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4.
The Maths Test

Miss Pimm surveyed the class over the rim of her tortoiseshell glasses. "You'll be pleased to hear we're going to spend most of this lesson covering a new topic. It's high time you were introduced to the delights of Pythagoras' theorem."

Xanthe groaned to herself. Pythagoras' theorem? What on earth was that? It sounded terrible. Like a disease or something.

"However," went on Miss Pimm, "I thought we'd start with a short test to get those maths brains of yours working again after the Christmas break."

Xanthe's heart sank even further. A test? On their second day back? What a way to spend her thirteenth birthday. She exchanged glances with Grace, who was sitting beside her.

"It'll help me find out what you've remembered from last term," said Miss Pimm. "See if there are any areas we need to revisit." She began to walk round the classroom, handing out sheets of paper. "Please don't turn over your tests until I tell you to."

Xanthe eyed the sheet in front of her. Knowing Miss Pimm, it would be completely impossible.

The teacher returned to her desk and checked her watch. "You have fifteen minutes to complete the test. Don't forget to write your name on your sheet. You may begin."

Xanthe turned over her paper. She scribbled her name at the top and looked at the first question.

Long multiplication! All that carrying and remembering to put the noughts in the right places. If she tried to do this one first she'd panic and mess the whole test up for sure. Better to leave it out and go back to it later on.

The next few questions were on shapes and graphs. As long as she took things nice and slowly she'd probably be OK with these. They looked more like art than maths, really. A collection of drawings with a few numbers thrown in for good measure.

A couple of tables along from her, she could see Kelly scribbling away furiously. Kelly was amazing at maths. You could practically hear her brain whirring as she worked. She had probably done the long

multiplication question in seconds.

Xanthe completed the questions on shapes and graphs and glanced through the rest of the paper, which was all on fractions.

She was *terrible* at fractions. When it came to numerators and denominators her brain just seemed to shut down.

She pressed her fingers against her forehead. She could feel a headache coming on, a dull thumping sensation that was worsening by the minute. Leaving the fractions questions blank, she went back to the long multiplication at the top of the page.

Six nines were fifty-four, weren't they? Put down the four. Carry the five. Four fours were sixteen…

A commotion nearby made her glance up. Donna had dropped her pencil case, and everyone was staring at the scattered collection of pens and pencils on the floor: everyone, that was, except Kelly, who had obviously finished her test already and was sitting back in her seat looking at Xanthe, the corners of her mouth twisted into a sarcastic smile.

"Keep going, everyone!" instructed Miss Pimm. "You've only got half a minute left. I'll pick up your things, Donna."

Forcing herself to ignore Kelly's gaze, Xanthe returned her attention to the question. Nine sevens … she hated this one. She started to go through her

nine times table, but her head was pounding now, and the numbers seemed to be blurring before her eyes. Nine sevens … nine sevens…

She blinked, then stared again at the test paper.

The multiplication sign was glowing bright red.

"Time's up!" announced Miss Pimm. "Turn over your sheets and put your pens down."

Xanthe turned her test paper over. She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them wide. Had she imagined that glowing shape? Was her mind playing tricks on her? Certainly her head was throbbing fit to burst.

"Right, settle down, please," said Miss Pimm. "I'll write up the answers and you can mark each other's tests." She redistributed the papers before making her way up to the whiteboard. "I'll check the results myself later on."

Xanthe glanced at the sheet in front of her. It belonged to Alex Macpherson, Saul's best friend, and it looked like he'd managed to answer all of the questions, including the long multiplication one. She ferreted around in her pencil case for a different coloured pen. Her head still ached, but at least her vision had gone back to normal: the multiplication sign on Alex's paper definitely wasn't glowing.

"Miss Pimm?"

Miss Pimm turned round. "Yes? What is it, Kelly?"

Kelly scraped back her chair and got to her feet, brandishing the test paper she had been given. "You'd better see," she said, marching up to the front.

Silence fell around the room as Miss Pimm scanned the piece of paper. Her face turned an unpleasant shade of purple.

"Thank you, Kelly," she said. "You may go back to your seat." She cleared her throat. "Xanthe. Come here, please. It would seem you have some explaining to do."

Xanthe frowned. She couldn't be in trouble already, surely? Miss Pimm hadn't even written the answers on the board yet.

She shot a quick glance at Grace, then walked up to the front of the classroom.

"I suppose you think you're being funny?" snapped Miss Pimm, thrusting the sheet of paper at her.

Xanthe stared down at the test paper and gasped. A thick line had been slashed across it, and at the bottom, in her own handwriting, were the words, *Miss Pimm's maths class stinks*.

"But…" she began.

"But what? Are you telling me this isn't your paper?"

Xanthe's eyes flitted over the sheet. There was her

name at the top, and beneath the slash she could see the unfinished long multiplication question, the completed middle section, and all those fractions at the end left blank.

"Well?"

"It – it *is* my paper. But I didn't put that line through it. Or write that at the bottom. It wasn't me, really it wasn't…"

"Things like this don't just happen by accident," said Miss Pimm. "This is your handwriting, isn't it?"

Xanthe bit her lip. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Kelly sitting with her head bent, her shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

"Yes," she murmured. "It is. But I didn't do it, Miss Pimm. Really I didn't. It must've been—"

Miss Pimm held up her hand to silence her.

"I don't want to hear any excuses, thank you."

She tore a sheet of paper from a notebook on her desk and began to write.

"Take this to Mr Maguire," she commanded. She sealed the note and test paper in an envelope and thrust it into Xanthe's hand. "Let's see what he has to say."

Xanthe's eyes filled with tears.

She blundered towards the door, her gaze sweeping the classroom.

Grace was leaning forwards in her chair, her face

full of support and concern – but in Saul's eyes there was an altogether different look, a look that told her all she needed to know.

That he was no longer sure what to believe.



Xanthe hovered outside Mr Maguire's office, her heart racing.

She'd been there nearly five minutes now, and with every passing second her courage was fading. Each time she raised her hand to knock on the door she lowered it again, terrified of what the headmaster was going to say. She was almost certainly about to get her first ever detention – and on her birthday, too.

To her left was the Honours Corridor, which ran the entire length of the school hall. It was lined with scores of wooden boards bearing the names of all the successful Milchester High students. She was sure none of them had ever found themselves standing outside the headmaster's office waiting to be punished.

She jumped as the office door swung open.

"Xanthe!" exclaimed Mr Maguire. He smiled down at her. "Have you come to see me?"

Xanthe glanced away. If she tried to speak she'd probably start crying. She held out the envelope, her hand shaking. Her head still ached so much it was

making her feel sick.

Mr Maguire opened the envelope and scanned its contents. His smile faded. "You'd better come in," he said, standing back to let Xanthe past. "I must say, you're one of the last people I might have expected to land themselves in trouble."

He motioned for her to take a seat at his desk and sat down opposite her. "Why, the last time you were in here you signed the Book of Excellence, didn't you?"

Xanthe nodded, watching as the headmaster picked up a red book from the side of the desk and began leafing through its pages.

"Here we are," he said. *"Xanthe Fox. For generosity of spirit and exceptional manners."* He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "So what's gone wrong? Your behaviour in maths sounds completely out of character."

"I didn't do it," began Xanthe. "Honestly, I didn't."

"Then who did?"

Xanthe hesitated.

"I – I think it might've been Kelly Snier," she said at last. "I don't want to tell tales or anything, but she was the one who got my paper to mark and—"

"Miss Pimm tells me in her note that the remark at the bottom of the test is in your handwriting," interrupted the headmaster. "And that she had only

just given out the papers when Kelly drew her attention to it. She wouldn't have had time to copy your writing in such a short space of time. Assuming she'd wanted to in the first place." He frowned. "Do you two girls not get on?"

Xanthe said nothing.

"Let me put it another way," went on Mr Maguire. "Has Kelly ever done anything like this in the past?"

Again, Xanthe hesitated. If she told the headmaster what had happened in art yesterday, she might find herself in an even worse mess than the one she was in already. Slowly, she shook her head.

"In which case, I would strongly suggest you take your own advice and cut the tale-telling," advised the headmaster.

Xanthe glared down at the carpet, silently tracing its pattern of blue and red triangles. Under the collar of her shirt she could feel the cool silver of Grandma Alice's locket against her skin. So much for bringing her good luck.

"Is there something worrying you, Xanthe? Are there any problems I should know about? At school? Or at home, maybe?"

Xanthe bit her lip. If he'd asked her that two days ago, she'd have said no, but now her life was starting to look like one big problem. She was in trouble at school and it looked as if the boy she liked thought

she was a liar. To top it all, she had a splitting headache and she seemed to be seeing things. Or at least she had in maths. That glowing red shape on her test paper had been seriously freaky.

"Well, if you're not going to talk to me, I'm afraid I've no option but to give you a lunchtime detention," said Mr Maguire. "Now, off you go: the bell's about to ring for break. I don't want to see you in here again all term, Xanthe. Not unless it's to sign the Book of Excellence. Understood?"

Xanthe nodded. She stumbled to her feet and made for the door.

At the other end of the corridor she could see her class streaming out of maths. Saul was walking next to Donna, who was smiling at him and nodding enthusiastically at something he was saying.

She watched as the pair of them disappeared through the double doors, swallowing back a sob that threatened to erupt from deep inside her.

Right now she couldn't remember ever feeling so miserable.