

STORY ONE

The Case of the Missing Homework

An Illustrated Classroom Mystery

CHAPTER 1

The Homework Challenge



Maya Patel liked three things more than almost anything.

She liked sharpened pencils, books with maps in the front, and knowing exactly what was supposed to happen next.

That was why Monday morning felt perfect.

Her backpack was zipped. Her lunchbox was packed. Her homework folder was in the front pocket, right where it belonged. Even her favorite purple pencil was clipped to the top of her notebook.

Maya patted the front pocket of her backpack just to be sure. “Still there,” she whispered.

Her little brother, Ravi, looked up from his cereal. “What’s still there?”

“My homework.”

Ravi made a face. “Why would homework run away?”

“It would not run away,” Maya said. “But things can disappear when people are not careful.”

Ravi gasped. “Like socks?”

Maya thought about the basket of lonely socks in the laundry room. “Exactly like socks.”

At school, Room 12 was already buzzing.

Zoe Chen was at her desk drawing stars around the date on the board. Amir Johnson was lining up his pencils from shortest to tallest. Leo Brooks was digging through his backpack like he was searching for buried treasure.

A crumpled granola bar wrapper fell out first. Then one sneaker. Then a library book. Then another granola bar wrapper.

Maya blinked. “Leo, why is there a shoe in your backpack?”

Leo looked at the sneaker. "I wondered where that went."

"You are wearing both shoes," Amir said.

Leo looked down at his feet. "Oh. Then this is my extra emergency shoe."

Zoe laughed. "What kind of emergency needs one shoe?"

"A one-shoe emergency," Leo said.

Maya slid into her seat and placed her homework folder carefully on her desk. It was yellow, and her name was written on the front in neat letters: Maya Patel.

She opened the folder and checked inside.

Math page. Reading log. Spelling practice.

Everything was there.

Across the room, Mrs. Rivera clapped her hands twice. "Good morning, Room 12."

"Good morning, Mrs. Rivera," the class answered.

Mrs. Rivera smiled. She had a bright blue scarf, silver hoop earrings, and the kind of voice that could make even Monday feel less Monday-ish.

"I have an announcement," she said.

Leo sat up straighter. "Is it about pizza?"

"No," Mrs. Rivera said.

Leo sank down in his chair. "Then I will try to be brave."

Mrs. Rivera picked up a stack of papers from her desk. "Today we are starting a two-week homework challenge."

The room got quiet.

Maya's pencil was already ready.

"For the next two weeks," Mrs. Rivera explained, "your job is to bring your homework folder every day and turn

in your completed work each morning. At the end of the challenge, everyone who completes it will join our Friday celebration.”

Zoe raised her hand. “What kind of celebration?”

“A reading party,” said Mrs. Rivera. “With games, partner reading, mystery word cards, and a few snacks.”

Leo’s hand shot into the air. “What kind of snacks?”

Mrs. Rivera smiled. “The responsible kind.”

Leo squinted. “That sounds like raisins.”

The class giggled.

“There may be crackers,” Mrs. Rivera said.

Leo nodded seriously. “I accept.”

Maya wrote in her notebook:

Homework Challenge

Bring folder every day.

Turn in homework every morning.

Earn a stamp.

Do not lose anything.

She underlined the last line twice.

Mrs. Rivera walked around the room and gave each student a homework challenge chart. It had ten little boxes, one for each school day.

“When you turn in your homework, you will get a stamp,” Mrs. Rivera said. “The goal is not to be perfect. The goal is to practice responsibility.”

Maya loved the chart immediately.

Ten boxes. Ten stamps. One clear goal.

Perfect.

Zoe leaned over and whispered, “I’m going to decorate mine.”

“Of course you are,” Maya whispered back.

Amir studied his chart. "I think we should make a plan."

Maya nodded. Amir understood the importance of plans.

Leo stared at his chart like it was a snake.

"Two whole weeks?" he asked.

"You can do it," Zoe said.

"Probably," Leo said. "Maybe. Unless something happens."

"What would happen?" Maya asked.

Leo shrugged. "I don't know. Things happen to me."

That was true. Things did happen to Leo.

Once, he forgot his lunchbox on the bus. Another time, he brought his soccer shin guards for show-and-tell instead of his rock collection. Last month, he accidentally turned in a drawing of a dragon instead of his math homework.

The dragon had been very good.

The math homework had not been done.

Maya looked at Leo's messy backpack. "We can help you. Every morning, check your folder before class starts."

"Good idea," Amir said. "And every afternoon, put your homework straight into your backpack."

Zoe drew a tiny backpack on the corner of Leo's chart. "I'll make you a reminder symbol."

Leo smiled. "Thanks. I need all the symbols I can get."

The morning moved quickly.

The class read a story about a boy who built a boat. They practiced spelling words with long vowel sounds. They worked on math problems with carrying.

At lunch, Leo traded carrots for pretzels. Zoe said carrots were too valuable to trade. Amir said both foods

were crunchy, so it was a fair exchange. Maya said nothing because she was still thinking about the homework challenge chart.

By the end of the day, Mrs. Rivera passed out the first homework packet.

“Remember,” she said, “place this in your homework folder. Bring it back tomorrow morning.”

Maya slid the paper into her yellow folder.

Zoe put hers into a folder covered in flower stickers.

Amir placed his into a green folder and tapped the edges until they were straight.

Leo opened his backpack. A pencil rolled out first, followed by a sock and then a spoon.

Maya stared at the spoon. “Why do you have a spoon?”

Leo picked it up like it was perfectly normal.

“Emergency spoon.”

Amir blinked. “What kind of emergency needs a spoon?”

“Pudding,” Leo said.

Zoe nodded slowly. “That is actually the best answer you could have given.”

Maya helped Leo find his blue homework folder. It was bent at one corner, but it was mostly fine.

“Put the homework inside,” she said.

Leo did.

“Now put the folder in your backpack,” Amir said.

Leo did.

“Now zip the backpack,” Zoe said.

Leo zipped it.

Everyone looked proud.

“This is my most responsible moment,” Leo said.

Mrs. Rivera opened the classroom door. “Have a wonderful afternoon, Room 12. I will see your homework folders tomorrow.”

The class packed up. Chairs scraped. Backpacks thumped. Voices filled the room.

Maya put on her backpack and checked the front pocket one more time.

Yellow folder. Still there.

Good.

At the cubbies, Leo bent down to tie his shoe.

“Your emergency shoe?” Zoe asked.

“No,” Leo said. “Regular shoe.”

Maya laughed.

The four friends walked out together. Outside, the afternoon sun made the playground look golden. Parents waited by the gate, buses lined up along the curb, and somewhere near the blacktop, a whistle blew.

Leo suddenly stopped.

His eyes grew wide.

“What?” Maya asked.

Leo swung his backpack around and unzipped it. He pulled out his library book, the emergency spoon, the sock, and the crumpled granola bar wrapper.

Then he pulled out his blue folder.

He opened it.

His smile disappeared.

“Uh-oh,” he said.

Maya stepped closer. “What do you mean, uh-oh?”

Leo turned the folder upside down.

Nothing fell out.

“My homework,” he whispered. “It’s gone.”

Zoe frowned. "But we watched you put it in."

"I know," Leo said.

Amir checked the folder pockets. "Maybe it slipped behind something."

Leo shook his backpack. The granola bar wrapper fell out again, but there was no homework.

Maya looked at the empty blue folder. Then she looked back at Room 12.

The classroom door was already closed.

Leo swallowed. "It was right here. I know it was."

CHAPTER 2

Not Just Leo



The next morning, Leo arrived at Room 12 with his backpack hugged tightly against his chest.

He did not bounce into the classroom the way he usually did. He did not tell anyone a joke. He did not even make a sound effect when he dropped his backpack by his desk, which was very unusual for Leo.

Maya noticed right away.

“Did you find your homework?” she asked.

Leo shook his head. “I looked everywhere.”

“Everywhere everywhere?” Zoe asked.

“Backpack, folder, desk, kitchen table, couch cushions, under my bed, inside my shoe, and behind the toaster,” Leo said.

Amir frowned. “Why behind the toaster?”

Leo shrugged. “At that point, I was checking all places.”

Maya felt bad for him. Leo could be forgetful, but they had all seen him put the homework page into his blue folder. Maya remembered it clearly. Amir had reminded him to zip his backpack. Zoe had even cheered like Leo had won a medal for basic school responsibility.

The homework had been there.

Then it had not.

Mrs. Rivera stood near the homework bin, greeting students as they came in. “Good morning, Room 12. Homework folders in the bin, please.”

One by one, students placed their folders into the plastic basket on the front table.

Maya slid her yellow folder into the bin. Zoe added her flower-sticker folder. Amir placed his green folder neatly on top and tapped the edges so they lined up.

Leo stayed at his desk.

Mrs. Rivera noticed. "Leo, do you have your homework folder?"

Leo picked up his blue folder and walked slowly to the front of the room. He held it open so Mrs. Rivera could see inside.

"It's empty," he said quietly.

Mrs. Rivera looked at the folder, then at Leo. Her face was kind, but serious. "Did you complete your homework?"

"Yes," Leo said quickly. "I mean, I started it. I mean, I had it. I put it in my folder yesterday. Maya saw. Zoe saw. Amir saw too."

Mrs. Rivera glanced toward the three friends.

Maya nodded. "He did put it in."

"He really did," Zoe added.

Amir nodded too. "We helped him check."

Mrs. Rivera's expression softened. "I believe that you tried. But part of responsibility is making sure your work gets from school to home and back again."

Leo looked down at his sneakers. "I know."

"I'll give you another copy to complete tonight," Mrs. Rivera said. "You can still keep going with the homework challenge if you bring it back tomorrow."

Leo nodded, but his ears turned pink.

Maya knew that meant he was embarrassed.

The morning started, but something felt different. Usually, Leo whispered funny comments during spelling practice. Today, he stared at his pencil. Usually, he made tiny drumbeats with his fingers during math. Today, his hands stayed still.

During reading time, Maya peeked at him from behind her book. Leo was looking at the homework challenge chart on his desk. The first box was empty.

Maya did not like empty boxes either.

At recess, the four friends sat on the low wall near the playground. Leo poked a stick into the dirt and made tiny circles.

"It's okay," Zoe said. "You can still turn it in tomorrow."

"But now everyone thinks I lost it," Leo said.

"Not everyone," Amir said.

Leo looked up. "Mrs. Rivera thinks I lost it."

"She thinks you need a better system," Maya said carefully.

"That is a teacher way of saying I lost it," Leo said.

Maya did not know what to say to that, because it was a little bit true.

Zoe leaned back on her hands. "Maybe it fell out when we were leaving."

"We checked outside," Amir said. "We checked by the cubbies too."

"Maybe someone picked it up by mistake," Zoe said.

Leo's eyes widened. "Or maybe someone picked it up on purpose."

Maya held up one finger. "We do not know that."

"But it disappeared," Leo said. "Papers do not just disappear."

Maya thought about Ravi's missing socks and the lonely sock basket at home. Sometimes things did disappear, but usually there was a reason.

"We need facts," she said.

Leo looked hopeful. "Facts are good."

“Fact one,” Maya said. “We saw you put the homework in your folder.”

“Fact two,” Amir said. “You zipped your backpack.”

“Fact three,” Zoe said. “The homework was gone before you got home.”

Leo sat up straighter. “That means something happened at school.”

Maya nodded slowly. “Maybe.”

The whistle blew, and recess ended before they could talk more.

Back in class, Mrs. Rivera asked everyone to take out their spelling homework from the night before so she could check a few examples.

Zoe opened her folder with a proud smile. Her folder was covered in stickers: flowers, stars, tiny cats, and one very dramatic unicorn.

Then her smile disappeared.

She flipped through the left pocket. Then the right pocket. Then she opened the folder all the way and shook it gently.

A reading log slid out.

A bookmark slid out.

A small drawing of a cat wearing sunglasses slid out.

Her spelling page did not.

“That’s weird,” Zoe whispered.

Maya turned in her seat. “What?”

“My spelling page is gone,” Zoe said.

Leo froze. “Gone gone?”

Zoe checked again, faster this time. “It was here. I did it at my kitchen table. I used purple pencil for the challenge words.”