

And there, Thomas saw something that
made his eyes bulge and his jaw drop,
and sent chills of terror shooting through his body.

But before he could move,
a giant claw clamped onto the back of his neck
while another covered his mouth,
keeping his screams from being heard.

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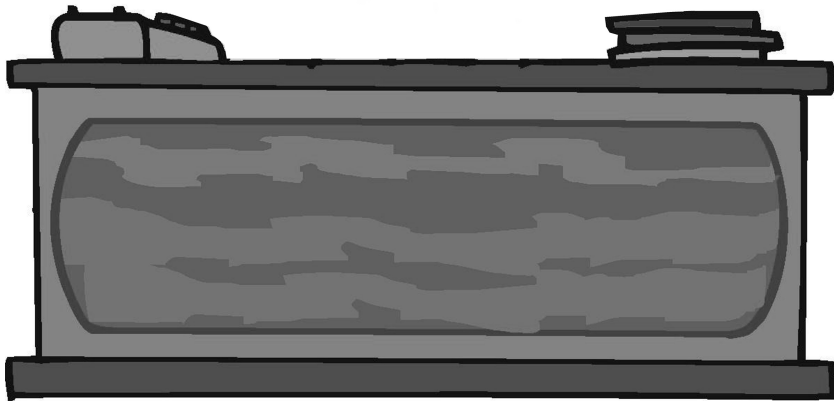
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Under My Teacher's Desk



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Jericho Quill Press

Under My Teacher's Desk
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**Dedicated to Mrs. Ytreide's Fourth Grade Class
and especially to Max,
who believed that being a custodian
means more than just taking care of a building.
Centennial Elementary School
Nampa, Idaho
1998**



CHAPTER ONE

Jeremy Watson pushed his nose against the school bus window and watched as each breath he exhaled made little clouds. On the other side of the glass he saw the sign for Rachel Steerman Elementary School go by, and as always he wondered who Rachel Steerman was, and why she had a school named after her.

The bus jerked to a stop in front of the school and Jeremy shoved his friend Thomas off the seat and out into the aisle. “Hey, you’d better watch it,” Thomas said, laughing, “or I won’t help you with your math homework tonight!”

“So what?” Jeremy laughed back as they pushed their way up the aisle. “If you don’t help me with math then I won’t help you with English!”

Just then they caught up with their friend Adam who cut in front of Jeremy and said, “And you’d better both help *me* or I won’t let you sit in my brother’s car anymore!” Adam’s brother was much older than he, and drove a black convertible. Sometimes when he was home from college he’d let Adam and his friends sit in the car, and even took them for a ride once. It made Adam feel good, because sometimes he didn’t feel as smart as his two friends.

“Okay, okay, you win,” Jeremy laughed.

The three friends jumped off the bus and gathered near the Main Entrance with all the other fourth graders in Mrs. Winfred’s fourth grade class.

Rachel Steerman was a very ordinary and average elementary school. Every ordinary and average school day all the students would climb off the busses, or out of their parents’ cars, or would walk to school on foot, and line

up in straight lines keeping their hands to themselves. When the bell rang, each teacher would fetch their own class, starting with the kindergartners and going on up through the sixth graders. Then they'd silently march into the school and down the hall, past Principal Sherman, into their classrooms to begin their work for the day. And it was usually about then, Jeremy knew, that Alison first got into trouble.

Alison was another student in Mrs. Winfred's class and she didn't much like having to stand in a line so straight, or march in a line so silent. So sometimes she just couldn't help whispering to her neighbor Gregory when she thought of something really important to say, like how many tacos she'd eaten the night before. Then Mrs. Winfred would have to scold Alison and Gregory, and remind them that fourth graders don't talk in line.

Or sometimes it was Nicole who would get all fidgety, and wiggle and squirm and twist and worm her way down the hallway. Then Mrs. Winfred would have to scold Nicole, and remind her that fourth graders don't fidget. So Nicole would say, "It wasn't me! It was Andrea!" and Mrs. Winfred would have to scold Nicole for lying, then quietly scold Andrea because maybe it *was* her after all.

Once in a while it was Kedrick who would forget to walk with his hands to himself, so Principal Sherman would call him out of line and, right there in front of everyone, remind him that fourth graders don't punch other people even if it's just in fun, because hitting someone will get you kicked out of school.

Or sometimes Jeremy would hear other kids talking in line. "Personally," he might hear Brandon whisper to his neighbor Trey, "I don't see why we have to walk in lines so straight and silent. What's the big deal?"

"I don't know," Trey would answer. "It seems kind of stupid to me." Then Chris-with-a-C would add, "I think it should be against the law," at which point Mrs. Winfred would scold all three of them and remind them that fourth graders should respect authority.

Once inside their classroom, the fourth graders of Mrs. Winfred's fourth grade class would hang their coats and backpacks in their cubbyholes, then find their seats before the bell rang. Except that, just about every day, Corey would forget his pencil or library book or homework or spelling list and have

to run back to his backpack and then run back to his desk before the bell rang except that he never, ever, did make it in time. Then Mrs. Winfred would scold Corey, and remind him that fourth graders should be responsible and get everything out of their backpack the first time, and no matter what, they never, ever run in the classroom.

Just about every day Emily would forget which city she was in. All the desks in Mrs. Winfred's class were arranged in groups of five, and each group of five was named for a different city because they were studying all the capitals of the United States. So Emily would go from Casper, Wyoming to Bismarck, North Dakota to Orlando, Florida to Olympia, Washington looking for her desk, and Mrs. Winfred would scold her because fourth graders should be able to remember that their desk is in Rockport, Maine.

Then Principal Sherman's voice would come on the PA system. First he'd announce that Mr. Herdman's sixth grade class had won the canned food drive, or that there would be an assembly today to watch Mrs. Welch's fifth graders perform a play, or remind them that no one is allowed in the hallways without a pass. Then he'd announce that lunch today would be beans and hot dogs or pepperoni pizza or Chef's Surprise, and then he'd lead the whole school in the Pledge of Allegiance. And everyone in the whole school would stand at their desks with their hands on their hearts and look at the flag and recite the pledge with him. Except that, sometimes, Kris-with-a-K would get distracted by a bug outside the window or an ant marching across the floor or a spider hanging from the ceiling and forget to say the pledge. Then Mrs. Winfred would scold Kris-with-a-K, and remind him that fourth graders are old enough to pay attention.

At morning recess, Max the Head Custodian would play baseball or soccer or hopscotch with the kids. Jordan always jumped rope with Katee and Ricardo, except that sometimes Jordan would mess up when it was her turn to twirl the rope and then Katee would get mad and Ricardo would be on Katee's side and Jordan would try to explain that it wasn't on purpose but nobody believed anybody and they'd all start yelling. Then Mrs. Blanchard the Duty Person would come over and scold them all because fourth graders should surely be old enough to play together without getting into fights. Then Mrs. Winfred would make them miss the next recess because fourth graders should

be able to play together without getting into fights and Jordan and Katee and Ricardo would all think to themselves, "Didn't we already hear this?"

Every day Jeremy and Thomas and everyone else in Mrs. Winfred's class would turn in their math homework, and every day Heidi would say to Elaena that she really didn't much like doing math homework every day. "After all," she'd say, "we do it in class. And why do we have to know this anyhow? I'm just going to use a calculator when I grow up." Then Elaena would nod her head in agreement and say, "I think it's dumb. Who cares that six times six is fifty-two?"

"It's thirty-six," Heidi would say and Elaena would say, "Whatever."

After science – during which Mrs. Winfred had to scold Quade for putting their test subject in his lunch box because their test subject was a live frog and fourth graders aren't mean to animals – Shantell and everyone else went to lunch. Sometimes she'd just be putting the first chicken nugget in her mouth when Sanjay and Travis would both flick Tater Tots at her. Then Mrs. Sanchez the Lunch Room Lady would scold the two boys and make them stay in to help Max the Head Custodian wash off all the tables because fourth graders are old enough to know that you don't throw food. Then Max would scold them because he'd rather be out playing baseball with them than having to punish them. Then Mrs. Cho the Vice Principal would walk through the lunch room and ask Mrs. Sanchez why Sanjay and Travis were washing tables, so Mrs. Cho would scold them and tell them they had to apologize to Shantell in front of the whole class. When Mrs. Cho left, Mrs. Winfred would scold them again because they had embarrassed the whole class and made Mrs. Sanchez and Mrs. Cho and Max the Head Custodian go to all that work of scolding them.

And so it went every ordinary and average day at Rachel Steerman Elementary School (whoever Rachel Steerman was). First they'd do math, then they'd do science, next it was reading, and then came lunch. Writing and social studies followed that, and PE and computers and music all fit in there somewhere.

And when the day was almost over, and every fourth grader in Mrs. Winfred's fourth grade class had been scolded for all the things that fourth graders need to be scolded for, it was time to feed the classroom cats,

Nicodemus and Kitten, who lounged all day in baskets on the back counter. Nicodemus liked it when it was Whitney's turn to do the feeding because Whitney always slipped him a piece of beef jerky or a fruit rollup, except that Mrs. Winfred would usually catch her and scold her, reminding her that fourth graders should know better than to feed human snacks to a pet.

Then the bell would ring and Mrs. Winfred would dismiss the class by cities saying, "I'm looking for a city that has a clean floor." And when the floors were clean and their city was called, each city would walk quietly to their cubby holes and quietly get their coats and backpacks and line up to walk out to the busses that took them home where, every night in every home parents would ask, "What did you learn today?" and every student in every home would answer, "Oh, nothing."

Yes, Rachel Steerman was a very ordinary and average elementary school where nothing strange ever happened and everyone had to learn math and reading and science and social studies, and Jeremy and Thomas and Adam were friends with the two girls in their city, Jasmine and Tracy.

Ordinary.

Average.

Until, that is, one certain day, late in January, when they came to school and everything, but *everything*, was different.