

## Chapter 1

# A World of Possibilities

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## A World of Possibilities

**I**n the school auditorium, Jefferson sat with his fifth grade class as the students of Flint Hill Elementary filed in. It was near the end of the day, and he was ready to get out of school. He didn't think much of assemblies—lectures on bullying, school safety ... boring. While he waited, he took a tiny notepad and pencil from his pocket and started to draw. Drawing was something Jefferson loved to do—second only to painting.

Jefferson's best friend, Darren, was sitting beside him. "What are you drawing this time?"

"The usual," Jefferson said. "What I see."

Jefferson sketched a picture of the scene before him. He drew in Principal Cooler, who was standing on stage with a large chalkboard behind her. He worked on her poofy hair and black-rimmed glasses.

Principal Cooler cleared her throat. "Students and staff," she began, "this year marks an important year for Flint Hill. Our school is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary!"



Principal Cooler politely clapped and the audience followed suit.

“But the school building is showing its age. It’s time we address that.”

A hundred whispers filled the room. Jefferson paused from his drawing, wondering what Principal Cooler had meant.

“They’re going to tear this place down!” Darren smacked a fist into his palm. “Bam!”

“In your dreams.” Jefferson knew that wouldn’t happen. Flint Hill was proud, and the small town was even prouder. Some famous scientist who invented plastic—or something like that—went here. They’d never demolish the school.

Principal Cooler grabbed chalk from the tray. “Today I’d like to hear suggestions about how we can make our school look better than ever for our big anniversary celebration. Who has an idea?”

Dozens of hands shot into the air. Principal Cooler called on a second grade boy.

“Let’s build a roller coaster that starts in the cafeteria and ends at the bus stop,” he said.

“Roller coaster.” Principal Cooler wrote the words on the chalkboard. “That might be a bit much, but thank you for your suggestion.” She turned to face the audience. “Now what else would make the school a real standout?”

Jefferson thought about Flint Hill, sitting atop its grassy, manicured slope. The lawn always looked amazing because



Mr. Summers, the groundskeeper, had a knack for cutting perfect patterns with the riding mower in the grass. But the building itself was a miserable two-story rectangular shoebox in comparison. It had been painted in white over and over again to make it look new when it clearly wasn't. *Something that will stand out*, Jefferson thought.

Then it hit him. "A MURAL!" he blurted.

Everyone turned to look.

"We could paint something cool on the side of the building!"

"Like graffiti?" Darren said. "Sweet."

The audience buzzed with excitement.

"Isn't that illegal?" someone called out. "Awesome!"

Darren began to chant. "Mural, mural, mural!"

Jefferson elbowed Darren to stop him from causing a scene. But it seemed Jefferson's idea was taking over the room. "MURAL! MURAL!" everyone shouted.

As the teachers tried to quiet everyone, Principal Cooler thought it over. She waited until the room was calm and set down her chalk. "A mural is a brilliant idea! That would look great on the wall that overlooks the lawn and faces the town. It will transform the entire school. But who will paint it?"

"That's easy," Darren called out. "Jefferson can draw and paint anything."

Jefferson's ears burned. *Darren, quit it*. How could *he* do the mural? He wasn't an artist, like the real grown-up people who got paid to do that.



"It's true," said Katherine, a classmate sitting a row behind him. "Everyone knows Jefferson is a killer artist. Miss Baar is always using his work as an example in art class."

Jefferson swallowed. *She does?*

Miss Baar stood from the front row. "Principal Cooler, I have no doubt Jefferson can paint something perfect for the mural. He's a true artist. I'd say we put him in charge."

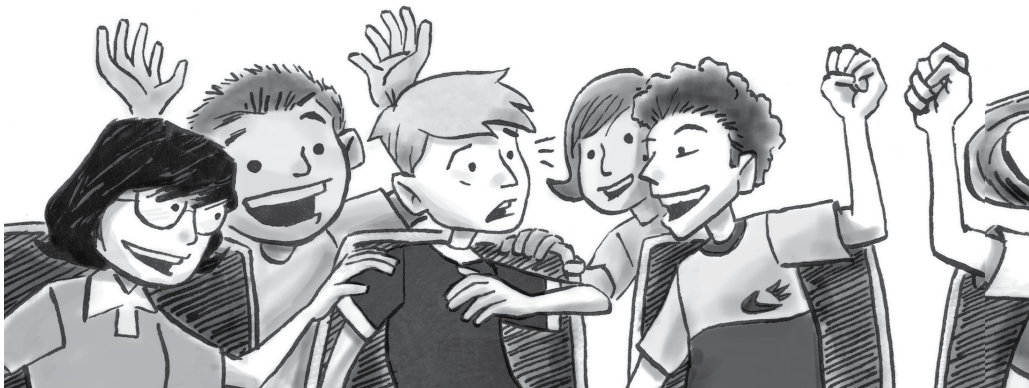
Jefferson gaped. *True artist? Put me in charge?* What had Miss Baar put in her coffee this morning?

But before Jefferson could refuse the job, Darren had started another round of chanting. "Jefferson! Jefferson! Jefferson!"

The decision was made.

After the assembly ended, the students were released for the day. Principal Cooler stopped Jefferson at his locker. "I can't wait to see your vision for the mural."

"My vision?" Jefferson mumbled as he tossed a few things into his backpack. "I mean, my vision will be great!"





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Principal Cooler was all business. She opened the schedule book she was holding and ran her finger down the page. "Our anniversary celebration is in a month. I'm inviting the mayor, so you'll need to get started ASAP. Let's have an assembly next week to look at your plan." She slapped the book shut. "Sound good? Great!"

She spun on her heel and left Jefferson standing alone at his locker.

*The mayor? A plan by next week?* He slung his backpack over his shoulder and closed his locker. How was he going to do this?

He headed out the side entrance. Mr. Summers was riding the mower, doing his weekly cut of the lawn. Jefferson strode out onto the grass and turned to look at the largest canvas he had ever laid eyes on. The two-story white brick wall seemed to go on forever. What was he going to fill that with? How was he even going to get up there?





A few students spotted Jefferson before they got onto a school bus. “Do something cool,” a boy said, “like snakes!”

“Paint a zoo,” a girl said.

“No, superheroes!” suggested another boy.

As the kids boarded the bus, Jefferson thought about their ideas. Suddenly, he could picture something. A vision! He pulled out his notepad and jotted things down.

The following week, the school auditorium was noisy with excitement. Principal Cooler was already onstage. A screen had been set up, and Jefferson was standing behind a laptop. Once the students quieted, Principal Cooler said, “Jefferson will present his design idea for the mural. When he is finished, I will ask for your opinions.”

Jefferson’s hands started to sweat as he pulled up an image. “I hope you like it.”

The auditorium got quiet as everyone took in Jefferson’s design. There was a lot to look at—superheroes, a zoo, snakes, flowers, a roller coaster—practically everything that had been mentioned to Jefferson in the last week.

Finally, a kindergartener squealed, “The puppy I wanted is so cute!”

Jefferson sighed with relief. She liked it!

“But Sparkles really should be pink.”

Jefferson’s smile faded. He glanced at Principal Cooler, who was standing to the side. “Interesting,” she said. Then she smoothed her skirt and faced the audience. “So? Raise your hand if you have feedback for Jefferson.”



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Dozens of hands shot up. One student suggested that Jefferson use different superheroes, another thought that he should add a motorcycle, and another wanted him to change all the colors to black and white. Jefferson bit his lip and scribbled down all their ideas.

"Not to worry," Principal Cooler said. "Jefferson has another week to come up with a revision. Assembly dismissed!"

After school, Jefferson went outside to look at the wall again, hoping to be inspired. He nodded a hello to Mr. Summers, who was mowing perfectly cut lines up and down the lawn. Jefferson turned to stare at his canvas. Only two stories of white wall. Yet he had enough ideas from everyone for a four-story wall! How was he going to design something that would work?

*Ugh.* He was just a kid. He wasn't a real artist!

Then it hit him. Of course!

He was just a kid, and all he'd been doing was listening to other kids. The teachers were the ones who made the rules at Flint Hill. He should find out what they would want, and then he couldn't go wrong.

The following week, everyone was gathered in the auditorium again. Jefferson knew this design would go off without a hitch. After Principal Cooler got everyone's attention, Jefferson brought up an image on the screen. There it was, Flint Hill—everything the teachers thought would represent the school best, suggested by the rule-makers







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themselves. Jefferson beamed. Mr. Averett, the librarian, had asked for books. Ms. Mislavsky thought drama masks would be nice. Mrs. Mouritsen wanted a falcon, the school mascot. Jefferson even put in the cup of coffee Miss Baar said she really needed the other day.

"Oh my," Principal Cooler said, studying the screen. "I see you've also included an image of a bigger paycheck for Mr. Lu. Interesting. Um ... anyone have feedback for Jefferson?"

Hundreds of hands shot up.

Principal Cooler picked a girl in the front row.

"Where's Sparkles?" she said.

"Yeah, what happened to everything we wanted?" said another student.

Many of the students were upset that everything they had asked for was gone. But the kicker was when Mr. Averett said he wanted the books on the mural to be arranged by the Dewey Decimal System, *not* alphabetically.

Jefferson's stomach sank. When he looked at his design again, he didn't see anything that had made him confident anymore. It was a disaster. The mural was not cool. How could he ever think a bunch of teachers' ideas could be great to begin with? What was he thinking?

But Principal Cooler remained as calm as ever. "Everyone, we put Jefferson on the job because he is a true artist, right? And Flint Hill is not just any school. We are a proud school. We see the possibilities in everyone, and we see it with Jefferson, just like we did with the plastics inventor



who went here fifty years ago. Let's give Jefferson the boost he needs." Principal Cooler did more polite clapping.

"I'm a believer!" Darren called from the audience. "Jefferson! Jefferson! Jefferson!"

Before long, the whole school was chanting. But this time, Jefferson wondered if they meant it, or if they just loved being able to shout in school without getting into trouble.

After the assembly was over, Jefferson strode out to the lawn again.

There was Mr. Summers, like an old friend, mowing that lawn and making the school look terrible in comparison. Jefferson groaned. Maybe it was Mr. Summers's fault that Jefferson was stuck in this mess!

Jefferson looked at the wall, lay down in the grass, and closed his eyes. His head was swimming with the ideas everyone had given him. From superheroes to poodles to library books, he'd drawn it all. There was nothing left to draw anymore. He closed his eyes, his thoughts spinning.

"Hey, boy," someone said.

Jefferson opened his eyes. He had no idea how long he'd been lying there.

Mr. Summers was standing over him. "I haven't mowed this spot yet."

Jefferson got to his feet. "Sorry about that."

Mr. Summers took off his cap and wiped the sweat from his brow. "You're the kid who's going to paint that wall, aren't you?"



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"Supposed to."

"Good. It's making my lawn look bad. Make it perfect."

"If I only knew how. No one likes my ideas for it."

Mr. Summers scratched his head. "I'm confused." He pointed at the wall with his cap. "That wall is blank. Don't you have to paint something first? Where's *your* idea?"

Jefferson started to explain, but as he stared at the blank wall, something occurred to him. He hadn't painted anything. He'd been so busy listening to everyone else's ideas. Where was *his*?

Mr. Summers marched back to his mower. "Paint the wall, boy," he called back. "Then ask what everyone thinks. Now I've got a lawn to cut."

As Mr. Summers started the mower, Jefferson glanced at the endless slope of perfectly cut grass that the groundskeeper had already finished.

*Paint the wall.*

Mr. Summers was right.

Jefferson smiled and pulled out his notepad.

The next day, Jefferson told Principal Cooler what he wanted to do. She got him everything he needed: the paint, brushes, and a helper—Mr. Summers. To paint the wall, Jefferson wore a harness and worked on a platform supported by four large ropes hanging from the roof. Mr. Summers would move Jefferson around the wall by using the ropes. Every day after school until the anniversary neared, Jefferson worked on his painting.





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