

Boss of the Whole Sixth Grade
(Sample Chapter)
By Ann Herrick

Chapter One

"Mom, I'm going to be late for school!"

"Just one more, Greta."

Dad used to take all the pictures until he and Mom separated last year. Their troubles started when Dad wanted to accept more *exotic* assignments at work, have adventures, and "see what else was out there."

Mom and Dad didn't know I overheard some of their "discussions." Mom accused Dad of wanting to see "more than *what* else was out there." She said she thought he wanted to see "*who* else was out there."

Dad said that wasn't true, he just wanted to make up for "missing out" on his twenties, because they'd married "so young."

Mom said no one forced him to propose.

Dad didn't respond to that.

Mom also made a big deal out of Dad buying his "little red sports car." She said it was part of the "whole middle-aged crisis cliché."

Dad said he wasn't having any crisis, he just always wanted a sports car and now he had one!

One *discussion* led to another, and next thing they were separating.

Dad and Mom both kept saying how the separation was "friendly," but they didn't fool me. If they were so "friendly," they should've worked it out so that they stayed together!

Or maybe I needed to look up the definition of "friendly."

Anyway, Dad was now out of the country on assignment. Newsmonthly magazine had him taking photos of penguins in Antarctica, which is a long way from our home in Beach Park, Connecticut.

Mom adjusted her phone for the twenty-seventh time. "This year is special. You're in sixth grade." Mom's voice quivered. "Your last year at Beach Park Elementary!"

Mom always got emotional over endings. And beginnings. I could only imagine what she'd be like next year on the first day of junior high. But that was her problem. "Mom! Mari is waiting for me!"

Mom took one last picture. "Okay." She hugged me. "Now hurry, or you'll be late."

"Late?" Grampa looked up from his newspaper. "I can saddle up Blaze."

"Uh ... thanks, Grampa." I kissed his cheek. "But that's okay."

Sometimes Grampa got confused, because his memory wasn't so good any more. Blaze was a horse he had when he was a little kid, growing up on a farm—what he called the "good old days."

"No trouble at all, by gum." Grampa reached for his cane. He'd lost part of his right leg a long time ago, cutting down a tree on the farm. His leg was artificial from the knee down.

"Dad." Mom said. "It's okay. Greta can walk to school."

"All right, Lela. If you say so."

That settled, I called out "So long," as I flew out the door.

I ran over to Mari's. She was waiting for me on her front steps. She wore a brand-new dress, as she always did on the first day of school. Her parents insisted. I wore my usual shirt-and-jeans and, of course, my lucky skull-and-cross-bones ring.

Mari has been my best friend since we were three years old. My first memory of Mari was her showing me a doll, part of a huge collection, all with special outfits. She said, "This doll's name is Yoshie. She's wearing a kimono with morning glories because it is summer. My grandmother made her."

I remember that I showed Mari my Barbie-doll with the hair cut short. I'd dressed her in a camouflage outfit from one of my brother's action figures. "This is Kalinda. She's an adventurer."

"I have a big brother," Mari told me. "His name is Miki. He's bossy."

"I've got a bossy big brother too. Ryan."

We'd both laughed and that's when we decided to be best friends. Now my brother was off at college and hers was a senior in high school.

"Sorry, I'm late, Mari," I said. "But you know my Mom and Grampa."

Mari nodded. "We'll be okay if we hurry. Besides, we're in sixth grade now. No one to boss us around."

Yeah! I pumped my fist. Even if Dad wasn't around, at least I had being in sixth grade to be happy about.

We fast-walked, so we wouldn't be late. Mari's dark hair swished back and forth. My long, wavy hair, which some kids called "rusty red," didn't swish. It sort of bounced all over the place. Mari and I were both short and both looked younger than we really were. Grampa said I was "spunky." I didn't know about that, but I was determined. Mari was too. It's probably why we became such good friends.

We got to school in plenty of time, and ran over to Ms. Dodge's classroom first, because we'd looked forward all summer to having her for our teacher. She was one of the most popular in the whole school.

There was a crowd in front of the door. Mari was small enough to slip through and get a look at the list.

I fought my way closer. "Are we in?"

"I am," said Mari. "But I don't see your name!"

"There has to be a mistake! If you're in Ms. Dodge's class, I must be too." I elbowed my way past Tiffy Summers and her suitcase-sized book bag. "My name has to be on the list."

Mari pointed to the bottom of the sheet of paper posted on the classroom door. "See for yourself, Greta."

Sure enough. There was Mari Yamada. But that was the last name. Where was *Greta Zipp*? "This cannot be right. We've *always* had the same teacher. 'A' through 'M' in one class, 'N' through 'Z' in the other. It's been that way forever!"

"Not anymore." Tiffy sniffed. She always thought she knew everything. Trouble was, *sometimes* she was right.

"Oh, really?" I tried to sound bored instead of totally worried.

Tiffy flicked her ruler-straight blonde hair. She smiled with satisfaction. She loved being the bearer of bad news. "Yes, my mother said that the office secretary said that Principal Crowell decided it was time to 'mix things up.'"

I had the sick feeling in my stomach that it was true. Still, I let out a big sigh to show that I thought she was wrong. "I guess the only way to find out is to check Mr. Bloom's door."

"You mean Mr. Hopper's door," Tiffy said with her know-it-all smile.

I tried not to sound too curious. "Oh?"

"Mr. Bloom took a job in Alaska. Mr. Hopper is the new teacher." Tiffany took a deep breath and continued. "He's kind of old. At least forty. It's his first year of teaching. He was a male model before."

"Really," I said. "A male model?" Please. Where did Tiffany get her information? Why would some guy handsome enough to be a model want to teach sixth grade? "Mari, let's go check it out." I grabbed her arm and we headed off to the other sixth-grade classroom. Tiffany was right behind us.

I tried to pretend she wasn't there. I was not what you'd call popular, but I was not really *unpopular* either. I was sort of in the middle. Since I *did* have a best friend, I didn't think too much about "being popular" the way people like Tiffany did. When it came to the Tiffany types, I got along with them mostly by avoiding them.

"I'm in Mr. Hopper's class too," Tiffany said, as if she knew it all along. But if she knew it all along, why had she been checking the list on Ms. Dodge's door?

Mari looked at the list first. "Oh, no. It's true, Greta. We're not going to be in the same class! That stinks!"

I had a weird feeling in my stomach, as if ants were running around in there. I'd been so sure Mari and I would be together in Ms. Dodge's class. We had plans. Dreams. Things were supposed to happen the way I'd expected them to in sixth grade.

Still, I elbowed Mari and said, "Hey, no problem."

I'd told Mari over and over not to let her feelings show in front of people like Tiffany. Ryan had warned me about this back in fourth grade when I was complaining about how I got made fun of for screaming over a fake spider Blair Blanchard brought to class. He said some people would just use your emotions as a weapon. But Mari just wasn't good at hiding her feelings.

Fortunately, Blair Blanchard barged in. "Tiffany!" she squealed. "We're in the same class."

"It so is fabulous!" Tiffany squealed back. She was the only person I knew who used the word *fabulous*.

The warning bell rang.

Mari looked at me with sympathy. "It's bad enough we're not in the same class," she whispered. "But now you're stuck all by yourself with those two."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah. What a thrill."

Mari patted my back sympathetically. "Good luck!" She waved as she ran off.

"You too," I said. As if she'd need it. I was the one stuck with Tiffy, Blair, and some dumb teacher I knew nothing about. Ugh. I thought about all the crummy stuff in my life. Dad was away, Grampa was losing his memory, and my best friend was in a different classroom. I trudged down the hall and peeked in the doorway of Mr. Hopper's room. He wasn't there.

I took a desk in back, next to the window. The sixth grade classrooms were in the old section of the school. That meant they were about sixty years old, instead of thirty, like the "new" section.

But I liked the wood floors, old-fashioned chalkboards and, best of all, the old desks that opened on top. They were really sturdy. I guess that's why they were still in use after so many years. Not one had a wobbly leg. Whenever you opened your desk you could whisper, make faces or send signals without getting caught. Plus, you could store all kinds of stuff in there.

Just as I sat down, I heard a huge roar outside. Everyone ran to the windows. A man in a black jacket and helmet on a gleaming black motorcycle pulled into a teacher's parking space.

"Hey, cool!" Brody Hood said. "I'm gonna have a bike like that someday."

"Yeah, right," Jake McCutcheon said. Next thing, he and Brody were arguing.

The rest of us went back to scouting the room to see what kids we'd be sharing a classroom with for an entire school year.

Micah Reynolds skulked in and looked around. His face was already turning three shades of red and nothing had happened yet. He was the only kid who blushed more easily than I did. I was determined to someday find a cure for blushing.

Brody Hood crept up behind Micah and threw a paper airplane right at the back of his neck. Micah let out a yelp and turned all kinds of red.

The room was getting crowded and I hadn't seen anyone who might be a potential friend. Sadie Crump and Zoe Wheaton appeared in the doorway. They were best friends who always sat together, so forget them.

Then Michelle White slipped into the room. Kids sometimes called her Snow White because of her black hair and snowy white skin. She was the quiet type who spent as much time with her horse as with people. But she was nice. I waved at her and pointed to the empty seat next to me.

She waved back. Before she took two steps, Brody Hood started to take the desk meant for her. The thought of paper airplanes, spit balls and rubber bands soaring my way for the entire

school year made me take action. I threw a book on the empty chair before Brody could sit down. "Sorry! Seat's taken."

"Oh, yeah?" Brody curled his lip. "Who says?"

"I say," I said. "Unless you want me to cast a spell on you."

"A...a sp-spell?" Brody's eyes grew as big as basketballs.

"That's right," I said with a wicked smile.

"Aw, I wasn't gonna sit here anyway." Brody stomped off.

I let out a quick breath. Thank goodness Brody was so gullible.

Just as Michelle took the desk next to me, the room went silent. A tall man with bristly black hair filled the doorway. It was the motorcycle man. His inky black eyes surveyed the room.

Suddenly everyone took a seat and stared. It was so quiet I was almost afraid to breathe. Finally the man sauntered over to the teacher's desk. He took off the leather jacket and revealed a crisp white shirt and plain dark tie. He went from a motorcycle gang member to someone who could be on the cover of a men's magazine.

He placed his hands on his hips. In a booming voice he announced, "I'm Mr. Hopper. Your new teacher."

I gulped. He did look as if he could've been a male model. That might have made sixth grade exciting, at least for the girls, except he did *not* look like a fun guy. Not at all.

Instead of being great, sixth grade it looked as if it was going to be a seriously loser year.

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