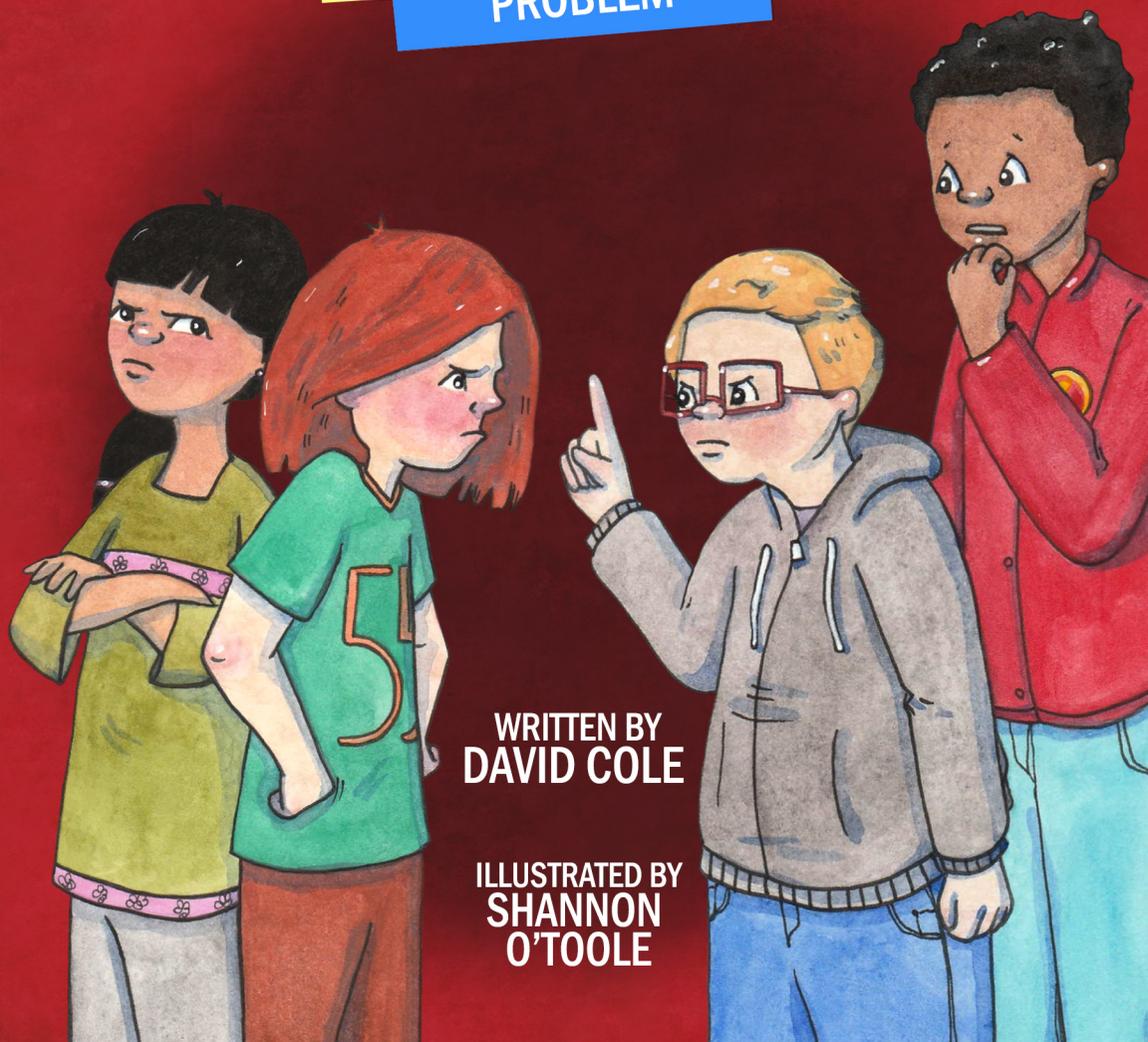


THE MATH KIDS

A KNOTTY
PROBLEM



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A Knotty Problem



Book 7 in The Math Kids Series

by

David Cole



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Prologue



The sleek blue helicopter swooped in low over the top of McNair Elementary School. From the helicopter's window, Jordan Waters could clearly see a partially deflated volleyball near one edge of the roof.

"Do you see that?" he asked.

"Yeah, I bet that's the one Dylan kicked up there during recess last week," Justin Grant said.

Jordan started to ask if the pilot could land on the roof so they could retrieve the ball but thought better about it.

"Is that Vivie and Ally on the playground?" Catherine Duchesne asked. The two sisters were twins and never went anywhere without the other.

"I think so," Stephanie Lewis said. She waved her hand frantically as the two girls looked up. The twins waved back and stared as the helicopter settled gently onto the grassy soccer field.

"Thanks so much for the helicopter ride!" Jordan said enthusiastically with an ear-to-ear grin on his face.

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"Don't mention it, Jordan," Willard Howell said with a smile almost as wide. "It was the least I could do."

The four friends had helped the eccentric billionaire out of a tricky situation. To return the favor, Howell had agreed to grant Jordan's wish of a ride in his helicopter.

Once the rotors had spun down, Howell hopped out of the helicopter and helped the four to the ground.

"You're okay making it home from here?" he asked.

"Sure, Mr. Howell," Justin answered. "It's only a couple of blocks."

"Well, I want to thank each of you again," he said, solemnly shaking each of their hands. "You know I still owe you one, right?"

"We'll keep that in mind, Mr. Howell," Jordan said.

"I mean it. I'm only a phone call away," Howell said. He glanced down at his watch. "I've got to get going now. Thanks again!"

Howell climbed back into the helicopter. The pilot waited until the kids were a safe distance away before spinning up the rotors. The helicopter rose gracefully in the air, pivoted into the wind, and then sped away. The four stared after it until it was just a blue speck in the distance.

"Is that your helicopter?" Vivie asked. She and her sister had come up behind them as the helicopter flew away.

Stephanie laughed. "No, Ally, that's not ours."

"I'm Vivie."

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"Are you sure?" Stephanie asked. She was convinced she had finally figured out how to tell the twins apart.

"I'm pretty sure," Vivie said.

"Yeah," Ally added, "she's definitely Vivie."

"Sorry about that," Stephanie said.

"It's okay. It happens all the time," Ally said. "Even our parents get it wrong sometimes."

"Are you sure that's not your helicopter?" Vivie asked again.

"I'm afraid not," Jordan said. "Maybe someday, but not today."

"If you ever get one, will you take us for a ride?" Ally asked.

"Sure," Jordan answered.

"Okay," Ally said. "We've got to go." She and her sister turned and walked away.

"I've got to get home myself," Justin said.

"Me too," Stephanie agreed.

"Okay, but we're still meeting on Saturday after Stephanie's soccer game, right?" Jordan asked. "The district math competition is coming up and we need to be prepared."

"Oh, we'll be ready," Catherine said. "Nothing can stand in our way this year."

She smiled, not knowing their team and their very friendships would soon be tested to the breaking point.

Chapter 1



Stephanie used her right foot to settle a sharp cross field pass from Riley Clark, quickly shifted the soccer ball to her left foot to keep it away from the nearest defender, then drilled a shot into the upper left-hand corner of the goal. She smiled as she heard a squeal of delight from the sideline. She recognized the voice of Catherine, her best friend, and gave a small nod of recognition in her direction.

"Great shot, Stephanie!" Riley said as she caught up to her teammate. The two exchanged a high five.

"It wouldn't have happened without your amazing pass," Stephanie replied.

"True," Riley said. "That was an amazing pass."

Stephanie grinned and put an arm over Riley's shoulders as they walked toward midfield. "The only thing more amazing than that pass is your modesty."

Riley nodded solemnly. "You're right, Stephanie. When you get past my incredible soccer skills, good looks, and

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great sense of humor, I think it's my modesty that really stands out."

Stephanie burst into laughter while Riley tried to keep a straight face.

"You two want to join us?" the ref called out.

"Oh, sorry!" Stephanie yelled and hustled to midfield for the kickoff.

Two minutes later, the ref blew his whistle to signal the end of the game. Stephanie glanced over at the scoreboard. Her team had won eight to zero in a game that saw her score four times and assist on two other goals. Her teammates swarmed around her as she walked off the field.

"Great game, Stephanie!"

"Way to go, Steph!"

"Amazing game, Stephanie!"

Her face turned a bright red in embarrassment. She shrugged her shoulders in response to the compliments.

"Good game, Stephanie," said Logan Clark, her coach and Riley's dad. "I hope you saved some of that fancy footwork for the state tournament."

"It was a great team effort," Stephanie said.

"Like my amazing pass," Riley chimed in, drawing a look from her dad which quickly turned to a grin as he saw her earnest expression.

"There's not much to talk about," the coach addressed

the team. "Great passing, and a lot of good shots. Let's hear it for the offense."

The girls all applauded and several clapped Stephanie on the back.

"And let's not forget the defense. Shutting out a good team like this isn't easy. Good job of sticking to your opponents and clogging up the passing lanes. Let's hear it for the defense."

The team clapped again.

"And finally, let's not forget about a couple of really nice saves by Sydney!"

Sydney Maine took a dramatic deep bow while her teammates cheered.

"So a great game across the board," Coach Clark said. "I guess you already know, but this win assures us a spot in the state tournament. Pick up one of the packets with all the details and make sure it gets into your parents' hands. Okay, that does it for me. Get out of here and enjoy the rest of your weekend."

Stephanie gathered her stuff and walked over to where Catherine was folding up her lawn chair.

"Great game, Stephanie!" Catherine said. "That last goal happened so fast I almost missed it."

"It was fun. That may have been one of the best games I've ever played," Stephanie admitted. "I hope I can play that well in the state tournament."

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She glanced down at the stack of papers in her hands. The color drained from her face.

"What's wrong?" asked Catherine with concern.

"It's the tournament."

"What about it?"

"It's on the same weekend as the district math tournament," Stephanie said.

"Oh, no! Are you sure?"

Stephanie handed the papers to Catherine. Her friend's face fell as she confirmed the date.

"Justin is going to go through the roof," Stephanie said. "All that work we've done is going to be wasted."

The Math Kids had won the school math contest in fourth grade but lost in the finals of the district competition. When they advanced from fourth to fifth grade, they found that Mr. Miller, their new teacher, hated math. But after the four helped keep Mr. Miller's son from going to jail, he had allowed them to form their own math group to continue working toward avenging their loss in the district math competition.

Now all the studying, all the weekends working on increasingly difficult math problems, all the dreams of holding up that trophy looked like they were all for nothing.

"You're right," Catherine said glumly, "Justin is going to go through the roof."

"You've got one to your left!" Justin cried out.

"Got him," Jordan replied. "You cover the right side and I'll move up along this ridge." He grimaced and scanned left and right as he inched his way forward.

"Incoming!"

There was a thunderous boom as an alien grenade blew up near Jordan's character. His health points went quickly to zero and Jordan dropped his controller in frustration.

"That's the third time I've fallen for that trap," he said. "It looks completely clear and then bam, I'm dead. Maybe next time I'll just plow right down the middle of the valley instead."

"Nah, you tried that too," Justin said. "Next time let's try hugging the right side and double-teaming the alien sentries."

Jordan and Justin both loved to play video games, although Justin was hands down the better of the two. Both Justin and Jordan got a weekly allowance for doing chores around their houses. While Jordan spent his money as soon as he received it, Justin carefully saved every cent until he had enough money to buy the latest game. This new one was the toughest they had played.

"I'm actually glad this one is going to take a while to beat," Justin said. "*Andromeda Attack* was way too easy."

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"You think maybe we should try an easier setting?" Jordan asked.

"No way," his best friend protested. "We can beat this, I know it."

"Okay, let's restart and give it another shot then."

"I've got a better idea," Justin said. "Let's take a break and tackle that problem Mr. Miller gave us."

"You don't want to wait for Stephanie and Catherine?"

"I think they're still at Stephanie's soccer game. We can at least get a start on it."

For Jordan and Justin, shooting aliens was one of the best ways to spend a Saturday afternoon. The other was solving math problems, the more difficult the better.

Justin dug into his overloaded backpack. Jordan watched in amusement as his friend pulled out three golf balls, a realistic rubber snake, four books, a handful of rubber bands, a roll of cellophane tape, and a pair of broken sunglasses before he finally retrieved a pile of papers.

"Why do you always have so much stuff in your backpack?" Jordan asked.

"I like to be prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

"Anything," Justin replied.

Jordan looked skeptical. "It looks like random junk to me."

"Random?" Justin asked. "No way. This is all carefully planned out."

"Okay, so what are the golf balls for?" Jordan asked.

"Defense against rabid animals," Justin replied. "You just peg the animal in the head, and it will take off."

"Why three balls?"

"I'm not that good a shot."

Jordan laughed. "Okay, and what about the snake?"

"That's easy," Justin replied. "That's to keep mice from sneaking into my pack to eat the snacks I have hidden down at the bottom."

"Why do you need the sunglasses?"

"In case it gets sunny."

"But they're broken."

"That's why I have the tape and rubber bands to hold them together."

"Okay, I give up," Jordan said. "This is all important stuff."

"You bet it is," Justin said. "And now, here's the math problem Mr. Miller gave us." He pulled a single crumpled sheet from the stack of papers and placed it on the coffee table.

The doorbell rang. Justin looked annoyed as he went to answer the door. When he returned with Stephanie and Catherine, Jordan was carefully studying the problem.

"Hey guys," he said. "This problem looks pretty easy. It's a lot like the sixes problem Mrs. Gouche gave us last year! This will be a breeze to solve."

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"Cool," Stephanie said.

"How was your soccer game?" Jordan asked. "You win?"

"Of course they did," Catherine said. "And Stephanie had half of the goals!"

"Nice," Jordan said.

"That was your last game, wasn't it?" Justin asked.

"Yeah," Stephanie said. "Except for..." Her voice trailed off as she thought about what would come next.

"Except for what?" Jordan prompted.

Stephanie exchanged a long glance with Catherine. It did not go unnoticed by Justin.

"What is it you're not telling us?" he asked.

Stephanie took a deep breath and then told them about the conflict between the soccer tournament and the math competition. Her prediction about Justin's reaction was right on the money—he went through the roof.

"You can't miss the math competition!" he exclaimed.

"I don't think I have any choice," Stephanie said. "It's the state tournament."

"And it's the district math competition. We have to avenge our loss from last year."

"But it's the first time our team has made it to state," Stephanie said. "The team needs me."

"What about our team?" Justin asked. "You can't drop

out just when we need you most. You joined the Math Kids, so you have a duty to do everything you can to support the team. That's all there is to it."

"No, it isn't," Stephanie said. "You're forgetting that I have another team that's also counting on me."

"But there are only four of us," Justin countered. "Your soccer team has lots of other players."

"Stephanie is the best player on the team," Catherine said. "If she doesn't play in the state tournament, they'll probably lose. They need her."

"Well, we need her too!" Justin shot back. "We'll definitely lose without her."

"Hey, I'm not happy about this either," Stephanie said. "You know I want to be in the math competition."

"Then do it," Justin said.

"But I also want to play in the state soccer tournament."

"I guess you'll have to make a decision then," Justin said, his voice eerily calm. "Either you're a part of the Math Kids or you're not."

Stephanie's eyes opened wide in surprise at his statement. "Are you saying I can't be in the Math Kids if I don't go to the district competition?"

"That's what I'm saying," Justin said firmly.

"I guess that means I'm out then," she said.

"Fine. Have it your way," Justin replied.

Catherine looked at Jordan, hoping he would step in to help, but he looked as helpless as she felt.

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"Look, guys," Catherine said. "Can't we talk about this?"

"What's there to talk about?" Justin asked. "Stephanie is choosing her stupid soccer team over us."

"It's not stupid!" Stephanie shot back.

"Catherine's right," Jordan finally chimed in. "Isn't there some way we can figure this out?"

"It's simple," Justin said. "If she's out of the math competition, she's out of the group."

Catherine's face became red with anger. "Well, if Stephanie is out, I'm out too."

"That's your choice."

Catherine stared at Justin, who stared right back. Jordan didn't know how to respond. He was watching their close group of friends break up right in front of his eyes.



"Hey, c'mon guys," he started, trying to figure out some way to ease the tension.

Stephanie was having none of it. She turned on her heel and left. Catherine followed her out of the room, out of Justin's house, and out of the Math Kids.

"We have to do something," Jordan said, almost pleading with Justin.

"No, we don't. They made their choice, and they have to live with it. Now, how about tackling that math problem since we won't be getting any help from Stephanie and Catherine?"