

# THE MATH KIDS

AN UNSOLVED  
PROOF

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# *An Unsolved Proof*

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*Book 9 in The Math Kids Series*

by

**David Cole**



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# Chapter 1

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“S

top, thief!” Justin Grant turned quickly, scanning the storefronts in the mall, hoping to catch a glimpse of the robber. Suddenly his arm was locked in an iron tight grip. He was spun around and now he could see the beefy security guard who had grabbed him.

“Hey, that hurts!” he cried out.

“Good,” the guard sneered. “Maybe next time you’ll keep your sticky fingers to yourself.”

“What are you talking about?” Justin asked, his face a mask of confusion.

“I got him,” the guard said to a thin man wearing a pair of gray slacks and a short-sleeved collared shirt with *Karl’s Comics* emblazoned across the front in bright orange.

“What are you talking about?” Justin repeated.

“I’m the store manager. We’re going to need to look in your backpack,” the thin man said.

“Why?”

"Two boys reported that you stole some comics from the store."

"I didn't steal anything!" Justin protested.

"If that's true, then we won't find any comics when we look in your backpack, will we?"

Justin thought about that for a moment. His backpack was always stuffed to the point where the zipper strained to keep everything inside. *Do I have any comics in my pack?*

"C'mon kid, open it up," the security guard insisted as he tugged on the backpack, trying to dislodge it from Justin's back. Justin tugged back.

"If you didn't steal anything, you'd let us look inside," the store manager said.

Justin looked around. A crowd was starting to gather in the mall hallway. Several adults had a look that said they were convinced he had been caught in the act and was guilty. Justin thought he recognized a few of them, maybe friends of his parents. This wasn't good.

"Can we go inside the store?" Justin asked quietly.

With a nod from the store manager, the security guard half-walked, half-dragged the boy into the store and out of the site of the growing crowd. Once inside, Justin shrugged the backpack off his shoulders. One look and he knew he was in trouble. The zipper to the main compartment was half open. He always made sure it was

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securely zipped before putting the backpack on so none of his important stuff would fall out.

The manager reached a hand into the open pocket and pulled out two comic books.

"Didn't steal anything, huh?" he shouted out with a note of triumph in his voice as he brandished the comics.

"Those aren't mine," Justin insisted.

"That's right, they aren't," the man said. "That's why they call it stealing."

"What else do you have in here?" the security guard asked. He unceremoniously dumped the contents of the backpack. Three math puzzle books, scraps of paper, pencils, a broken calculator, a library card, a candy bar, four movie theater ticket stubs, a tennis ball, a tangled power cord, a short length of rope, an assortment of nuts and bolts, six double-A batteries, a purple flip-flop, duct tape, and a pair of binoculars tumbled out onto the floor.

"Hey, be careful with that stuff!" Justin said.

The security guard poked through the contents. "Anything else here from the store?" he asked the manager.

"No, I don't think so," he answered, "although I wouldn't be surprised if some of this stuff was stolen from other stores."

"It was not!"

"So only the comic books are stolen?" the manager asked slyly.

"I told you those aren't mine," Justin said, the frustration rising in his voice. The manager and guard ignored him.

"You want me to take him down to the security office?" the guard asked.

The manager nodded. "I assume you'll need some kind of statement from me?"

"Yes, sir," he answered. "If he doesn't confess, we might also need any video surveillance footage you have. Although this looks pretty straightforward. I mean, we found the stolen items in his backpack."

"Those aren't mine," Justin said for the third time, his voice now subdued as he realized his protests weren't getting him anywhere.

The guard led him out of the store and down the length of the mall. To Justin, it felt like the longest walk he had ever taken. The guard kept his meaty hand clamped on Justin's arm, and Justin could feel the stares of everyone they passed.

"Hey, Justin, what'd they get you for?" someone catcalled from the other side of the hallway. Justin swiveled his head in the direction of the voice but couldn't see who had yelled.

Then it was down an escalator to the main floor of the mall. Halfway down, they passed Catherine Duchesne and Stephanie Lewis, two of his best friends, going up. They were past each other before any words could be

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exchanged. The look of shock on their faces was enough. Justin could feel his face grow warm with embarrassment.

Finally, they reached the mall security office, a small room located at the end of a short hallway near the escalators. The security guard pushed Justin down onto a hard plastic chair in front of a desk. He made his way to the other side of the desk and sat in a black swivel chair in front of an ancient desktop computer. He yanked a desk drawer open and glanced inside, then used one finger to click a few keys.

"Name?" he asked, glancing up from the keyboard.

"Justin Grant," Justin answered.

He continued to answer questions—address, parents' names, phone number, age, and so on—without ever looking up from the cracked green linoleum floor. The whole time he was thinking about how those comic books could have gotten into his backpack. He tried to get into his "zone," that thinking place he sometimes went to solve difficult problems, but the guard kept interrupting his thoughts.

The guard finally left him alone for a few minutes. Justin was glad for the break from the questions. He was sure that if he could just think it through, he'd find a reasonable explanation for what had happened. Something tugged at the back of his brain, something that he was missing, but it was just out of reach, like a



word on the tip of his tongue. A few more minutes and he'd have it.

"Justin?"

Whatever it was he was thinking about was gone in an instant. That voice ruined it. Without turning around, Justin knew it was his dad, and he realized the ride home was going to feel even longer than the walk to the security office.