding with. When I saw the two boys running around with a soccer ball, I wanted to go over even more.

“Let’s go and meet them,” I said.

Sam said, “You guys can go on. I need to curl my hair.”

“But Mom said you’re not supposed to curl your hair, Sam,” Sadie said.

“Well, Mom’s not here, is she?” Sam snapped back at her younger sister.

Drake, Sadie, and I walked a couple of houses down to meet the new neighbors.

“Oh, and here comes our crew now,” I heard Daddy Derek say. “This is our daughter, Morgan, and our niece and nephew, Drake and Sadie. Where’s Sam?”

“Don’t ask,” Sadie said, rolling her eyes.

Daddy Derek laughed. “We have an older niece too, Samantha. Guys, meet the London family.” Pointing at the boys, he said, “These are their sons, Antoine and Alec. You all should stay out here and play for a while.”

“Yeah, but not too much longer. I’m sure they need their boys to help them move some things around,” Mom added.

“I don’t mind helping,” I said before Daddy Derek cut in.

“Morgan, I’m sure they’ve got it. You just play for a while and get to know each other a bit.”

I don’t think he knew how much that comment hurt my feelings. Why did he think I couldn’t do anything?

“Can y’all play dodge ball?” the older boy asked.

“Yeah,” Drake, Sadie, and I all answered at once.

“Well, it was nice meeting you folks. We should get together soon,” Mom said. Then all the grownups left us alone.

All of a sudden, the two boys, who seemed nice when their parents were around, turned into animals. Antoine picked up the ball and threw it hard at Drake's head.

"Ow! We're not even ready yet," Drake said.

Antoine yelled, "Ah, come on! What are you, a wimp or something? I know that didn't hurt."

"No, it didn't hurt," Drake said, rubbing the side of his head. "I just wasn't ready. That's all."

When Sadie saw Alec and Antoine jumping up and down like they couldn't wait to hit us even harder with the ball, she said, "I don't wanna play this game. You guys play too rough."

"Let's play! If you can't stand the heat then you better get out of the game," Antoine called out.

Sadie sat on the curbside and started cheering us on. I was ready to take them on and was dodging all of their balls. It was easy enough because it didn't seem like they were throwing them at me too hard. But they were trying to hurt Drake for real.

Then, Alec threw the ball at Drake's face and hit him in the eye. He yelled, "Touchdown!" as Drake stumbled and fell to the ground.

"Wait a minute. We're not playing football," I said to Alec.

Antoine said, "Y'all are playing whatever we wanna play. I told you if you couldn't stand it, then get out of the game. You decided to stay in, so deal with it."

"I'm not dealing with nothin'," Drake said, as he tried to

get up. But Antoine pressed his foot down hard on Drake's chest.

I was really getting mad at my cousin. He was the one who kept saying girls couldn't do this and girls couldn't do that. But now he had his hands full because he had run into some really bad boys. It wasn't right how rough they were playing. And I knew I should help my cousin out and not let them mess with Drake.

"Get your foot off him!" I yelled.

"Man, you've gotta have that little girl take up for you because you can't take up for yourself. I told you, Alec, before he walked over here, that he was a girl," Antoine teased.

"For your information—" I started to say before Drake grabbed me.

He'd had enough and was pulling me toward the house. "Stop! I'm talking to them. I don't need you to defend me. Okay?" he said.

"I'm trying to help you. I'm going right in there and telling my mom," I said.

"No, you're not," Drake said, as he stood in front of me and looked at me with a very mean face. "Did you hear what those guys just said to me? They called me a girl. Man! I didn't even wanna come here for Christmas anyway."

I watched Drake walk faster. And even after how he treated me, I was sorry he felt so bad. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything to help him. I really didn't know how to make it all better, but what I tried to do wasn't helping.



“Morgan, we thought you wouldn’t ever want to come back over here. With all those kids and the loads of fun you’re having at your house,” Papa joked, “I just knew you’d forgotten about your old grandpa.”

He didn’t know how happy I was to be spending the day with my grandparents on Christmas Eve. I bet it did seem like fun to have three other kids in the house, but that was far from the truth.

Sam didn’t wanna play at all. She just primped in front of the mirror all day long like her beauty was going to change any second. Every chance she got she was worrying about her long, black hair and making sure that her lip gloss was shiny enough.

Drake didn’t wanna play with me, thinking it would make him look bad. He was still upset about what happened with the new boys down the street, so he just played alone. Sadie and I could talk about a lot of things, but I was tired of making the Barbie dolls talk. I was tired of playing house. Sadie loved helping my mom with baby Jayden, and my mom liked having a helper who was **enthusiastic**.

Every time Mama and Papa asked if I could come over, my mom would tell them I had company. Finally, after begging her to take me over to see my grandparents, she finally dropped me off. Mom could tell I needed the break, but I couldn’t stay overnight. Though my visit was only for the day, it was still fun for me. Mama and Papa were like

my best buddies, and I had missed them.

“Your mom will be here to get you soon, young lady.”

Papa was pleased that we had done a lot together and asked me, “Did you enjoy going to the movies and shopping at the mall? Did you have fun playing board games?” He really made me feel good, knowing all the things that I liked to do. “Anything for my baby girl,” he said.

“Papa, can you call my mom and tell her I don’t wanna go home?”

Mama had been listening, but when she heard me say that, she slid over next to me. Putting her arm around my neck, she said, “Okay. You don’t wanna go home and this is Christmas Eve. Why? What’s going on?”

I didn’t say anything. “Is anybody hurting you, Morgan?” Papa said, looking concerned.

I knew I had to speak up then because he was ready to grab his coat and keys to head over there. “No, I’m okay. I’m fine.”

“That’s not an ‘I’m fine’ sound,” Mama replied. “How about I bake some cookies before your mom comes and we can talk about it?”

“Okay,” I said in a sad tone, like I’d lost my favorite toy.

Mama was a really good cook and her desserts were the best. Soon I had some delicious warm cookies set on a plate in front of me. My eyes grew big when I saw the shapes of Christmas trees, reindeer, and crosses, all dazzled with red and green colored sprinkles. Mama knew just how to get me to open up.

“Tell us, Morgan. You know we can talk about anything. It must be rough with all those kids over there. Are they getting in your way? Are they bullying you? What’s wrong, baby?”

“Oh,” I huffed. “It’s just . . . ”

“What? It would’ve been a nicer Christmas if y’all would’ve been by yourselves, wouldn’t it?” Papa said as Mama poked him. “I told my daughter it wasn’t a good idea to let Derek’s nieces and nephew come over there on y’all’s first Christmas as a family. That’s a lot on everybody.”

“Hush up, now!” Mama told him.

“Papa, do you remember how you let me meet your coworkers that day?”

“Yep, I sure do. A lot of my coworkers are still talking about how little Morgan has such good manners. It makes me so proud to hear that.”

“And how about when you let me help you fix things around here?”

“Yeah. I gotta show you how to do stuff like I did with your mom.”

“Well, that’s just it. Daddy Derek doesn’t let me do anything. He looks at me like I’m some little girl that could break her hand whenever I try to help do things. Drake is getting on my nerves. He wants all of Daddy Derek’s time because he doesn’t have a dad of his own. Sure, it’s okay for them to spend time together, but Drake doesn’t wanna share. Sometimes I think Mommy doesn’t want me to have any fun! I’m a girl, and I like being a girl, but girls can do

lots of things. I don't wanna just sit around painting my nails all day long like Sam."

"Tell that to your grandma," Papa whispered.

"Hush," Mama snapped.

I looked at both of them. "I'm serious."

All of a sudden, Mommy walked into the kitchen and picked up on what we were saying, "You're serious about what? Morgan, are you ready to go? I don't have much time. Ooh, Mom, you baked cookies," she said, grabbing one. Just like that she stopped rushing and sat down next to me.

They were so good with milk. But I was too upset to eat more right then. I had to tell Mom what was on my mind.

"Mommy, may I spend the night?" I asked.

Mama spoke first, "Yes, maybe she should stay here because she's telling us some things that we need to address."

No, no, no, I thought to myself. I wanted Mama to stop talking. My grandparents knew the rule: whatever we talked about stayed between us. And now they were going to break it.

"This is very important though, Morgan," Mama said.

Mom asked, "What did Morgan tell you?"

"She just feels left out because she's not allowed to help out around the house. And you and your husband need to know that Morgan likes to help," Mama said.

My mom looked at me and said, "Oh, Morgan, I didn't

know you wanted to help out. Why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't think I had to, Mom. That's my room, and you know I wanted to paint it. Helping with the work is part of the fun. What I didn't wanna tell you is that Drake was saying Daddy Derek didn't want me to help. I just didn't want there to be any problems."

"Sometimes you gotta talk about things. Sometimes you need to open up, and that's okay. You're not being a tattletale when you express your feelings. We can't fix something when we don't know something is wrong. We love you, Morgan. Don't feel like you have to keep anything from me," Mom said and kissed my cheek. "Daddy Derek does like having you around to help him."

Papa whispered to me, "See, we had to tell. Now everything will be all better."

Letter to Dad



Dear Dad,

Sometimes boys can be mean and they treat girls like we have the plague. Is it that some boys are insecure because girls may be stronger than them? Well, whatever it is, I'm getting impatient with boys thinking they can push me around. I can play dodge ball and football. And I'm uninterested in playing with Barbie dolls all day, though I do want a new doll for Christmas. I just wish you were here to help me with the friction between me and my cousin Drake. I do feel sorry for him because his mom has to work two jobs to make up for the one she lost because of the recession. Pray for us because we're not that enthusiastic to be around each other.

Your daughter,
Tough Girl, Morgan

Word Search

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

ENTHUSIASTIC

FRICTION

IMPATIENT

INSECURE

PLAGUE

RECESSION

UNINTERESTED

Words to Know and Learn

1) **plague** (plāg) *noun*

A widespread affliction or calamity

2) **in·se·cure** (in'sī-kʏr') *adjective*

Not sure or certain; doubtful

3) **im·pa·tient** (im-pā'shənt) *adjective*

Unable to wait patiently or tolerate delay; restless

4) **un·in·ter·est·ed** (ʏn-in'trī-stīd) *adjective*

Without an interest in a particular thing

5) **fric·tion** (frīk'shən) *noun*

Conflict; disagreement between people or groups of people

6) **re·ces·sion** (rī-sěsh'ən) *noun*

A period of reduced or declining economic activity

7) **en·thu·si·as·tic** (ěn-thū'zē-ās'tīk) *adjective*

Having or showing great interest



Chapter 2

Too Cool

“Wow! Look at all my presents!” I was so excited, as I ran downstairs to the family room. My gifts were piled high next to the pretty, white Christmas tree. “Are these all for me?”

I counted the boxes and couldn’t believe there were twenty-five presents with my name on them. “From: Santa, To: Morgan Noelle Love,” the pretty tags read. Big boxes. Shiny boxes. Long boxes. Short boxes—I was so happy!

It had been a rough year for me. I had to say good-bye to my dad. I had to adjust to a new dad. My mom and baby brother had been sick, and I was scared I would lose them. And I had to make new friends at a new school. It was one thing after another, but seeing those gifts made the end of my year look great.

After looking over my huge stash, I didn’t even care about what my cousins or anyone else got. I just yelled out,

“Mom, can I open my gifts now?” Before she could give an answer, I had ripped off a bow and was halfway through the shiny wrapping paper.

“Ooh, Morgan, that Barbie doll is so pretty,” Sadie said. “Look at her outfits and her hair. May I see her?”

I handed the doll to her and went on to the next thing. This box was long and wrapped pretty tight. Using all my muscles, I opened it to find a new guitar. I would surely get around to playing with it, just not right away. As I searched around trying to decide which box I would open next, out of the corner of my eye, I watched Drake eyeing my guitar.

“Do you wanna see it?” I asked him.

“Oh, yeah! A guitar was on my list too,” Drake said, as he reached for it with a big smile on his face.

“Here, you can play it,” I said, handing it to him.

The next present was a cute and girly box. It was small enough for a ring or something like that. Opening it up, there was a pretty gold necklace with matching earrings inside. Sam started to oooh and aaah over the jewelry. I knew it was the type of stuff she liked, so I let her see them.

I kept on tearing open presents until pieces of wrapping paper were everywhere. I was so lost in my own world that I hadn’t realized my cousins were watching me. They only had two presents each—one from their mom and one from my parents. So their eyes were on me because they didn’t have any more gifts to open.

That was too bad, but it wasn’t my fault! I had gifts

from Mama and Papa. Of course, Daddy sent me some things from overseas. Mommy and Daddy Derek gave me a bunch of stuff. And even the Navy had sent me a gift. I had lots of wonderful things, and I loved them all!

I was down to the last five boxes to open and one envelope. Inside the envelope, I found five \$20 bills. That was \$100! “Yea!” I squealed. “I got some money! I can buy myself some more things!” I shouted.

When I started dancing around and singing, “I got a guitar. I got a new doll. I got a necklace. I got a—” All of a sudden, Mom snatched me from the family room and pulled me into the bathroom. “What are you doing, Morgan?” she asked making sure to not let me leave the bathroom.

“What, Mom? I’m just enjoying my Christmas. Thank you so much!” I reached up, trying to wrap my arms around her. But she wasn’t having it.

“No, you’re bragging, Morgan Love. And I don’t like that.” She looked disappointed.

“Bragging about what?” I asked, not sure what she meant.

“Sweetheart, didn’t you see your cousins’ faces?”

I shook my head. “No, I was checking out my stuff.”

“Baby, you’re a person who cares about other people’s feelings. Right?”

I nodded yes.

“That’s why you have to be aware when people around you are hurting. If I would’ve had the money to buy them

more gifts, then I would have,” Mom explained. “But we bought your gifts long before we knew they were coming.”

She sounded upset when she said, “I told Derek not to have you open all of your gifts at once.”

“What, you wanted to keep some of my presents away from me because they wouldn’t have as many?” I asked with my voice turning sad.

She sighed. “It’s not that you wouldn’t have gotten them at all, sweetie. You just didn’t need them all today. I **predicted** this might happen,” Mom said in a worried way.

“I don’t understand, Mom,” I said, folding my arms and poking out my lips.

She went on. “I mean, I saw this coming. While you’re all excited about what the Lord blessed you with, your cousins weren’t given as much, and they’re not happy.”

“Well, why didn’t they get more stuff? Weren’t they good?”

Mom walked around in a circle and scratched her head. “Morgan, I’m sure they were good. Sometimes we just don’t always get all we desire. But I need you to remember this. The Lord was the One who allowed those gifts to be here this morning for you. But when people aren’t as fortunate, we don’t need to rub it in their faces. I’m not saying it’s your fault they’re in this situation. I just don’t want us to be the cause of them not having a great day. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am, I get it now.”

We left the bathroom and went back to the family

room. Mom was right all along. I could tell when I saw their long faces.

“Okay, everyone, let’s eat breakfast,” Mom said, trying to take their mind off their sadness and make them smile.

But even with the wonderful spread of pancakes, waffles, French toast, scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, and ham that she had fixed for us, it still didn’t cheer them up. When I tried to talk to them, none of them had anything to say.

I had learned a big lesson in the wrong way. You have to be **conscious** of other people’s feelings and never brag. You just don’t know when you could hurt someone’s feelings, even when you don’t intend to. But I was growing and learning. Now I knew.



My cousins tried to ignore me most of Christmas day on purpose. Even though I was being nice and not playing with my own stuff, they were still leaving me out. After all, I did let Sam try on my new necklace. Drake got to play with my new guitar. And I let Sadie play with my new doll. I wanted to be the first one to try out all my things and enjoy Christmas, but I wasn’t. I did **sacrifice**, and I did share. But that wasn’t enough for them.

I was downstairs watching the Disney Christmas parade by myself and Daddy Derek came and sat beside me. “Hey, Morgan, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” I said, feeling sad and knowing he wasn’t buying it.

“Your mom told me she fussed at you. I hope you see that you have a little more than my sister’s kids. I’m sorry you’re sad on Christmas. I think that you should be able to enjoy your things even though the other kids are here. It’s okay for you to play with your stuff, Morgan. I want you to enjoy it.”

“Okay,” I said with a tiny smile.

I was glad that he did care about how I felt, but Mom was right. My cousins were here whether anyone liked it or not. I couldn’t believe how mad they were at me because of all the gifts I got. Since we only had a couple more days until they went home, I would tough it out and let them play with my things.

“Know what? Maybe a little fresh air is what everyone needs,” Daddy Derek said, thinking he had a great plan to bring peace to the house.

“No, I’m fine, honest. I don’t want you to make them play with me.”

Daddy Derek smiled at me and yelled out, “Drake!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Get yourself on down here right now. Bring your shoes and your sisters. Y’all are going outside to play with Morgan.”

Drake was the first one down. He just looked at me and frowned. “But—”

“Did you ‘but’ me, boy?” Daddy Derek said in a strong voice.

Drake could tell he wasn't playing, and said, "Okay, we're going."

We all put on our coats, hats, and gloves. Walking outside, I actually thought this could be a cool way for us to let go of some of the early morning **tension** and just have fun. I would go along with anything they wanted to do, but it needed to be something we could all enjoy.

Looking around the garage to get some ideas, I spotted my red ball on the garage floor. I asked them, "You wanna play dodge ball?"

"I'll throw it," Sam spoke first. "I'm trying not to run back and forth. I might slip and get dirty."

"You're not going to slip," I told Sam.

Sadie leaned close to me and joked, "Oh, then you don't know my sister. She's got two left feet." And we laughed and it felt good.

Drake, of course, was the one who wanted to hit somebody with the ball. He got on the opposite side of Sam and threw the first pass. It didn't surprise me that he aimed it right at me, but I dodged it.

Then Sam picked up the ball and threw it. Not at Sadie, but at me—hard. She missed me by a long shot, but her face told me that she was trying to take me down.

"You guys can't get me. I'm too good at this. This must be my day!" I teased.

"Yeah, it is your day," Drake said. "Do you have to keep going on and on about all that stuff you got for Christmas?"

“Yeah,” Sam said. “You know we’re only playing with you because Uncle Derek said we had to.”

Drake took the ball and aimed it at me again. He threw it extra hard in my direction and this time he tagged me. I slipped and fell in the mud. Sam and Drake started laughing really hard. They even came over to where I was and stood over me, laughing.

“Ouch!” I screamed because it hurt really badly when I fell. The ground rubbed against my leg and it was burning even through my pant leg. They were actually thinking it was funny to see me in pain.

Sadie was the only one who was nice to me. She came over and put out her hand to help me up. As soon as I was up, I yanked my hand from her and ran away.

I kept walking until I went way past my house. All I could think was I wanted to get as far from them as I could. *Lord, I prayed, I’m trying. This is hard though. This isn’t what I wanted for my Christmas. I’m just a little girl, and I don’t get everything right the first time, but why does this have to be so hard? Why do they have to be mad at me? Why can’t they just leave? I let them play with my toys and they still don’t like me. They think I’m a brat. Well, maybe I should just be a brat then. Can You please help me?*

They didn’t even try and stop me. I had gone so far from my house that I was in a part of the **subdivision** where the houses weren’t finished yet. All I could see was woods in front of me, but I didn’t dare go in. Then I heard some crying and shouting and it just didn’t sound right. So

I stepped a little closer to the trees. To my surprise, I was shocked to see Antoine punching Alec in the stomach real hard. But when he heard me coming, Antoine jettied away like a plane taking off.

I rushed over to Alec and said, "Are you okay? Let's go home and tell your dad. Your brother needs to get in trouble. Why is he so mean?"

Alec stopped holding his stomach and grabbed my coat collar. "Leave me alone, you girl! You'd better not say anything or the same thing will happen to you. You got that?" He let me go and ran away.

I was still shocked at what had happened. It wasn't cool at all and even worse, Alec scared me. Did he really mean that he'd hurt me if I said something? I had just told Mom I wouldn't keep secrets from her, but now I was afraid. As I walked home thinking about it, I knew I couldn't tell on those two brothers. No telling what they might do. One thing I did know, even if someone made me mad again, I knew I wasn't going to wander that far away anymore.

Huffing and puffing all the way home, I prayed out loud, "Lord, did You hear me? My day isn't getting any better, it's getting worse."

It seemed like I had been away for a long time, but that was probably because I was pretty shook up.

When I walked up the street, my cousins were still playing in front of my house. They didn't say anything to me and no one inside seemed to notice that I had been gone. All I could think was, *I'm glad I made it home in one piece.*



The next day was Sunday and we were at church. I didn't have to be an usher today, so I got to sit right next to Mom and baby Jayden. Daddy Derek worked at the church, so he couldn't sit with us. We sat on the front row near the First Lady. Mom told me that I had to sit up straight, pay attention, and be on my best behavior. I wanted to make sure to do what she said for me to do.

I was listening very hard to Rev. Barney this morning. These past few days had been rough and I needed to hear some good news to help get me through the bad times. It didn't matter that I'm just a young girl; I still wanted so badly to be closer to God. Papa always said people come to church to get fed so that was what I wanted to do. I told myself that I would feed on God's Word so I could be happy.

Rev. Barney was saying, "Well, yesterday was Christmas. And if your house was anything like mine, which I'm pretty sure it was, the kids got up early and ran straight past the breakfast table to get to their presents."

So far I thought he was right, and I kept listening. "Even we adults were excited to open up something from our loved ones, coworkers, and friends. I can hear you complaining now: *Why did she give me this? I got something better than that from her last year.* Or: *Why did he get me that?*"

He had the whole church laughing, as he imitated the adults and their selfish behavior.

Rev. Barney went on talking. "I'm sure a lot of grumbling was going on, and a lot of people were caught up in

the wrong things. They weren't interested in the *one thing* that mattered most about yesterday."

Mom squeezed my hand. I didn't know why, but I squeezed hers back. She gave me a look that said, *listen closely*. I was already trying to keep my focus on what Rev. Barney was talking about because I wanted to understand what that "one thing" was.

"See, Christmas isn't about the gifts under the tree. It is about the gift God gave us—His only begotten Son, Jesus—who died for us to be saved. You see, when you're caught up in God's Son, Jesus Christ, it doesn't matter if you didn't get the earthly present you wanted. It doesn't matter if you got all the things you wanted in the world, and other people were disappointed in their presents. It doesn't even matter if you didn't get anything at all. Do you know why?"

Some of the church members said out loud, "Why?" And that included me. Then Rev. Barney said, "Because when you're excited and filled with thoughts of Jesus and understanding that He is the greatest gift in life, then no other thing can compare or should matter."

Rev. Barney stepped down from the **pulpit** and walked down the aisle. He was looking over the congregation to make sure we didn't miss what he was trying to say. I watched as everyone nodded at him and paid attention. I understood a little of what he was saying, but I was waiting for more. I think we all were waiting for more.

"You see, even us grown folks get it wrong sometimes. We get so caught up in wanting to receive something, that

we fail to accept the gift that's already been given to us. And we fail to give something back. The Lord wants us to show Him that we are thankful. Not for what He will do for us, but for what He already has done. The church administrator, Derek Randall, told me that his daughter, Morgan, learned the slogan WWJD: 'What Would Jesus Do?' in Sunday school. Sometimes he hears her around the house saying it. And it sounds so cute and sweet."

Okay, by then I was feeling a little uncomfortable that he was talking about me. I didn't want him to make me an example. Why couldn't he talk about someone else? People were looking all around trying to find me, so I ducked down under my mom. I didn't want him talking about me, even if it was only for a little while.

"If little Morgan can think about what Jesus would do in certain situations, then you know we adults should do that too. But I'm talking to everybody—grown-ups and kids too. No, you might not have gotten what you wanted for Christmas. But would Jesus be mad about it, or would He be happy that He got something? Yes, you got a gift that was better than someone else's, but would Jesus share His things or would He keep them all to Himself?

"There are a lot of unfortunate people who don't have food and shelter. Would Jesus share His food? Would He go out and **volunteer**? Come on, people. Your lives may not be perfect, but that's only part of the story. And it's not the most important part."

By then, I was a little lost. What is the most important

part? What is Christmas really about?

He continued, “When you know the King of kings and the Lord of lords, and you understand that He allowed His Son to leave His side and be born for you, then you’ll be complete. Do you love the Lord? Are you truly thankful for Jesus? Then get on your feet and thank Him. Not for sending you presents—but for giving you the best gift. He sent His Son to be born for you.”

People were standing up and shouting. The sound was getting louder than a crowd at a football game. It was amazing. And for the first time, I felt myself raise my hand up in the air as I said, “Thank You, Lord!”

The next thing I knew, Drake leaned over and said, “Morgan, we’re sorry for being mean to you yesterday. Are we cool?” I could see his sisters looking over and smiling at me too. I could tell they were sorry, and so was I. All of us had been paying attention to the wrong things. Of course, I forgave them. God had answered my cry for help after all.

Now I understand what Christmas is really about. Yesterday, I had been happy to see all those boxes that were for me, but that feeling didn’t even compare to how happy I was to know that God allowed Jesus to be born because He loves me so much. Getting new things was neat. But God’s love for me is the coolest thing of all. Too cool!