

CHAPTER 1

Everything changed the afternoon she marched into our fourth-grade classroom, her black ponytail bouncing in rhythm with her footsteps.

“Hi everyone, I’m Stephanie,” she announced from the front of the room.

I looked on in amazement. Here she was, a new kid in a new school where she didn’t know anybody, and she walked in like she owned the place. *That is so cool*, I thought, wishing I had that kind of confidence.

For the first time that day, our teacher Mrs. Gouche smiled, and you could almost feel some of the tension from the morning easing.

“Class, this is Stephanie Lewis,” she said. She looked down at the paperwork Stephanie had brought with her. “Her family just moved here from California. Stephanie’s favorite subject is math and she loves to play soccer. I hope everyone will make her feel welcome. Stephanie, please take an empty desk. I’m sure you’re going to love it here.”

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Stephanie smiled and made her way toward the empty desk right in front of mine. The first spitball hit her before she got halfway there. That's when Mrs. Grouch appeared.

When Mrs. Gouche was having a rough day, she sometimes snapped and her alter ego, who we called Mrs. Grouch, appeared. None of us were brave enough to call her that to her face, of course, except maybe Robbie Colson, who usually spent at least two days a week staying after school for detention.

"THAT'S IT!" she yelled, and the room became instantly silent.



To be fair, it wasn't really Mrs. Gouche's fault she was angry. It was after lunch by the time Stephanie arrived, and Mrs. Gouche had already been having a frustrating day. Robbie Colson and his band of bullies, which mostly consisted of Bill Cape and Bryce Bookerman, had been giving her a hard time all morning.

It had started just five minutes into the day when the dry erase markers went missing.

"Has anyone seen the markers?" she had asked. When no one answered, her eyes moved to Robbie. Even with no evidence, Robbie was a pretty good bet if you had to pick someone who had done something wrong.

“Don’t look at me,” he protested. “Why do you always think it’s me?”

“Perhaps because it usually is, Robbie,” she replied. “Are you sure you don’t know anything about the markers?”

“How do you know someone didn’t hide them in their desk?” Bryce asked.

“Yeah, I think I saw Susie playing with them a few minutes ago,” Bill chimed in.

Susie McDonald had a look of shock on her face.

“Can you check your desk, please, Susie?” the teacher asked.

“But I didn’t—” Susie started.

“I understand you didn’t put them there, but can you please check?”

Susie opened the lid to her desk.

“It doesn’t look like they’re here, Mrs. Gouche,” she said with a sigh of relief.

“Try looking under her social studies book,” Robbie said to the teacher with an attempt at an innocent look.

Susie lifted the book and there they were. All the color drained from her face, and her shoulders shook as she started to sob. She looked like she might be ill at any moment.

“You three seem to know quite a bit about the inside of Susie’s desk,” Mrs. Gouche said, looking pointedly at the bullies as she put an arm around Susie’s shoulders to console her.

The bullies protested, but I could see that our teacher wasn’t buying any of it. It looked like another detention was in store for them.

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“Jordan, can you walk Susie down to the nurse?” Mrs. Gouche asked.

“Me?”

“Yes, you, Jordan Waters. Or is there another Jordan in the room I don’t know about?” she asked.

“No, ma’am,” I answered lamely.

I walked Susie down the hall. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to go back, so I stood outside the nurse’s office reading the health bulletin board until I heard my name being called. I looked down the hall and saw my best friend, Justin Grant, coming my way.

“You get lost coming back to class?” he asked.

“I was hoping to stay out here until English is over,” I answered with a smile. “If I can stall until lunch then it’s math class this afternoon.”

I was a whiz in math and I loved to read, but I wasn’t so good when it came to writing and spelling. Justin gave me trouble about this sometimes, but I didn’t let it bother me since he’s been my best friend since kindergarten.

“We’d better get back before Mrs. Gouche sends out a search party,” Justin said. “If Robbie and his friends keep it up, there’s no telling when Mrs. Grouch is going to show up.”

I nodded glumly and slouched back to the classroom.

The rest of the morning had gone just as badly for Mrs. Gouche. It wasn’t just the bullies either. Everyone seemed to be on edge and snapping at each other. But it was that spitball hitting Stephanie that finally put her over the edge.

Stephanie was still standing next to my desk. She had frozen in place when Mrs. Gouche yelled. I wondered

what she had to be thinking—*two minutes into my new classroom, and the teacher has already lost it.*

Mrs. Gouche stared at everyone in the class, but saved her sternest looks for Robbie, Bill, and Bryce. Even Robbie wasn't brave enough to return that look. Instead, he pretended to be searching for something in his desk. Mrs. Gouche didn't say anything for a moment but you could tell she was thinking about her next step. What price would be paid for the day she had been through?

She decided to take her frustration out on the whole class. Why do teachers do that? I didn't hide the markers or shoot the spitball, so why should I be punished? If you want to know the truth, I think Mrs. Gouche was just looking for an hour of silence when she hatched her evil plan.

"Everyone get out a pencil and a sheet of paper. I'm giving you an assignment," she said, her eyebrows dropping into a sharp *v*.

The class responded with groans and frowns. Before Robbie could even open his mouth, Mrs. Gouche turned to him and said, "And if you say one word, Robbie Colson, one single word, I'll be on the phone with your parents before that word even reaches my ear. Is that understood?"

I hoped that he would say *yes*. I wanted to see if that counted as saying one word. But Robbie just nodded his head in silence. No kid, not even a member of Robbie's band of thugs, wanted a call made to their parents. Detention was nothing compared to what your parents could do to you.

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“Here is your assignment. I want you to add up all the numbers from 1 to 100,” she said with something like an evil grin. “No calculators and *no talking* while you are working,” she added. “And be sure to check your answer before you bring it to me.”

In stunned silence, I took out a sheet of paper and started to work.

$$1 + 2 = 3$$

$$3 + 3 = 6$$

$$6 + 4 = 10$$

$$10 + 5 = 15$$

This is terrible. It's going to take forever, I thought. *What a lousy way to spend an afternoon—and I like math!* I wondered what the kids who didn't were thinking.

I'd only added the first five numbers when Stephanie rose from her chair and approached Mrs. Gouche, who was leaning back contentedly in her chair.

Mrs. Gouche was startled to see Stephanie standing in front of her with a piece of paper in her hand.

“What is it, Stephanie?” she asked.

“I'm finished, ma'am,” Stephanie said with a smile.

Everyone in the classroom put their pencils down and watched the interaction.

“You added all of the numbers from 1 to 100?” Mrs. Gouche asked.

“Yes, ma'am,” Stephanie responded.

“All one hundred numbers?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“And you’re certain your answer is correct?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Stephanie replied politely.

“And what’s the answer?”

“5,050.”

“That’s impossible!”

“Impossible?”

“There’s no way you could have added all of those numbers in less than a minute!” Mrs. Gouche said angrily. “You just made up a number.”

“Want to bet a class pizza party on it?” Stephanie asked as her lips curved into a sly smile.

“You’re on!” Mrs. Gouche growled.

The class watched as the teacher began to punch numbers into her calculator. “Staring at me isn’t going to get you the right answer,” she said to the class. “Get back to work!”

Forty minutes later, Mrs. Gouche stared at her calculator in disbelief. The number 5,050 stared back at her in glowing green digits.

Man, that pizza is going to taste great. I gave Stephanie a big grin as she returned to her seat.

“How did you do that?” I whispered.

“I’ll show you after school,” she replied.

And that’s when the idea for the math club popped into my head. At the time, I had no idea where that idea would take us.