



# FOCUSED

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**I HAVE FORTY-FIVE** minutes to finish five word problems, shower, get ready for school, and eat. I should have done all my homework last night, like probably everyone else in my class did. But the word problems this year are a lot harder than the ones we had to do last year, and I guess I thought that when I woke up this morning, the questions would be easier and less like blobs of letters that make zero sense. I was wrong. They're still impossible. And even though I'm the worst at math, I know that if I hand in five out of ten answers, my best-case grade is a *50*.

In other words, an F.

I can't let that happen.

My phone is buzzing. I'm pretty sure it's Red since he's the



only one who ever texts me. I scan the room—bed, dresser, side table, floor. It's not here. Unless it's under the pile of clean clothes Mom asked me to fold and put away yesterday. But that doesn't even make sense. My phone is my alarm, so I had it a few minutes ago when it woke me up. It must have fallen off the table. I hang off the side of the bed and look. Phew. I pick it up, flip it over, and put it down next to me. I don't read the text. I can't let Red's message distract me from my homework. He'll totally get it when I tell him what happened. I mean, we're best friends, so he knows how my life will be ruined if I fail.

I sit up and read the first word problem: *Three friends—Jane, Jon, and Joe—are dividing up the proceeds from their local lemonade stand . . .* My stomach grumbles. I'm pretty hungry. Maybe I should shower, eat, and *then* do my homework. A toasted English muffin with melty peanut butter on one side and Nutella on the other might help me concentrate. Plus, it will only take me fifteen minutes, and then I'll still have thirty to finish math. Done. Great plan.

I shower as fast as I can, cover up my new forehead zit, gloss my lips, and throw on a light blue dress, because even though it makes me look like I'm trying too hard, a dress is an insta-outfit, and the clock is ticking. I don't have time to

coordinate tops and bottoms right now. I need to make breakfast and get back to work.

I grab my textbook and run out of my bedroom and down the hall three minutes earlier than I'd planned. Winning! I'm rushing down the stairs and flipping back to the page about Jane, Jon, and Joe so I can read while I toast when my foot slides and slips out from under me. I grab for the railing, but I miss and fall backward, landing on the stairs.

*What is wrong with me?*

"Clea? Are you okay?" Mom asks, rushing over.

"I don't know." My voice sounds small and far away.

Mom helps me up, and once I'm standing, everything in my body feels weird and shocked and stiff. She bends down to pick up my textbook, wraps her arm around me, and leads me into the kitchen.

We sit down at the table, and she looks at me like she's really worried. "I know we've talked about this before, but you need to slow down and take your time, sweetheart. If you try to do everything at once, you're going to end up getting really hurt."

I want to scream, because I already know falling and not finishing my homework is my fault and none of this would have happened if I weren't so stupid and forgetful. But I don't

want Mom to know about the word problems, so I nod and let her rub my back for a little longer.

Henley walks into the room, puts a granola bar on the table in front of me, and grabs on to my arm. She's in the same purple overalls she's been wearing every day for two weeks, ever since she turned six and a half and decided she was old enough to be in charge of picking her own outfits.

"You scared me," she says. Only she can't actually say the word *scared*, so it comes out sounding like *sca-wed*.

"I'm okay," I assure her. "Promise."

She looks up at me with her big blue eyes, checking to be sure I'm telling the truth.

I smile at her, unwrap the granola bar, and take a bite, because even though I know being hungry isn't the reason I fell, I don't want my sister to think about me for another second when she already has so many other things to worry about, like speaking up in school and enunciating her words and all the things that are hard for her.

If I can help it, at least one of us is going to have a good day.

When I get to school, Red is waiting at our bench. As soon as I see him, I remember—my phone. It's still in my room, and I never checked his message. *UGH. Stupid.*



He starts talking before I even get there. “So, are we not best friends anymore? Because I’m pretty sure even sort-of friends don’t straight up ignore each other’s texts.”

“I’m sorry. We’re definitely BFFs,” I say. “I’m the worst.”

“I needed you to answer.” He sounds annoyed.

“I won’t do it again.” I look at him when I say it, because I want him to know I’m serious. “I was trying to finish my math homework, which I didn’t even do, and then I forgot my phone in my room. I’ll write back next time. I promise.”

“Okay.” He nods. “Thanks.”

“What did you say in the text?” I ask.

“That I hate my dad, and now we have to talk every other day, because the lawyer says he deserves more ‘quality time.’ Maybe he should have thought of that before he moved across the country.”

“That’s not okay,” I say.

“Yeah, not really.” He looks down at his sneakers.

I wish there were something I could say to make it better, but I can’t think of anything that will actually help.

“What are you going to do about math?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No clue. I mean, I have it first period. Suggestions welcome.”

“Mmm, don’t save your homework for the morning.”

He grins.

“Because that’s really helpful right now.”

“You’ll figure it out,” he says. “You always do.”

He has no idea how wrong he is.

I look around Ms. Pumi’s room for the folded piece of paper that says CLEA ADAMS. She moves the name tags every single class so we can always learn from a “new perspective.” I’d rather just sit in the same place.

I spot my name and walk over to my assigned seat for the day, which is at the far corner of the room next to Dylan.

Lucky me. Not.

He grunts a little when I sit down, like I’m bothering him, when he’s the one who smells like ocean waves or some other gross boy-scented body mist that’s making it hard for me to think about anything else.

I should take out my notebook, but I don’t want to look at my half-finished worksheet now or ever. I still don’t have a plan, and I’m starting to get scared. I can’t get a bad grade on anything or I won’t be allowed on the chess team. Chess is a special elective at our school, which means we practice during the day twice a week, and after school once a week. If

your grades aren't good enough, you have to go to extra study hall instead. I need to make sure that doesn't happen, since chess is my number one favorite thing in the entire world. Maybe Ms. Pumi will be so excited about teaching fractions that she'll magically forget to collect our homework. Then it will be like this whole horrible blip of a morning never happened.

Ms. Pumi claps. "I'd like to start out by reviewing the homework from last night as a class. We'll go through each of the ten problems together. Could I have volunteers to show their work on the board?"

I raise my hand. This is my chance to (A) participate and (B) prove that I did the homework. I just need to be one of the first five people picked, because I don't have answers for the second half of the questions.

Ms. Pumi scans the room, looking at all the hands. "Jason—one."

I reach up even higher and sort of wave my fingers around in the air a little, in case she didn't see me before, but her eyes pass right by me. "Anna—two." *Ugh. Don't freak out. It's not over yet. There are still three more chances.* I stretch my arm up as high as it will go, and look right at Ms. Pumi, because eye contact usually works in these situations. She glances back at

me, and I'm pretty sure she's about to say my name. I hold my breath and cross my fingers. *Please.*

"Dylan, why don't you answer number three?" *No. No. No. Dylan really doesn't need another chance to show off. He's already such a bragger. We all get it—math is so easy for him.* "Angela, go ahead and start on number four. And—" She pauses.

*Please. Pick me. Please. Please—*

"Pick me!" I blurt before I can stop the words from falling out of my mouth.

*What's wrong with me?*

"You need to wait until you're called on," Ms. Pumi chides.

I hear someone giggle.

I put my hand down and sink into my chair.

Ms. Pumi calls on a few other students, but I'm not listening. I keep my eyes glued to the floor and replay what I just did over in my mind, until I hear, "Clea—why don't you come on up and show us the answer to the last problem?"

I look up at her and shake my head.

"I'd like you to solve number ten," Ms. Pumi says, and I can tell by her tone that she's not asking this time. Everyone is staring again. Their eyes are burning into me, like they're

all waiting for me to get up and figure it out already, instead of sitting here like a dummy.

I pick up my textbook and walk over to the board. I need to figure this out fast. *Joanna enters a baking contest in her town and wins a \$350 grand prize. If she spent \$20.35 on ingredients, \$9.27 on equipment, and \$3.29 on marketing materials, what percentage profit did she make on her big win?* I'm pretty sure I need to add, subtract, and then divide. But maybe that's wrong. I don't even know, and I'm running out of time.

"Is everything okay?" Ms. Pumi asks.

"Yes," I squeak. *Stop messing up. Just focus. Pull it together. She can't know you didn't do the homework.* I start writing the numbers on the board, because I definitely can't add them up in my head. Mental math is impossible for me. I don't get how people can do it. I can barely remember the numbers I'm writing down. I have to keep looking back at the book so I don't get them all wrong. I add five, seven, and nine and then carry the two, when Ms. Pumi says, "That's enough. Can someone who did the homework please come up to the board?"

I can't breathe. There's not enough air in the room.

"Ooh," someone says.

Everyone laughs.

"Don't do that." Ms. Pumi shoots them down, but it



doesn't change the fact that they all know there's something wrong with me. And now I'm definitely getting an F on the homework.

No matter what I do, chess is going to get taken away.

By the time I get to Spanish, almost every seat is taken. We're allowed to sit wherever we want, which is one of the many reasons Spanish is my favorite subject. But today picking our own seats doesn't seem so great, because even though I can tell that it's a front-row-by-the-window kind of day, the only open desk is smack in the middle of the room.

As soon as I slide into the chair, I feel cramped.

“¡Buenos días, estudiantes!” Señora Campo says, making her grand entrance in a black-and-white-striped skirt and bright red sweater. I love when she talks to us *en español*, like she knows we can handle it. It makes me feel like I can, and also like I'm being transported to Madrid, where word problems don't matter and my back and butt aren't sore from my fall. “I want to get a sense of all the wonderful things you remember from our lessons. So we are going to spend this period taking a pop quiz. I'd like you to think of this as an opportunity for us to check in and see where you are and where

you need to be.” She looks around the room and smiles at each of us. “Please take one and pass it on.”

Before I even have a quiz, everyone around me is churning out answers and making me nervous. Lily hands me the stack of papers. I put one on my desk and turn to pass the rest of the pile on, but somehow everyone behind me has already started working, so I give the quizzes to Hunter, who’s sitting next to me. Then I write my name and read the first question: *You are on vacation with your family and decide to rent bicycles to explore the sights*—the staple in the top corner is breaking apart, barely able to hold the pages together, because there are so many of them. I flip to the end and look at the number—10. *UGH*. This isn’t a pop quiz—it’s totally a pop *test!*

I glance at the clock. Only thirty minutes left, and I haven’t done anything. I need to focus. *Write three sentences describing your bike ride through the city.*

What city? Any city? Did I miss that in the directions? I read them again, but it just says *vacation*. I don’t have time to go up and ask Señora Campo. Plus, I don’t want her to know I haven’t even started.

My stomach grumbles. I really hope there’s pizza at lunch. Hunter is chewing on his eraser and breathing hard, like he’s



running a marathon. And I guess this is kind of like the marathon of pop quizzes, but still. He needs to stop. It's impossible for me to think about anything else. It also doesn't help that I can't remember the Spanish word for *bicycle*. I should move on to the next question. This is such a waste of time. There are pencils everywhere, and they're so loud.

Lily is shaking out her hand, like it's tired from all the writing she's been doing, while I've been sitting here doing—I don't even know what. Nothing! I can't fail a quiz in my best subject. *Bicicleta. Dub!*

The bell rings. Everyone gets up, except for me. I don't want Señora Campo to think that the only thing I remember in Spanish is my name.

The whole class clears out of the room. I make a move to go, but I guess I lose track of my own leaving, because Señora Campo walks over and sits down next to me. I'm going to be late for chess. "Is everything okay, Clea?" she asks.

I don't know. I mean, it's not, and I want to tell her, but I have no idea what to say or where to start. Hunter is a heavy breather. People need to turn down the volume on their pencils. My brain got stuck on question one. I sat here being mad at myself. It's like out of nowhere the time disappeared on me. And I'm not sure where it went.