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Norton

Chapter One

(in which Matthew waits)

Matthew and Snickers sat on the front step. Snickers stretched in the morning sun. Matthew stroked her soft ears and waited for the parade of kids on their way to school.

Abigail Mortenson came skipping up the sidewalk. She swung her pink backpack by one strap. “Oh,” she said when she saw Snickers. “Can I pet your dog?”

Matthew nodded.

“Hello, Snickers,” said Abigail. She patted Snickers’ head. “Bye, Snickers. See you tomorrow.” Abigail skipped up the sidewalk toward school.

Three girls and a boy came up the sidewalk. “Can we pet your dog?” they said.

“Yes-s,” said Matthew. He concentrated hard to say his *S* correctly.

Because of Snickers, the kids talked to Matthew. At least a little bit. They mostly talked to Snickers. “Oh, you’re so soft.” “You have the blackest, wettest, coldest nose.” “You have the softest fur.” “You have beautiful golden eyes.” “Snickers, you’re my favorite dog.”

Then they ran up the sidewalk to school, too.

Matthew pushed his backpack out of the way. He gave Snickers a hug. “Maybe today,” he said into the soft fur on top of her head. “Maybe today, no one will make fun of me.” Snickers gave Matthew’s chin a dog kiss. She wagged her tail like a flag and rested her nose on Matthew’s knee.

Matthew’s family lived in a big old brick house next to the school. All the kids walked past Matthew’s house to get to school.

Cranston Jacobs came rollerblading along the sidewalk. Cranston was in sixth grade. Cranston was the best soccer player in the whole elementary school. He knew it, too. Everybody called him Cran or Cranberry. Cran looked at Matthew and Snickers. “Nice dog,” he said. He braked his rollerblades. He didn’t ask if he could pet Snickers. He just glided up the sidewalk to them. “Wish I had a dog.” He rubbed the soft fur under Snickers’ chin. “Nice dog,” he said again. “See ya, Matthew-Molasses.”

Matthew watched Cran skate away. “Wait,” said Matthew. “What? Why did you call me Mo-lath—“ Matthew’s *S* came out wrong. He was nervous around Cran. “That Mo-word?”

“Cause you’re slow as molasses, and you can’t say your *S*’s. That’s why, Matthew-Slow-as-Mo-lasses. That’s you,” Cran hollered back and laughed. He whizzed up the hill toward school on his roller blades.

It was true, and Matthew knew it. He was slow at everything. He was slow at math. He was slow at reading. He was even slower at spelling words that didn’t look the way they sounded. He was slow at running. He was slow at art. He was slow at understanding directions. He was slow at talking and at saying his *S*’s, even after he started speech therapy. He was so slow at making friends, that he didn’t have any yet.

Matthew sighed. He rubbed Snickers’ tummy. “At least Cran talked to me,” he said. “S-nickers,” Matthew said. “I can thay—say—your name all the time. You don’t make me nervous. See you later, S-Snickers. I have to go to school now.”

Chapter Two

(in which Matthew is not good at anything)

Matthew had to go to Mr. Beenken's room for special help in all his classes. Mr. B said it didn't matter if Matthew took longer to understand multiplication. But Matthew wished it didn't take *so* long to understand *everything*.

"Hello, Matthew," Mr. B said that morning. "May I see your math homework?"

Matthew was busy petting the two classroom hamsters, M.C. Hamster and Andy Hampster.

"I'm not done with it," Matthew said. He came back to his desk. "It took too long." He opened his notebook and showed Mr. B. "Th-see? I was too th-slow. Mom th-said I had to go to bed. I'm not good at anything."

Mr. Beenken was tall and slim. He was good at racing his bicycle. His skin was brown as a caramel from riding his bike every day. Mr. B straightened up and scratched his head. "That's not true, Matthew." Mr. B's hair was barely longer than Matthew's dad's whiskers in the morning, right before he shaved. Mr. B scratched his black shadow of stubbly hair. "You're getting better and better at saying your *S*'s. That's something you're good at." He smiled.

Matthew didn't smile. "But everybody else is good at th-something. Ellie is good at the trombone."

Matthew's sister Ellie was in sixth grade. She was good at playing the trombone. She was so good that she got asked to play a solo in concert. The *seventh* grade band concert. She practiced her trombone every single day for a long, long time. The whole neighborhood listened.

"And Luke is very fast," said Matthew. "He's in track."

"I know," said Mr. Beenken.

"Th-See?" said Matthew. "Everybody knows Luke. He's famous."

Last year, Matthew's big brother Luke was on the high school track team. He was the only eighth grader on the team. He got a letter jacket. It was black with a big letter "E" on it for East High School.

Matthew said, "But my eyes are too slow. I never even saw Luke cross the finish line. He went by the bleachers too fast. My eyes couldn't catch him. By the time I saw him, he was done with the race. I was jumping up and down, and I didn't even know why."

Mr. Beenken laughed. "You're funny, Matthew. You're good at being funny. Besides, you cheered for Luke even when you didn't know why. You're good at being a brother."

Matthew frowned.

"Now let's look at that math homework," Mr. B said.

When Matthew walked home that day, he thought about what Mr. Beenken had said. Maybe he was good at being funny. Maybe he was good at being a brother. Maybe. But he knew it was hard to believe that he and Luke were brothers. Luke was tall and lean. Matthew was not. When Luke ran, he seemed to fly. You could see all the muscles in his legs and arms.

It was hard to believe that Ellie and Matthew were sister and brother, too. Ellie was willowy, even when she carried her trombone case. She looked like a musical note, floating along the sidewalk.

Matthew didn't fly or float. He just trudged down the sidewalk from school. Very slowly.