

they  
trouble  
with rules

*For Mia and Zeke*



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Summary: Now that she is in fourth grade and is not supposed to be friends with boys anymore, Nadie must hide her friendship with Nick, her neighbor and lifelong best friend, but when a new girl arrives who believes that some rules need to be broken, Nadie learns a lot from her.

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Leslie Bulion

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# 1

## PENCILS

**T**he new girl blew into Room Twenty on a whoosh of air as cool as the spaces between snowflakes. She smelled a little like cats.

I noticed the smell right away because of my uncle's cat, Francis. When we're visiting my uncle, Francis glares at my brother and me from the bedroom doorway the whole time. That cat is always hatching an evil plot, which is why I don't trust cats.

Mr. Allen walked over to our four-desk group and pushed an empty desk so the front of it touched the sides of mine and Nick's. On the other side of Nick, Owen picked up two of those pink eraser caps that normal people use on the ends of their pencils and got busy. Busy sticking them in his nose, that is.

"Eeww!" Lacey squealed in my ear. "Don't look, Nadie!" She covered her face.

I looked. It's always a good idea to keep an eye on Owen. He hauled in a gigantic breath and snorted. The erasers shot out: *thoop-thoop*. He crawled under his desk after them, then put them back on his pencils. It's also a good idea never to touch anything that belongs to Owen if you can help it.

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"Fellow learners," Mr. Allen said in his attention-please voice. "This is Summer Crawford." He put his long arm around the new girl's shoulders and steered her to the empty desk. "She'll be joining our class for the rest of the year. I'm sure you will all help her feel welcome." Mr. Allen raised one sharp, black eyebrow at Owen, then turned back to the new girl.

Owen ducked behind his desk lid. When he picked his head up for a second, I saw that the erasers were back in his nose, this time with the pencils attached. He ducked back down. There was another snort, and then *thoop-ding, thoop-ding*, the pencils hit the inside of his desk. It's a good thing Owen's desk is diagonally across from mine so I never have to look inside there.

"Owen," Mr. Allen said. "I think—"

We never got to hear what Mr. Allen thought because right then our principal, Mrs. Winger, opened the classroom door. She motioned to Mr. Allen.

"I need to step outside with Mrs. Winger for a moment," Mr. Allen said. "Let's help Summer feel welcome with our excellent Room Twenty behavior." Mr. Allen went into the hall and closed the door behind him.

The new girl bent at the waist and shimmied out of an enormously wooly sweater. Her shirt hiked up under her arms, and we all got a good look at her wide, pale back. Right in the middle was a brown beauty mark that looked like Louisiana, and bunching up from the waistband of her jeans, a shiny roll of purple underwear.

"Eww—your shirt!" squealed Lacey.

The new girl tugged her shirt back down, then flumped into her seat. The tips of her hair fluttered against her chin like



## PENCILS

dry grass. She smiled all around as if one of the most embarrassing things in the world hadn't just happened to her.

"Hi," she said, sticking her hand right out at Nick. "I'm Summer."

Nick's face filled in pink between his freckles. The room got so quiet I figured everyone had quit breathing.

Maybe they went by different rules in Summer's last school. We sure did last year in third grade, when we were in the lower primary school, next door. But here in Upper Springville Elementary, boys and girls in the fourth grade barely talked to each other. And they definitely didn't shake hands.

Every eye in the room was trained right on Nick. He gulped. He slouched down small in his seat. He coughed and scratched his knee. Then he reached out and gave Summer's hand a quick pump. "Nick," he mumbled.

"Oooh!" Lacey whispered loud enough to be heard in China. "Nick likes the new girl!" She jabbed me with her bony elbow. I edged away from her.

"Love at first sight!" Max yelled from the back of the room.

At the next group of desks, Alima and Jess giggled.

Owen stood up, pointed his finger at the back of his throat, and made gagging noises. Other kids laughed. As if she didn't notice any of it, Summer lifted her desk lid and started putting away her pencils and folders. Nick just sat there looking miserable. Nick says he is *not* too nice for his own good, but he is, and shaking hands with the new girl like that was a perfect example. He knew that Owen would make fun of him. Now Owen was going to keep making fun of him until the whole class joined in.

In school we had to act like we hardly knew each other, but

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Nick Fanelli was my best friend. I had to do something to help him.

Through the glass in the door I could see Mrs. Winger's hands waving as she talked. Mr. Allen was nodding. Owen gagged again, louder, to make sure he had every kid's full attention. I needed to distract them. Maybe I could fold up a supersonic paper jet. A good one could loop all the way up to the ceiling, then shoot across the room. But a paper airplane could get me into trouble, and besides, it would take too much time to make one. I needed a better plan. I decided to pretend I was choking. As far as I knew, choking wasn't against any rule, and I could do that right at my desk. Out in the hall, Mr. Allen was doing the talking and Mrs. Winger was listening. It was now or never. I coughed and wheezed, making the sounds as scary as possible, then put my hands around my throat. With a loud gasp I tipped sideways off my chair.

*Slam!* Summer's desk lid dropped shut. The room went silent. From where I was lying on the floor I craned my head around to look. Summer had a pencil poking out of each ear, a pencil dangling from each nostril, and four more pencils jutting from her mouth like long yellow fangs. She had flipped her eyelids inside out for good measure.

Lacey screamed. Max leaped out of his chair. "Gross!" he shouted. "Ugh!" Alima and Jess wailed. The rest of the kids hooted and hollered.

The door swung open and hit the wall—*bang!* I pulled myself up into my chair. Everyone stopped still. You could hear the clock tick. I stared down at my desktop, letting the long brown curtain of my hair fall forward to hide my face. Mr. Allen's purple high-top sneakers squeaked across the room and came to a halt right beside my desk.

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My heart beat a *rat-a-tat-tat*, louder than the snare drum in band. I wondered if I could climb into my desk and shut the lid behind me. Next I wondered if Summer and I would be visiting Mrs. Winger's office singly or together. Did they send two kids at a time? I didn't know. I'd never been in visit-the-principal's-office trouble before.

"Is everything all right in here?" Mr. Allen asked. I examined the worn-in scratches on my desktop and swallowed hard. I didn't look at Nick, and I definitely didn't look at Summer Crawford, pencil queen.

"Just fine," Summer said.

I screwed my eyes shut. Well, that solved one half of the mystery. With her yellow fangs and the rest of it, Summer was definitely going to see Mrs. Winger. Under our desks, Nick poked my knee with his foot. I ignored him. He planted his foot on my knee and shoved. I opened one eye. Eight pencils with their big fat erasers on the tops lay in a neat line on Summer's desk. Her eyelids were right side out.

"I feel at home here already," Summer told Mr. Allen. She smiled so big she showed all of her teeth.

"Wonderful!" Mr. Allen bobbed his head up and down. "Better than marvelous!" He rubbed his hands together. "Now let's get on with our morning work. Math first."

Every kid in our class let out one long breath. Everybody, that is, except Owen. He just stared at Summer. He stared so hard I thought he might stare a hole right through to the other side of her.

"Need a pencil?" Summer asked him.

Owen opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again like he wanted to yell, except his voice wouldn't cooperate. Nick bit his lip and buried his nose in his math book so that

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all you could see of him was his short red hair. I knew Nick wasn't worrying about that handshake anymore, and he wasn't worrying about long division.

He was worrying about what was going to happen now that Summer Crawford was here.

## 2

# THE BOYS' SIDE

**G**ather your edible matter, fellow scientists," Mr. Allen announced just before noon. "I'm due at a meeting in Mrs. Winger's office in three and a half minutes."

I shot my hand into the air. "But what about our *Springville Spark* editorial meeting?" I asked.

Mr. Allen got up from his desk. "I'm sorry. We'll have to cancel it today. We're going to have some free time this afternoon, and we'll finish this week's issue then. We'll celebrate our study of space with this issue before we zoom back to Earth for our new science unit on insects. Now, let's form our exemplary Room Twenty lunchroom line."

Nick put his meal ticket in his pocket and trudged over to the line forming by the door. I dug around in my desk for my brown paper bag. It didn't matter about the *Spark*, not really. We could finish the class magazine at free time. The problem was that instead of eating lunch together in the classroom, Nick and I would have to eat at separate tables in the zoofeteria.

I wished lunch could be the way it had been in third grade. I'd always sat with Nick. But in upper school's lunch, the cafeteria was divided down the middle by an invisible wall—boys on the window side, and girls on the side near the hall. Now

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I'd have to sit with Lacey, Alima, and Jess, and Nick would be stuck all the way across the room at a table with Owen, Max, and some other boys.

I got in line behind Summer and followed her out into the hall. She was pulling her big sweater over her head. The faint smell of cat drifted my way, and of course I thought of that horrid Francis again. If you ask my almost-three-year-old brother Zack what a kitty says, he growls and hisses because that's what Francis does.

"You don't need that," I said to Summer, whose head was still somewhere inside her sweater. Winter had just turned the corner to April, but a sky the color of dirty dishwater hung over the playground. "It's still sleeting. We're not going out."

"I am." Her head pushed through the neck hole and she shoved her arms into her sleeves.

"You're not allowed to go out by yourself," I told her. "School rules."

"Where's the cafeteria?" She brushed her hair behind her ears. The front parts escaped again right away.

I pointed. "Around that corner."

Summer looked both ways like she was getting ready to cross a street. "See you there," she said, slipping out the playground door.

I watched her run across the pavement and duck under the slide. What could she possibly be up to?

"Nadie, please stay with the class."

I jumped about three feet in the air, and I wasn't even the one who'd ignored the rules. The rest of the kids had already disappeared around the corner. Mr. Allen stood waiting for me.

I got on the end of the lunch line without looking at Mr.

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Allen, but I could feel him watching me. The sour smell of rubbery franks and beans filled my nose and clogged the back of my throat. *Don't ask about her*, I prayed. *Don't ask, don't ask.*

"Nadie, wasn't Summer back here with you?"

"Ye-es." It came out like a squeak. The lunch line stopped moving. I looked straight ahead as if there was something enormously interesting on the wall outside the lunchroom doorway. All I had to do was get through the door before Mr. Allen asked me anything else. What was holding up the line? Summer might as well have taken a shortcut to Mrs. Winger's office, because that's where she was headed this time for sure. I squeezed past Alima and Jess, trying to get to Lacey.

"Hey!" they complained.

"Nadie?" Mr. Allen's long arm stretched over them and clamped onto my shoulder.

I stopped. "Mr. Allen, I—"

"Did you think you lost her?" He turned me sideways by my shoulder. "She just got ahead of you—look!"

Summer was walking over to the other side of the room, past the lunch monitor, Mrs. Wolfowitz. Mrs. Wolfowitz was shorter than most of us and as wide as a doorway. She always sat on a chair in the middle of the room with her eyes shut for the entire lunch period. We'd learned that she didn't much care what we did as long as we stayed in our seats to do it. The older kids say that a long time ago a fifth grade boy got up before the bell, just to throw something away. "That's it," Mrs. Wolfowitz had said. "Let's go." She took him away. No one saw where he went. The next day the lunch lady was back in her seat in the middle of the lunchroom. But they way they tell it, no one ever saw that fifth grader again.

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Mr. Allen still had me by the shoulder. He gave me a little shove toward Summer. "She's certainly learning her way around quickly, isn't she?" he remarked.

I wasn't so sure. Summer had gone outside, run around the building, and sneaked back in through a different lunchroom door. Now she was heading toward an empty table on the other side of Mrs. Wolfowitz—a table on the *boys' side*.

\* \* \*

As I neared her, I could see that droplets clung to Summer's sweater. Her cheeks and nose were the color of supermarket strawberries.

"Got my lunch." She held up a plastic grocery bag. Then she slung one leg over the bench to sit down.

"Summer, wait!" I yelled. But my words drowned in the voices of almost two hundred other Upper Elementary lunchers.

"What?" She plunked herself down on the bench. Then she yanked on my arm and I landed next to her.

"You just sat us on the boys' side," I wailed.

"Boys' side?"

"Yeah. We were supposed to sit over there." I pointed toward the safe area on the other side of Mrs. Wolfowitz.

"You mean girls can't sit here?" Summer peered into her plastic bag. "Who made that stupid rule?"

"I don't know—everybody," I said. "It's just how you have to do it." I glanced from side to side. The way the boys were looking at us, we might as well have been aliens with three purple heads.



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"I don't get it." Summer shrugged. "But okay, let's move over to the other side." She closed her bag and started to get up.

"No!" I pulled her back down. "We can't!"

Summer stared at me like I'd gone completely nuts. "Just tell me this," she said. "If we're not supposed to sit *here*, then why can't we go over there?"

"Because once you sit down, you're not supposed to get out of your seat." I pointed at the lunch lady asleep in her chair and lowered my voice. "That's Mrs. Wolfowitz's rule. If you get up, she makes you disappear."

Summer Crawford twisted around and studied the woman in the chair. Then she turned back to me and raised one eyebrow. She took a napkin out of her bag and calmly spread it on her lap.

I could tell she didn't believe me about Mrs. Wolfowitz.

\* \* \*

So far no boys had sat down at our table, and I was beginning to think that I might survive the lunch period after all. I took out the yogurt, the carrot sticks, and the almond butter sandwich with raisins that my dad had packed for me. He's a healthy-food fanatic. He says the three-to-eleven shift my mom works at Brennan Engineering is called the graveyard shift because all the junk they eat will kill you. Lacey thinks my dad and my lunches are not "normal." The last time I had to eat in the lunchroom, she tried to get me to eat those blue and yellow gummy giraffes that stick your teeth together.

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"It's fruit," she'd said, pointing to the flashy advertising on the package. "See?"

Looking at Summer's plastic bag, I wondered if she ate those blue and yellow giraffes, too, or what.

"Why'd you have to go outside to get your lunch?" I asked her. I opened my yogurt and gave it a stir.

"Refrigeration," she said. "I used that petrified snowbank by the corner of the playground." She took a family-sized jar of mayonnaise out of her bag. Next came a turkey drumstick big enough to bat a Wiffle ball. It smelled like the day after Thanksgiving. She put the turkey leg on top of the empty bag and opened the jar. Then she ripped off a hunk of meat and used it to scoop out a blob of mayonnaise.

"Mmmm," Summer said, chewing with her eyes closed. Her knuckles were shiny with grease.

Watching her made me want to take a break from eating. I put my yogurt spoon down on my napkin.

Just as Summer tore off another chunk of turkey, Nick walked by. He was so keen on looking straight ahead that he slipped on an empty juice box and almost dropped his tray. Having to pretend we weren't friends this year had been a lot of work for Nick and me. But today it was turning out to be downright dangerous. And I knew Nick was wondering what in the world I was doing sitting on the boys' side. I was wondering the same thing myself.

A loud voice at the other end of our table interrupted my thoughts. "Aw—no other seats." Owen slammed his tray down. "Guess we have to sit here with the cave girls." Max and two of their friends from Mrs. Novotny's class sat with him. They looked over at us and snickered.

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"Baked beans," said Owen. "Great ammo!" He blew the wrapper off of his straw and loaded a bean into his shooter. A bean zinged right past his head from the direction of the next table. Owen aimed his straw for a return shot while the others loaded.

Figuring they'd forget about us now, I turned away and took a bite of my sandwich.

"It must take a long time to make all that." Summer waved a piece of her slimed turkey at my lunch. "I'm not what you'd call an early riser, so I go for the grab grub."

"I don't get up early enough to make my lunch either," I said. I felt a little embarrassed. "My dad makes it."

"I don't have a dad."

I stopped chewing.

"Don't worry," Summer said. She gave a little laugh. "It's not like I had one that died or anything. He left before I was even born."

A baked bean flew right by us and smacked into the side of Owen's head. It came from the table on the other side of us, but he must have thought I shot it. "Let's get 'em!" he yelled.

"It wasn't me," I insisted, pointing. "It came from those boys over there." Owen turned his attention to the table next to us, and I looked back at Summer.

I thought about what she'd said about her not having a dad. I held up my carrot sticks. "Want some?" I asked her.

She gave me this funny smile, kind of shy and wide open at the same time. "Thanks," she said, which mostly just looked like her mouth moving because Owen and the others were now in some sort of shouting match.

"Put beans in it!" Max yelled.

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"I'm putting Jell-O in it, too!" Owen bellowed. "And I'm shaking it up!"

Summer took a couple of carrots and ate them, smiling and chewing at the same time. "Here." She pulled a hunk of turkey off the leg and tipped her mayonnaise jar toward me. "Try some of mine."

I could see greasy globs of mayonnaise shivering on the inside of the glass.

"NOW!" Owen shouted.

He leaned past me and sloshed the contents of his milk carton into Summer's open mayonnaise jar.

"HAH-HAH!" he yelled. The other boys pounded his back and cheered.

Summer screwed the lid on the jar and shook it. Mashed beans and dots of mayonnaise swirled in a foamy pink broth. "Thanks," she told Owen. "I am pretty thirsty." She raised the jar like she was making a toast, then tipped it back and took a swallow. She smiled at the astonished boys through a chalky pink mustache.

"Yah! Gross!" Max slapped the table and high-fived one of the other boys. The rest of them looked like they might be sick.

Owen jumped up. His face was all red. "You—you can't do that!" he yelled.

And just like that the lunch lady was at our table. The rest of the cafeteria suddenly went quiet, as if someone had hit the mute button.

"That's it," said Mrs. Wolfowitz. "Let's go."