

The Boy at the Back of the Class

Chapter 1 – The Empty Chair

There used to be an empty chair at the back of my classroom. It wasn't special—it was just empty because no one was sitting in it. But then one day, just three weeks after school started, the most exciting thing that could ever happen to anyone happened to me and my three best friends. And it all began with that chair.

Usually, the best thing about starting a brand-new semester is that you get extra allowance to buy new school supplies with. Every year, on the last Sunday of the summer break, my mum takes me on an Extra-Special Adventure to hunt down my notebooks for the new school year. Sometimes I get so excited that my feet feel jumpy inside and I don't know which store I want to go into first. There aren't many nice school supply stores where I live—they only ever have boring dinosaur sets for boys or princess sets for girls. So, Mum takes me on the bus and then the train into the city, where there are whole streets of stores—even huge department stores that look like tall blocks of apartments from the outside.

Last year, I found a space-themed notebook with pictures of an astronaut floating past the moon. It was on sale, too, so I bought a pencil case, a compass and protractor set, erasers, and a long ruler—and still had nearly a pound left over! The ruler is one of my favourite things, because the astronaut floats across it in water mixed with silver stars. I played with it so much that the astronaut got stuck to one side. But it wasn't my fault. Mr. Thompson, our teacher last year, had such a boring voice that my hands needed something to do. That's why it's important to have fun stuff with you in class—because you never know when you'll need to stop your brain from falling asleep or doing something that might get you into detention.

This year, I bought a Tintin and Snowy set. I love Tintin. Even though he's only a character in a comic book and isn't real, I want to be just like him when I grow up. I think being a reporter and getting to solve mysteries and go on adventures must be the best job in the world. My mum and dad used to buy me a brand-new Tintin comic book for my birthdays, and Mum saves all the comics her library is about to throw away because they're too old or ripped and gives them to me, so I have a whole collection of them now. I've read them all at least fifty times. But I'll have to think of another pet besides Tintin's dog, Snowy, to travel with

because I'm allergic to dogs. I don't think cats or hamsters, or even trained mice could be half as useful as Snowy. And even though I've thought about it for at least a year now, I still haven't come up with anything.

Because the Tintin school supplies were a lot more expensive than the astronaut ones and weren't on sale, I could only buy a pencil case, a small ruler, and two erasers. I had to think about it for a very long time, but in the end, I decided spending all my allowance at one time was worth it. Not just because everything had Tintin on it, but because if you press a button on the pencil case, Snowy barks and Captain Haddock's voice cries out, "Blistering barnacles!" I've already been yelled at for pressing it in the middle of math class this year, but if you can't press a barking dog button in math, then I don't see the point of it.

I don't like math. Simple math is fine, but this year we're learning about long division and square numbers and all sorts of things that my brain doesn't like doing. Sometimes I ask for help, but it's embarrassing putting your hand up too many times to ask the same question. I'm lucky because Tom and Josie and Michael always help me with the things I get stuck with. They're my best friends and we do everything together.

Tom's got short spiky hair and a side-smile and a big Adam's apple that looks like a Ping-Pong ball got stuck in his throat. He's the smallest in our group but he's also the funniest. He only joined our class last year after his parents moved here from America, but we became friends instantly. He has three older brothers who all tease and bully him. Not seriously—only as a joke. But I think they steal his food, too, which is why he's so skinny and always super hungry. I once saw him eat a whole pizza with extra toppings and a double cheeseburger for lunch and still not feel full! So I hide my snacks and chocolate bars from him when I can.

Josie has large, brown eyes and at least a million freckles across her face. She's tall and gangly and is always chewing on her hair. She's the fastest girl in our year and can kick a soccer ball past any goalie from the other side of the field. She's the coolest person I know, and I've known her since we were three. Our mums say we became instant friends the first day we started preschool, so they decided to become friends too. I don't really remember much about myself at that age, but Josie is in all my school memories. We even got our first detention together last year—all because of a hamster named Herbert.

Josie had heard one of the upper-school bullies say that he was going to flush our class hamster, Herbert, down the toilet at the end of the day. Josie told

me, and we decided to go on a Hamster Rescue Mission. We hid Herbert in my backpack before school ended and took him straight to my house. But of course, Mum found out and made me take him back the very next day. I tried to explain to boring Mr. Thompson what had happened, but he wouldn't listen and gave me detention. And even though she didn't have to, Josie stood up and said she had helped to steal Herbert too—just so we could do detention together. You know a friend's a Best Friend when they're willing to sit in detention with you.

Michael has the neatest, puffiest Afro out of all the boys in our year. Most people think he's weird. But not us. His glasses are always broken, and his shoelaces are never done right, so he's always tripping up or bumping into things when he walks. But we're all so used to it now that we never notice. He's mostly quiet but when he does say something, grown-ups usually look impressed and say that it's "ingenious" or "insightful" or use other strange words beginning with "in." I don't know what they mean, but I guess they mean he's smart. Grown-ups always like coming up with longwords for simple things.

Michael gets made fun of a lot because he can't run fast or kick a ball in a straight line, but he doesn't care. I wouldn't care either if I was as rich as him. His dad is a professor, and his mum is a lawyer, and because they're always busy, they buy him all the latest gadgets and books and the coolest new games. When we went to his house last year for his birthday party, we saw his room for the first time. It looked like the inside of a toy store. I think it must be easier not to care about what people think when you've got that many toys in your life.

Josie and Michael are always competing with each other to see who can get the most gold stars and as in class. Michael is the best at history and Josie is the best at math. But I'm better at reading and spelling than both of them—especially Josie. She hates reading and never, ever reads anything outside class. She says she doesn't have an imagination, so there's no point to reading books. I find that strange, because how can anyone not have an imagination? I think she must have had one when she was younger but that it was knocked out of her when she fell off her bike last summer. Mum says people without imaginations are dead inside. I don't think Josie is dead anywhere—she talks too much.

Having three best friends can make school seem like the best place to be, even on the most boring day. Although this year, school has become a whole lot more fun—and that's because of our new teacher, Mrs. Khan.

Mrs. Khan has extra-bouncy hair and always smells of strawberry jam—which is much better than smelling like old socks like Mr. Thompson does. She's new to

the school and extra smart—much smarter than Mr. Thompson ever was. And she gives us prizes on Fridays when we've all been good. No other teacher in our year does that.

Mrs. Khan lets us do all sorts of interesting things that we have never done before. In the first week of school, she helped us make musical instruments out of things we found in the school's recycling bin, and in the second week, she brought in a brand-new comic book to read to us that wasn't even in the school library yet.

Then in the third week, something happened that was so surprising and made everyone so curious, that even Mrs. Khan couldn't make us focus on our lessons properly. And it all began with the empty chair.

It was on the third Tuesday after school had started, and Mrs. Khan was taking attendance. She was just about to call my name when there was a loud knock at the door. Usually when there's a knock on the door, it's just someone from another class bringing a note, so no one really pays any attention, but this time it was Mrs. Sanders, the Principal. Mrs. Sanders always wears her hair in the exact same way and peers over her glasses whenever she talks to anyone. Everyone is scared of her, because when she gives detention, she doesn't just make you sit in a room; she makes you memorize long words from the dictionary and doesn't let you leave until you've learned them all by heart—the meaning and the spelling. I've even heard of lower graders being stuck in detention for hours because they had to learn words that were as long as this page!

So, when we saw that it was Mrs. Sanders at the door, we all fell silent. She looked very serious as she walked up to Mrs. Khan, and we all wondered who was in trouble. After she had whispered and nodded for a few seconds, she suddenly turned around and, peering over her glasses at us, pointed to the empty chair at the back of the class.

All of us turned around to have a look at the empty chair. As I said, it was a pretty ordinary chair, and it was empty because a girl named Dena left our class at the end of last year to move to Wales. No one really missed her except for her best friend, Clarissa. Dena had been a bit of a show-off and was always talking about how many presents her parents got her every week and how many pairs of shoes she had and all sorts of other things that no one else cared about. She liked to sit at the back of the class because then she and Clarissa could pretend to pay attention when really, they were drawing pictures of their favourite pop stars and giggling about someone they didn't like. Someone else

could have taken the seat, but no one really wanted to sit next to Clarissa. That's why the chair had stayed empty.

After whispering for a few more seconds with Mrs. Khan, Mrs. Sanders left the classroom. We expected Mrs. Khan to say something, but she seemed to be waiting, so we waited too. It was all very serious and exciting. But before we could start guessing about what was going on, Mrs. Sanders came back, and this time she wasn't alone. Standing behind her was a boy. A boy none of us had ever seen before. He had short dark hair and large eyes that hardly blinked and smooth pale skin.

"Everyone," said Mrs. Khan as the boy went and stood next to her. "This is Ahmet, and he'll be joining our class starting today. He's just moved to London and is new to the school, so I hope you'll all do your very best to make him feel welcome." We all watched in silence as Mrs. Sanders led him to the empty chair. I felt sorry for him because I knew he wouldn't like sitting next to Clarissa very much. She still missed Dena, and everyone knew she hated boys—she says they're stupid and smell.

I think it must be one of the worst things in the world to be new to a place and have to sit with people you don't know. Especially people who stare and scowl at you like Clarissa was doing. I made a secret promise to myself right then and there that I would be friends with the new boy. I happened to have some lemon candies in my bag that morning. I would try to give him one at recess. And I would ask Josie and Tom and Michael if they would be his friends too.

After all, having four new friends would be much better than having none. Especially for a boy who looked as scared and as sad as the one now sitting at the back of our class.