

I'll Never Cheat Again

Never, ever, ever, ever, *ever* cheat on the USTP.

I've always known that. If they find out, punishments are *severe*.

It's gotten me a little shook up.

USTP stands for United States Testing Program. It's this big test we take at the end of the year. If we fail it, we have to retake the grade.

Retake.

The.

Grade.

And if you cheat, it's an automatic fail, no matter your scores.

An.

Automatic.

Fail.

So that's why I've vowed to myself not to cheat. And I plan on keeping that promise. No matter how hard it gets.

"Miss L. Larding, do you need to retake your hearing test? I *said* to stop tapping your fingernails when I am trying to talk!" The words *retake* and *test* give me a jolt of terror, but it fades quickly.

Miss Talind, my teacher, can be strict, but she's actually really nice.

But she's fun to mess with sometimes.

I shoot her my most defiant, glariest glare. "Miss L. Larding, *why are you looking at me like that?* Stop that at once!"

My sister, Aia, snorts, and it sets the whole class into a fit of giggles—and Aia and I are laughing the hardest.

"That is quite enough, class! Miss L. Larding, you need to learn to control yourself. You will be staying in for recess, and your detention will be *quite* challenging. As I was saying, no communication in *any way, shape, or form*, unless it's with me—Yes, Miss L. Larding?"

My name is Adina Lelia Larding. Aia's is Aiana Idgiana Larding. That's why she calls us that. "Isn't communicating with you a *way, shape, or form* of communication?" I quote sassily. I mimic her fast, straight voice as I do so.

"*Miss L. Larding*, I take back your sister's punishment! She shall be punished tomorrow. *You* will take her place! We do not talk back to adults!" Miss Talind's cheeks are red. I can't tell if it's because of anger or embarrassment.

"*Miss L. Larding*, I take back—" I start to mimic, but then I realize I've reached the limit. It's not funny if you go too far. This'll be funny later.

"That's it, dear," Miss Talind says smugly as I freeze. "Class, I hope you never behave as poorly as Miss L. Larding has. Now, begin your test."

I press the button. Question One is adding negative numbers; that's easy for me. After about ten seconds, I'm already moving on to the second question.

$$2x \cdot 13 = 104$$

What is the value of X?

Well, 104 divided by thirteen is eight, I can do that mentally. Eight divided by two is, of course, four. I type that in. Next questi—

Help.

The words are on a pink sticky note. I glance around the room, trying to find the person who sent it. Miss Talind is out of the room, so Tamera is watching us. She lets us call her by her first name. She's got to watch two classes. But who sent the note? Faith? Hope? We're close.

Aia.

She's staring right at me, a look of panic in her eyes.

I shouldn't do this.

I can't do this.

I won't do this.

But I still find myself writing on the next note in the pad:

Okay. What's the question?

And on that same note, Aia writes back:

$$15x - \frac{9}{2}y = 5$$

$$33x = 66$$

$$63x + 22y = ?$$

The math takes me a little while. I check my work until Aia starts tapping her foot impatiently. I hand back the note with my answer:

192.

Sure enough, she types in my answer - *my* answer. it feels wrong, and I'm already regretting it -

192.

I think that I am going to hate that number forever.

It continues this way; I alternate between doing my own work and helping Aia. Now that Miss Talind is back in the room, we have to be more careful. Every time I see her read the paper and type in my answer, I feel queasier.

I submit my test.

She submits her test; my test.

This is more than just the rude teasing Miss Talind endures from me.

This is...I don't know *what* you call it! But it's so much more than the usual mischief. This is serious. When I look up at the stars, I can almost hear Orian saying, "Girl. You're better than this."

I didn't sleep at all last night.

So is it my fault I'm a little drowsy?

Well, yeah. I didn't sleep because of my actions...

I love the feeling of the breeze in my hair...especially when I'm riding a unicorn...

“MISS L. LARDING!” ...And the unicorn is gone. I whirl around, looking for my horned buddy. She’s not there. Ugh.

“Whereamiwhyamihere?” I mumble.

I’m surrounded by giggles. Oh. I was dreaming. I fell asleep.

“Now is not the time to get your beauty sleep!” Miss Talind shouts.

More giggles. Even Aia has joined the club now.

“Yes, Miss Talind,” I say blandly. It’s the first thing I’ve said since I cheated. The guilt has pushed all of the joking spirit out of me.

I never hear anything for the next few days.

I can see people’s lips moving, but it’s not enough to pull me out of my daze.

Until I make my decision.

“Miss Talind,” I start to say, but she interrupts me. “Adina! Just who I wanted to see!” She’s in “friendly mode.” When she is, she calls me by my first name. I cringe. For this, I don’t know if I want to tell her when she’s in friendly mode.

So I don’t. “I was just wondering if you could help me with my division...”

The next day, I’m ready. “Miss Talind...”