



The Four Points in the Margin

An addition mistake in her favor, a red pen nobody would question, and an honesty that didn't come with a prize

For ages 12-15





Chapter 1

Ninety-Two

The history test came back with a 92 circled in red.

Chaya had hoped for 90. She slid the paper under her notebook before her neighbor could lean over, then felt silly for hiding good news.

At the bottom of the second page, she added the points again while Mrs. Falk reviewed the hardest question.

Sixteen. Twenty-four. Thirty. Eighteen.

Eighty-eight.

Chaya added them a second time. Then a third, more slowly, as if a different total might appear for a girl who checked carefully.

The numbers kept saying eighty-eight. The red circle kept saying ninety-two.





Chapter 2

Nobody Would Count

Nobody would recount her test. Mrs. Falk had forty-one papers from two classes. The error wasn't a changed answer or a smudged word. It was four points of arithmetic that had landed in Chaya's favor.

Her friend Rivka had gotten an 89 and announced she was thrilled with it.

Chaya looked at the red 92 again.

She wasn't changing anything. She hadn't made the mistake. Keeping a grade someone else had written didn't feel like stealing, exactly.

It felt like finding money on the floor of an empty room and deciding not to ask whose it was.





Chapter 3

Two Afternoons

At home, Chaya put the test on the kitchen table and covered the red circle with her hand.

Mama, wearing her plum tichel, was peeling vegetables at the counter.

"Good mark?"

"It says ninety-two. The points add to eighty-eight."

Mama dried her hands and looked at the page. She added the columns herself.

"You're right."

Chaya waited for the instruction. Tell Mrs. Falk tomorrow. It came in her mother's voice inside her head, and she already resented it.

Mama didn't say it.





"What are the two afternoons looking like?" she asked instead.

Chapter 4

The Version With the Circle

"In the first afternoon," Chaya said, "I say nothing. I keep the ninety-two. Rivka studied harder than me and got an eighty-nine, but nobody compares tests, so it doesn't matter. I put it on the fridge."

"And in the second?"

"I tell her. She lowers it. I have an eighty-eight, which is still fine, and also I chose to lose four points, which is the strangest purchase I've ever made."

Mama smiled at that, but she didn't laugh it away.

"What does the first afternoon cost?"





Chaya thought about the fridge. Every time she looked at the 92, she would also see the columns beneath it. The circle would never again mean what it said.

"It costs the mark meaning anything," she said slowly. "And I'd know Rivka's eighty-nine is really higher."

Chapter 5

A Worry With a Costume

"There's another thing," Chaya admitted. "If I tell her, she might think I'm showing off. Being the girl who hands back points."

Mama considered that.

"Is there a way to tell her that isn't a performance?"

"Privately. After class. Just the columns, not a speech."





"Then the worry is real, and there's a way to make it smaller."

Chaya noticed that Mama still hadn't told her what to do.

She also noticed she already knew. The knowing had been there since the third time she added the columns.

Chapter 6

After the Bell

Chaya stayed behind after the bell on Tuesday.

"Mrs. Falk, I added my points. I think the total is eighty-eight, not ninety-two."

She put the test on the desk with the columns showing. She did not explain what kind of person she was. She did not mention Rivka.





Mrs. Falk, whose brown sheitel was pinned neatly beneath her small hat, added the numbers twice.

"You're right. Thank you for catching it."

She crossed out the 92, wrote 88, and initialed the change. The whole thing took under a minute.

"I'll re-check the addition on the class set tonight," she said, as if Chaya had done something useful for the grade book rather than something heroic.

Chaya walked to lunch with an 88 and an empty feeling where a small ceremony might have been.

Chapter 7

No Trumpets

At home, she told Mama the whole thing, including the part she was least proud of.





"I think I wanted her to say I could keep two of the points. For honesty."

"What did you get instead?"

"A correct grade and one initial."

Mama put supper on the table.

"Honesty that only works when it pays out isn't really honesty. It's a transaction with better manners."

Chaya made a face, but the sentence settled somewhere solid.

"I did the right thing and it felt like nothing."

"It felt like nothing because nothing was performed," Mama said. "Something still happened. Your mark says what you actually earned. You're the one who made that true, and you don't have to wait for trumpets to know it."





Chapter 8

The Fridge

The 88 went on the fridge that evening.

Chaya's little sister asked why a lower number was going up when everyone knew 92 was better.

"Because this one is mine," Chaya said.

It wasn't a speech. It was just the answer.

A week later, Rivka found an error on a quiz - two points taken off that she had actually earned. She told Mrs. Falk and got them back.

"You gave me the idea," Rivka said.

Chaya hadn't known anyone was watching. That was fine. She hadn't done it to be watched.

The red circle on the fridge still said 88.



It was, Chaya thought, the first grade she'd ever completely owned.