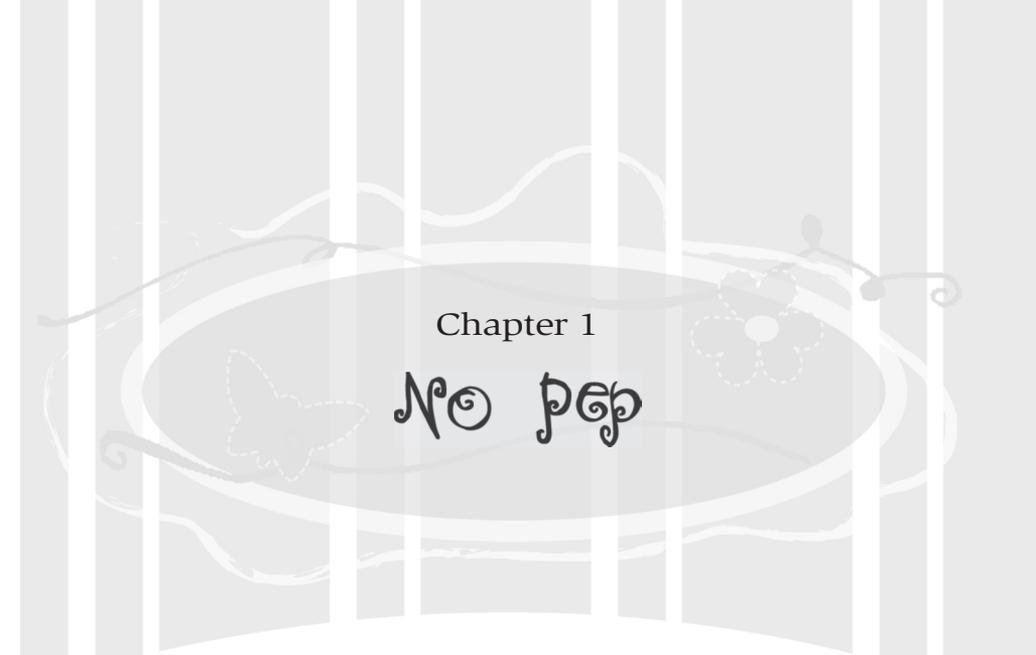


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Chapter 1

No pep

“Morgan Noelle Love! You have got to get out of the car and let go of my waist, girl. I’m going to be late. You’re squeezing me like I’m a lemon and you’re trying to make lemonade.” My dad said this to me as I hugged him tighter than I used to hold my teddy bear, Goldie, when I was in kindergarten. Now that I was going into the second grade, there was a lot going on. Can’t a kid get a break?

I am a big girl now. I don’t need Goldie to make sure I can sleep at night. I’m big enough to know that the bed bugs won’t bite. What I do need is my father, First-Class Captain, Monty Love. He’s leaving me again to go back to the U.S. Navy to serve our country off the coast of Africa.

We spent the last two months together, and they were so great. Now our fun time is over. It made me sad to hear him say good-bye, not knowing when he was coming back to Georgia. What will I do without my daddy?

Daddy said, “Morgan, sweetie, I’m serious. I have a plane to catch. It’s time for you to go inside your grandparents’ house. You see them up there looking out of the window. They can’t wait to spend time with you.”

I saw them all right. Every time I looked over at their pretty, two-story, red brick house, they jerked away from the window. They didn’t want us to think they were spying, but we saw them. And though I loved them very much, I knew that once I went inside their house, I’d lose my dad for a long while—and possibly forever. I could not let him go. I just couldn’t.

“I don’t want you to leave, Dad. My teacher last year told me that wars are serious fights. This might be the last time I ever see you.”

Time. I wanted more of it to share with my daddy, but it was quickly getting away from me. Just like when Papa watches a basketball game and his favorite team is behind and the clock is running out. That makes him real nervous.

Wanting Daddy to understand just how much he means to me, I had to do something real fast. The only thing I could think of at the moment was to shout out. I wanted the whole world to hear me: “I love my country, but why does my dad have to defend it? Couldn’t they find someone else?”

To my final attempt, Daddy calmly said, “Now, Morgan, we’ve gone over all of this before. It’s my job to serve in the military, but it won’t last forever. That reminds me, baby. I want you to know that all of the letters you

send me when I'm away really keep me going. It brings a huge smile to my face to know that I'm keeping my baby girl safe and protecting all the other little children of this great country. I'm so proud of the little lady you are growing up to be, and I know it's going to be hard for us to be apart. But, you know what? You have Jesus in your heart, and He's in my heart too. The Holy Spirit that we talked about is with us. So you don't have to worry about Daddy being safe because God is with me."

He reached into the backseat and pulled out an adorable pink basket tied with a bright pink matching bow. When he handed it to me, I said with surprise, "You got me a present?" My eyes lit up as I held it in my hands. "Wow, it's so beautiful!" All of a sudden, my voice sounded much happier than it had before now.

I couldn't wait another minute to see what was inside, so I ripped off the pretty wrapper. There in the basket was a cute pink notebook with glitter sparkles all over it. It was just the right size to fit in the front pocket of my book bag. On the side of the notebook there was a sparkly pink gel pen with a feather cap. Right away I wanted to use it to write on the fancy matching **stationery**.

Dad could see how excited I was, but I could tell by the look on his face that he was waiting to tell me something important. Pointing to the notebook, he said, "Now, Morgan, this is not a diary. It's your *word keep* book."

"My what?" I asked.

"Your *word keep* book. My baby girl is so smart. And

that's because you love learning new, big words. I want you to keep a log of those words. Write them down along with their meanings. Then use them in your own sentences when you write me letters on your new stationery. That way I'll know what you're learning."

"But I don't want to write letters to you, Daddy. I want you here with me when I learn the new words," I said, as I put the basket down beside me and looked out the window. I didn't want him to see my tears falling. "I want you here to protect me."

"Everything will be okay, Morgan. You have your grandparents here, a mom who loves you more than the world itself, and another daddy that . . ."

He kept talking, but I stopped listening. It's been two years since my parents sat me down and told me that they weren't going to be married anymore. Mommy has a new husband now. To make everything worse, I couldn't go home because she was in the hospital about to have a new baby.

I love my grandparents, Mama and Papa, so much. They made me feel special because I was their only grandchild to love. Soon they were going to have a new grandchild. I was my mom's baby, and now she was having a new baby. I wasn't going to be special Morgan Noelle Love anymore. Was it wrong to be upset?

My dad got out of the car and took my bags out of the trunk. He walked way ahead of me to my grandparents' door. At any other time I would be running ahead of him to get inside and play tea party with Mama or hide-and-seek

with Papa. But this day I had no pep in my step.

When they reached down to hug me, I just walked past both of them and went straight upstairs. I had my own bedroom at their house, but that didn't matter. My face was sadder than a girl who didn't get anything for Christmas.

They didn't even bother me. They both knew my heart was broken, and my dad couldn't help me feel better because he had a plane to catch.

When I looked out of the window, I saw Daddy standing by the porch, waving and blowing kisses up at me. I tried so hard to hold back more tears, but I lost the battle. Yes, I was mad at him for leaving me, but I couldn't let him leave without telling him one more time how I felt. So I ran downstairs as fast as I could, jumping over the bottom two stairs.

Everyone knew I would come back for a better goodbye. As I dashed to the door, Mama gave me a basket of goodies to hand to him. My Papa held the door open wide and there stood my dad with his arms stretched out. I jumped into them like I was bouncing on a trampoline.

He picked me up high in the air and spun me around. "You're my little lady, Morgan. Know that you are the most special girl in the world," he said to me.

Daddy kissed me on the forehead and took the basket. Before I knew it, he was gone. My heart felt sad. I already couldn't wait to see him again. But for now, I'd write to him as soon as I could.



“Morgan, let’s go, honey,” Mama called out to me the next morning.

This was the first day of the second grade, and I was supposed to be super excited. But I couldn’t find a way to be happy. Yeah, I had the cutest first-day outfit. I put on my new white shirt with its little pink stars and matching hot pink skirt. The pink and white sneakers Daddy bought me made my outfit look perfect. If no one knew before today that pink was my favorite color, they would know now. My new book bag was loaded with school supplies and I already knew Mama packed some yummy snacks in my lunch box. I couldn’t wait to eat the goodies inside.

I really tried to be excited, but there was another thing that made me sad. I wasn’t going to know many people at the new school. I was still living in DeKalb County, Georgia, close to the city of Atlanta. But we moved across town after my mom got remarried. Now we live in a new house near her new husband’s church. He is a minister at Double Springs Baptist Church.

My life was so messed up because of all the changes going on in everybody else’s life. Why did I have to change everything too? Now I had to go to school away from my friends. And that wasn’t right.

“Can you pick up the pace a little, Morgan? You’re walking slower than a snail,” Papa called out as we walked toward the car. “You know I have to get to my train.”

Papa was a train conductor, and Mama worked for the mayor of Atlanta. I knew I was moving really slow, but I

was so sad. I don't think they knew what I was feeling. Some first day of school! All the other kids had their parents take them to school. Why do my grandparents have to take me and not my own mommy?

"Morgan, do you like Papa's new car?" Mama asked me, as we were about to get inside.

I really wasn't paying it any attention. As far as I knew, it was probably like any other **vehicle**. But after I looked out from the corner of my eye, I had to admit the shiny red convertible was cool. I was just too upset and couldn't force a smile.

The world had done me wrong. My dad was halfway around the world. My mom was in the hospital about to bring home a new baby that I didn't want. I was going to a new school with kids I didn't know. I wasn't supposed to be happy. Not even riding in a new car and feeling my hair blowing in the summer wind was going to make me feel better. No matter what they did or said, no smile was going to be on my face.

As I climbed into the backseat, Papa held the door for me. When he said, "Ooh, Morgan, you're looking good, girl," I knew he was trying to cheer me up. So he went on talking. "That skirt and those little pants underneath work for you. You got it going on, girl!"

"Tommy!" said Mama. "Those are leggings."

"Legging. Pants. Stockings. They're all the same to me," he said.

"Leggings," she corrected him. "It's like I tell you one

day and you forget the next. Now, how many times do I have to tell you?” Mama scolded him, as she playfully nudged him in the arm.

They had the funniest way of fussing at each other. It wasn't like when I lived with my mom and dad. Even when I was small, their fussing made me see that it was hard for them to get along. But Mama and Papa's disagreements were funny. They seemed to have fun picking on each other. It was pretty great.

But still I wasn't going to let them make me laugh. I was too smart and knew that they were talking crazy just to get a smile out of me. It just wasn't going to work. Nope. Today was my mad day, and that was not going to change for anything.

When we pulled up to the school, all of the other kids ran to the car with their *oohs* and *aahs*. My Papa's chest stuck out about a foot long—twelve whole inches. Well, it didn't really stick out that far, but it sure looked like it. He acted really proud and stuff. He was showing the boys how to let the top down. The girls were checking out my Mama. They couldn't help but notice the huge smile on her face because she was so proud of Papa.

After Mama and I got out of the car one of the girls from the crowd came over to me and said, “Your grandparents are the coolest.” Then she raised her hand like I was going to give her a high-five or something.

Didn't she know that this was my mad day? I rolled my eyes at her and crossed my arms. I wasn't going to speak to

her or anyone else. This was not the day to mess with me, and I meant it.

“Hi, I’m Brooke,” the girl said, not caring that I wasn’t acting friendly.

“This is Morgan,” Mama said, as if I couldn’t speak for myself.

I looked back over my shoulder and gave her a look as if to say, *I don’t want you to be here. I don’t want you to speak for me, and I don’t want to make any new friends.* My grandmother just hung her head low like she gave up. She was always a **sassy** lady, and my dad said I got my personality from her. I couldn’t remember ever seeing her sad and not knowing what to say. Mama didn’t even respond and just walked away, **dejected**.

Brooke said, “That was mean. I couldn’t talk to my mom that way.”

“I didn’t say anything to her,” I said, setting the record straight.

“Well, if I even looked at my mom that way . . . ” Brooke said before I huffed and walked away from her.



Inside the classroom, this crazy and out-of-control boy was running and almost knocked me down.

“Hey, watch where you’re going!” I said to him, thinking, *Boys! Ugh! They’re so rough!*

He made me so mad that I had to look down at my clothes to make sure everything was okay. Then I said,

“You’d better not get me dirty. Stu—”

Before I could get out the rest of the word “stupid,” Papa called out, “Morgan Noelle Love! What has gotten into you?”

Frustrated, I turned to him and Mama. “Why are you both still here? Everyone else’s parents have left.”

“Because we love you, honey, and we want to make sure you settle in okay,” Mama replied.

“I’m okay. There’s Miss Nelson sitting at her desk, so you can leave.”

Papa asked, “How did you know her name was Miss Nelson?”

“All summer long, I knew whose class I’d be in, Papa. Ugh,” I said and stormed to my seat. It was a mean thing to say, and I should’ve just told him that Mommy gave me my new teacher’s name on the day she enrolled me in school.

A classmate tried to make up for me by telling my grandpa, “Don’t worry about her, mister. She’s just a girl, and sometimes they’re plain weird.” Later I learned his name was Trey.

But my granddad had a sad face, and I turned away so I wouldn’t see him. Finally, Mama and Papa left. I should have felt bad that I had such a stinky attitude. But with them gone, for the moment I felt a little better.

“Miss Love, I want to see you for a second,” Miss Nelson called to me. She was pretty and tall, with a calm voice. Her smile made me feel like I was looking at an angel, but I still knew I was in trouble. I hadn’t been in her

classroom for ten minutes before she needed to see me. No good was coming out of this.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I just want you to know that you were very mean to your grandparents. I’ve watched you since you came into the room, and you’ve been mean to your classmates too. I don’t know what’s going on with you, young lady, but you’d better fix it quickly. In my classroom, we all get along. If you don’t want to do that, then we can take a nice trip to the principal’s office.”

Miss Nelson wasn’t playing around. She was spelling out exactly what she wanted me to know, as she continued, “So I suggest you zip that lip and take in what I’m saying to you. Now, we can either have a nice year or it can be a long and hard one—if you get on my bad side. Go back to your seat and figure out which way you want it to be.”

Gritting my teeth, I screamed on the inside. Miss Nelson didn’t know what I was going through and now she was going to force me to be nice. What was I going to do? So far, second grade was yucky.



Finally, it was almost the end of the first day of school. I kept catching Brooke looking over at me. Though I wasn’t rolling my eyes anymore, I wasn’t smiling either. I didn’t want to be her friend. I missed Kimberly and Jan at my old school. These new kids were going to take some getting used to.

Trey kept trying to make me laugh. He was making silly moves like he couldn't be still and saying raps that didn't **rhyme**. I couldn't understand why he was acting like such a clown.

Then Miss Nelson divided us into groups for the math team game. She made Trey captain of one team, and Brooke was captain of the other. Neither one of them picked me and that didn't feel good. I started thinking it wasn't cool for people not to like me. It kinda hurt to overhear kids saying, "Don't pick her. She's mean. If she's on our team, we'll lose for sure with her bad attitude."

With twenty-four students in our class, I was the last one sitting in my seat. It was Brooke's turn to pick. She looked at me and then looked away.

"Ha!" Trey said, laughing out loud. "You get Morgan."

Wow. The girl who clearly wanted to be my friend earlier didn't even want me to be on her team now.

I'll show them, I thought to myself.

The game was going to be a fun math review. Miss Nelson wrote an addition or subtraction problem on the board and the first team who got the answer right scored the point. I don't know what everybody else was doing for the summer, but I was on the money. Everywhere my dad and I went—like Six Flags or the World of Coca-Cola—we counted things like people, rides, animals, and even our steps.

The problem on the board was "Five elephants, plus six giraffes, plus three monkeys, is how many animals?"

Because of all the practice I'd had, I knew the answer was fourteen animals. I didn't have to count on my fingers like Trey was doing. And I didn't need to count the numbers aloud like Brooke.

"This is mental math. I know the answer," I told them.

Truly wanting to win, Brooke said, "Then tell us the answer."

"Why should I help you when you didn't even want me on your team? I should let the team lose just because you wouldn't pick me."

"Aw, she doesn't know the answer," said Kyle, another boy on our team.

"I sure do," I replied and sat back down in my chair to watch Trey's team clobber ours.

For mental math, there are some simple rules. Ten plus any single digit number adds a one in front of that number. For example, $10 + 6 = 16$. If you have a nine and add a single digit number to it, the sum is a one and one less than the single digit number. For example, $9 + 7 = 16$. Most equations you just need to practice and memorize. Then once you know it, it is mental math. For example, $8 + 7 = 15$.

Subtraction is easy as well. I used flash cards to practice learning them. Plus my dad and I practiced subtraction all summer with money. He'd give me a twenty dollar bill, and every time I asked for something that day money was taken from the twenty dollars. For example, if I wanted a soda that was \$2 and a burger that was \$4, I added those

together, which is \$6. Then my new equation was $\$20 - \$6 = \$14$. And that's what I had left over.

Most people in the class said they didn't study math over the summer and I could tell. It took both teams a while to get all the easy answers. Still, when the game was over, we'd lost big time. Miss Nelson assigned the losing team math worksheets for homework. Brooke and all the kids on our team were upset with me. But it wasn't going to bother me that we had to do math homework. I looked at that easy sheet and knew I could finish it in about five minutes.

When Miss Nelson said it was time for recess, everyone got up and cheered. I sat still. I guess it made me weird to like classwork. I liked learning more than having free time to run around and act crazy. But then Miss Nelson made me go out and have fun with the other kids. Everyone was running, smiling, and jumping. I did look kinda silly sitting on a bench with my arms folded.

So I whispered a prayer. "God, help me. I don't want to be so angry. It just doesn't seem fair. Everything that I didn't want to happen to me is happening even though I was good. My parents told me it wasn't my fault they weren't together anymore, but it hurt so bad to not have them together.

Besides, I've lived for this long without a baby brother or sister, why do I have to have one now? You're supposed to take care of me and love me. It doesn't seem fair. Can You put a smile on my face?"

“Who are you over here talking to?” Brooke asked, as she came and sat next to me.

I quickly turned away from her. “I’m talking to God. Is that a crime?”

“Okay, okay. Why do you have to be so mean? Do you think He’ll be happy with the way you’re acting?”

That was a good question. When my dad took me to Sunday school last week, we talked about Job. He was a man who had money, a big family, and happiness. But when Job lost everything he had, he didn’t get angry about it. This is what he said about it in Job 1:21, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” It was one thing to read that, but was I supposed to live it?

Brooke kept talking to me. “I know you’re new here, and you’re probably upset that you can’t see your old friends too. But how do you think we feel? I’m mad that my parents couldn’t buy me a new outfit for my first day, and I really like how cool you’re dressed. But I’m not going to get mad at you because you have something I want. So don’t you be mad at me. Okay?”

“I’m not mad at you, Brooke.”

“Then quit acting like it. Nobody picked you today because you’ve been mean all morning. I don’t care what anybody says, everyone wants to have friends. Think about it.”

Then she got up to play with the other girls around us. I couldn’t wait for the day to end. I didn’t know how to tell

Brooke I wanted to be her buddy too. Even though I was going through some **horrible** things, I just didn't know how to fix my bad attitude. So I was left there by myself to sulk and be sad. My mouth was closed and I had no pep.

Letter to Dad

Dear Dad,

You see I'm using the **stationery** you got me to write you a letter. I miss you so much. My first day of school was not cool. Though Papa drove me there in his pretty new **vehicle** you'd love, I was a bit **sassy**. I'm just unhappy you're gone, and I don't want a baby brother. The first day was bad because no one picked me for the math team and I felt **dejected**. To be honest, I'm very **frustrated** that I'm not at my old school with my old friends. It's not cool to be at this school. That is a **rhyme**. Right now I feel **horrible** that I have to go back tomorrow.

Your daughter,
Mad, Morgan

Word Search

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

DEJECTED

FRUSTRATE

RHYME

SASSY

STATIONERY

VEHICLE

Words to Know and Learn

1) **stationery** (stā'shə-nĕr'ē) *noun*

Writing paper and envelopes

2) **ve·hi·cle** (vē'ī-kəl) *noun*

Something used to carry persons or things

3) **sas·sy** (să's'ē) *adjective*

Rude and disrespectful

4) **de·ject·ed** (dĭ-jĕk'tĭd) *adjective*

In low spirits; sad

5) **frus·trate** (frŭs'trāt') *transitive verb*

Feeling discouraged or baffled

6) **rhyme** (rīm) *noun*

A word that ends with the same sound as another word

7) **hor·ri·ble** (hŏr'ə-bəl, hŏr'-) *adjective*

Very unpleasant; disagreeable; very bad