



# CHAPTER ONE

What Oliver Knew \* Who Doesn't Love a Good Orientation Video \* A Late Drop-Off \* Getting to Know You, Getting to Know All about You \* Matilda's Curious Composition Book

-----

**PRESENT DAY**



“All right, then,” Frankie said, rubbing his hands together. “Ready for the big pond, Oliver?”

Oliver Beane and his best friend, Frankie Figge, stood outside the massive, newly refurbished building that would be their academic home for the next three years.

“No,” Oliver said.

“Aw, come on.” Frankie gave Oliver a nudge with his elbow. “I say in three months you and I will be running this place.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Six tops.” Frankie smirked with a cocksure confidence

that never ceased to amaze Oliver. Frankie could have been the poster child for goofy twelve-year-old awkwardness: big feet and hands; long, skinny legs and arms; and a boy's shoulders trying to hold up a man's head. Fortunately for Frankie, he had an unshakable sense of self-esteem. He wasn't full of himself, exactly. He just liked who he was and seemed to figure that everyone else would eventually catch on, sooner or later.

Despite his best friend's back-to-school spirit, Oliver was not feeling the middle school love. About a year ago, Oliver's parents had gotten a divorce after his father left them for a twenty-eight-year-old Pilates instructor named Selene. Then, a few months ago, his father and Selene moved to Phoenix. Oliver knew that starting middle school was supposed to be a big deal, a major life event. But as far as he was concerned, he'd had enough major life events for a while.

Frankie and Oliver made their way up the steps to the main doors, where Oliver collided briefly with a surly, hulking boy.

"Watch it, turdburger," the boy growled as he elbowed Oliver aside and went into the school.

"Okay, maybe it'll take eight months," Frankie said as they stepped into the school.

Eight months. The truth was that Oliver doubted he'd still be around in eight months. A few weeks ago, Oliver's uncle Tommy,

his mother's older brother, had driven all the way from Massachusetts to visit for a few days. His mom and Uncle Tommy were close, and Oliver knew that his uncle was pressing for her and Oliver to move to Belchertown, where he owned a chain of tire stores. Oliver knew this because while Uncle Tommy was staying with them, he kept dropping subtle hints about how great Belchertown was, how much there was to do, how much fun Oliver would have.

It didn't take a genius to put it together.

Oliver and his mom lived in the town of Lake Grove Glen, about thirty miles west by northwest of Chicago, in the house where his mom grew up. He'd always liked Lake Grove Glen—it had a way of being small-town and a little bit city at the same time, and he didn't want to leave. But ever since things had started changing, it didn't feel like his hometown anymore. Lately, it just felt like another part of his life that, soon, wouldn't be.

As Oliver and Frankie made their way into the auditorium for orientation, Oliver bumped into the school janitor, a thin, wiry, and very shaggy man.

“Oh, sorry, sir,” Oliver said.

The janitor mumbled something back and scurried away.

“Man, twice in one day,” Frankie chided Oliver. “It's like you're not even here, buddy.”



“Who, you may ask, is Preston Oglethorpe?” the narrator intoned rhetorically. “Only the smartest man you’ve probably never heard of!”

Oliver, Frankie, and the rest of the sixth-grade class were crammed into the school auditorium for a morning orientation, the culmination of which was an informational video, projected on a massive whiteboard screen up on the stage. The video was shot in the retro-throwback style of those old 1950s educational films with all the random pops and scratches of old film stock.

A file photo of an adult Preston Oglethorpe, staring blankly at the camera in an awkwardly fitting suit and tie, was replaced on the screen by one of a younger Preston Oglethorpe winning a school science fair.

“A former student at this very school, Preston won the state science fair in sixth grade but then left our hallowed halls in seventh grade . . . for MIT!”

A series of photos followed showing Preston Oglethorpe in college, head and shoulders below all the other kids in his classes.

“Preston went on to graduate at the ripe old age of fourteen and earned the first of several PhDs, this one in applied mathematics, by the time he turned seventeen. Then, at twenty-eight,

Preston won the Nobel Prize in Physics for his work in applied chaos theory.”

Oliver couldn't stop thinking about the faraway look in the man's eyes. Oliver knew he was supposed to be impressed, but despite all the glamorous pictures of Preston Oglethorpe winning awards and meeting powerful and famous people, Oliver just felt sad for the guy. He never looked happy; he never even smiled.

“But then,” the narrator continued as the music took on an ominous tone, “Preston Oglethorpe suddenly *vanished*. To this day, no one knows where he went or even if he is still alive.”

The screen dissolved into a huge, cheesy question mark superimposed over a portrait shot of Preston Oglethorpe.

“So where is Preston Oglethorpe now? Well, that is one mystery which, truly, only he can solve.”

The lights came up and the kids were dismissed to their classes.

“Neat video, eh?” Frankie said as they were walking back to class. “Kind of bogus, though, how the first thing we learn here is about a guy who already makes our lives seem small and meaningless by comparison. I mean, like sixth grade isn't intimidating enough without reminding us that we're totally basic?”

Oliver wasn't really listening. He was still thinking about Preston Oglethorpe and that faraway, lonely look in his eyes.



Matilda Sandoval and her dad sat in the car outside school. All the other kids were inside; the school day was already underway. It was a routine of sorts. Showing up a little late, when everyone was in class, made being the new kid, if not easier, at least less hectic.

This wasn't the first time they had done this. Matilda doubted it would be the last.

"You know," her dad said, "I had to start at a new school when I was about your age."

He'd never said that any of the other times. Matilda wondered if he'd been saving it.

"Across the street," Matilda said as she opened the worn composition book resting on her lap. "Four o'clock. Little warm for such a heavy coat. Possible shoplifter, maybe a concealed weapon."

Her dad followed her gaze as she jotted down her observations in the composition book. He spotted the suspect, a little old lady in a winter coat, as she entered a dry cleaner.

"Ummm, okay," her dad said. "I'll look into it."

Matilda finished writing, snapped the composition book closed, and got out of the car.

“Don’t forget your physical therapy,” she said, poking her head back in.

“I won’t,” her father said with a wistful smile. “Have a good day, okay?”

Matilda nodded soberly, shut the door, and headed into the school.



Oliver’s first impression of the new girl was that she was the most serious person he’d ever seen in his entire life. Her posture was right out of a health book, her stride quick and all business. Even her hair was intense, tightly coiled in a ponytail that tolerated no dissension in the ranks.

The principal had brought her into the classroom at the start of the period, but somehow it seemed like he was following her into the room.

“Good morning, Mr. Pembleton,” Principal Wilson said to their teacher while the serious girl stood at the front of the room, sizing things up. “Sorry to interrupt,” he continued. “But I have a new student for you. This is Matilda San—”

“If I may, Principal Wilson,” the girl said, stepping forward to address the class. “Good morning, my name is Matilda Sandoval. I like to be called Matty, but, well, no one ever does.”

Mr. Pembleton and Principal Wilson looked at each other quizzically, unsure whether or not one of them should reclaim the floor, so to speak.

“I’ve lived in four different cities in the last three years,” the new girl, Matilda, continued. “For any mathletes in the room, that’s a new school roughly every two hundred and seventy-three days.”

Oliver caught her giving a slight nod to two boys in the back who were presently checking her long division.

“My passions are modern surveillance techniques and staying current on the latest advances in computer encryption. I also enjoy true crime novels, play a passable flute, and am dreadful at any sport involving a ball.”

She then turned her attention to the teacher. “Mr. Pembleton, shall I take that empty desk by the window?”

“Pardon? Who?” Mr. Pembleton stumbled, caught off guard at suddenly having his class returned to him. “Oh, yes. That will be fine, Matilda.”

After Matilda passed Oliver on her way to the desk she essentially assigned to herself, Frankie leaned over to him. “Well, that was different.”

“Yeah,” Oliver said absently as he watched the new girl take her seat. She sat up straight in her chair, folded her hands, and looked dead ahead as Mr. Pembleton resumed



class. But her shoulders sagged a bit, and Oliver sensed that even though it was still just the morning, she'd already had a long day.



“Hey, Oliver. How old do you have to be to trade penny stocks?” Frankie asked, reading a pop-up ad on his phone.

It was lunchtime. The boys sat at the end of a long cafeteria table, by themselves.

“I’m guessing thirteen, at least,” Oliver said. “Still pushing for that dog?”

“Uh-huh,” Frankie said, putting his phone down on the table. “But between the twins acting like little maniacs and my dad starting his new catering business, it’s ‘not a good time,’ which is parent-speak for—”

“Not enough money,” Oliver said, finishing the thought.

At the other end of the long table, a big kid in a Clash T-shirt and Doc Martens walked over and knocked a lunch tray to the floor. Oliver recognized him as the kid he’d collided with on the way into school this morning.

“That’s Billy Fargus,” Frankie said. “A girl in homeroom was telling me about him.”

“What’s his deal?”