

# Middle School

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Rated: G

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Summary: In the continuity of the author's "Dagger" series, following "Consequences," it is Marta Kent's first day in seventh grade. In Middle School, she encounters an old rival, and makes the acquaintance of someone who is more than she first appears to be.

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This story takes place a few weeks after "Consequences" in the timeline of the Dagger Series, and introduces Allynda Myers, who is more than she seems.

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"You know," Clark Kent said, laying the paper on the kitchen table, "I think your series is having some effect, anyway."

"Which series?" Lois asked.

"The one on bullies. From what I'm reading, they replaced the principal at Metro Elementary again," Clark said.

Marta Kent looked up. "You mean Mr. Grandon isn't there anymore?"

"Nope," Clark said. "Ms. Parton is going to be the new principal this year."

"They do that a lot," CJ said. He reached for his backpack. This year he and Wyatt Dillon were eighth graders at Jason C. Hunter Middle School, and Marta was a seventh grader. "Remember after that thing with Biff and Grunt, just before Christmas, when I was in fifth grade? We left for Christmas vacation, and when we got back, Mr. Grunlow was gone, and Mr. Grandon took over. Not that it made any difference."

"You'd think they'd be more concerned about their policies than the people that carry them out," Lois said. She wiped food from the face of Rachel Lara, one of the triplets. Rachel had been the smallest of the three babies, and now, at three, was taller than both Lucy, her sister, and William Percival, the only boy in the trio. Johnny and Jimmy, ages nine and seven respectively, were stuffing the last of their breakfasts down at warp speed.

"Yeah, I know," Clark said. "You'll just have to keep pounding them until they decide that bullies need some discipline as well as sympathy and understanding. You can be understanding and firm at the same time. I've seen you do it."

"I wish Mom had been the principal of the school," Marta said. "Susie wouldn't have gotten away with anything."

"Neither would you," CJ said with a grin. He shouldered his backpack. "Hurry up, Sis. We've gotta go, or we're going to be late. Wyatt's meeting us over by his apartment."

Fortunately, Jason C. Hunter Middle School was only a few blocks from the Kent townhouse and Marta and CJ were able to walk the distance within a reasonable length of time. Marta glanced at her older brother as he went out the door ahead of her and then belatedly held it for her. CJ had been doing more of that ever since he and Linda Lennox had been going together. Maybe,

she thought, her big brother was actually starting to grow up. When had CJ suddenly started getting so tall, anyway? Last year he'd been only an inch or so taller than she was, and now she suddenly realized that she was looking up at him. At thirteen, he still wasn't as tall as Dad, but he was almost on a level with Mom, and his shoulders were getting broader every day. She'd seen him in a pair of swimming trunks at the community pool this summer, and heard the candid comments of some of the girls in her age group there. It felt a little funny to hear them oohing and aahing over her own brother! It was funny, though, to see their disappointment when they realized that CJ had a girlfriend.

Wyatt was waiting in front of his apartment house, and he stood up as soon as he saw them. He was carrying a trumpet in its case. Marta knew that two of his brothers and one sister played instruments, but she hadn't realized Wyatt did until this summer. He'd invited her to go with him to the school summer recital, and she'd discovered that he not only played a trumpet, but that he was good at it. He was in the Jason C. Hunter school band, and had a cool uniform and a hat with a fake white feather in it.

"Hey," he greeted them, falling in beside Marta.

"Hey," CJ replied. "All ready for everything?"

"Yep," Wyatt grinned at Marta. "Ready for middle school?"

"I guess," Marta said. "It feels kind of funny not to be going to Metro Elementary."

"It isn't that different," CJ said. "You just have to remember where all your classes are and you won't have any trouble."

Marta didn't answer. They turned left on Michigan Boulevard and hurried down the sidewalk toward the school, five blocks away.

Other children were converging on the middle school, as well, and several school buses were lined up at the stoplight.

Across the street, she saw Valerie Henderson and Maria Hernandez, waiting for them. They waved as Marta and CJ approached and waited as the two Kents and Wyatt crossed the street with the light.

"Hey, Valerie," CJ said. "You seen Linda, yet?"

Valerie shook her head. "Her bus isn't here yet," she said. "I saw Susie Jones, though. She's got her two suck-ups with her, as usual."

Marta made a face. CJ shrugged. "Figured she'd be here. Mr. Grandon never flunked anybody while I was there."

Mr. Grandon, Marta recalled, believed in promoting everyone to keep them with their age group. If Susie Jones could actually read beyond second grade level, she had acquired the skill over the summer.

"Where's your homeroom?" Valerie asked Marta.

"Uh — I'm in A-7," Marta said.

"A-Building is the one over there," Valerie said, pointing.

"They put you with the advanced students. Well, that figures."

"At least she won't have Susie in her room," Wyatt said, in his matter-of-fact way. "She's probably in the remedial group."

"Probably," CJ agreed. "Better get over there, Sis. You don't want to be late for your first day." He looked past her and Marta saw his face light up. "Hi, Linda!"

Linda Lennox joined the group. She had on a new dress, and Marta blinked at the realization that she was wearing lipstick! She'd never seen Linda wear lipstick, or any kind of makeup, before. Her freckles seemed less obvious, and her eyes looked huge. Marta guessed that she must be wearing eye makeup as well, but if she was it was hard to tell. Briefly she regretted the rule her mother had laid down — no makeup before eighth grade. Oh well, Linda was an eighth grader, and thirteen years old. Still, she looked much more grown up than Marta.

Wyatt smiled at her and she heard his voice in her head. "I still think you're prettier."

That made her feel better. She smiled at him. "I guess I'd better get to class." She looked at Maria. "Which room are you

in?”

“A-6,” Maria told her. “I’ll walk over with you.”

The two younger girls bade goodbye to the group of eighth graders and headed across the new campus toward A-Building. Maria glanced back at the others with a sigh. “CJ’s sure cute,” she remarked.

“There’s plenty of cute guys here,” Marta said. “CJ’s not the only one.”

“No,” Maria agreed. “But he’s the captain of the baseball team.”

“Linda’s his girl,” Marta reminded her.

“She might not always be,” Maria said.

Marta didn’t answer. She wasn’t supposed to discuss Kryptonian stuff with anyone else — even her best friend. Maria would find out eventually that CJ was already permanently taken. It was funny to think that, in a few years, Linda Lennox would be her sister-in-law. She pointed. “There’s A-7. I guess I’ll see you later. When’s seventh grade lunch period?”

“Eleven thirty,” Maria said.

“I’m going to be starved by then. I guess I’ll see you at the lunch room.”

Maria waved and went to join the crowd of boys and girls gathering beside room A-6. Marta headed over to A-7.

“Well, well,” a voice said. “Look who’s here.”

Marta glanced around. Susie Jones and her two satellites were standing next to the bank of lockers beside the classroom. She started to pass them when Susie stepped in her way. “I’m talking to you, Kent.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not talking to you,” Marta said. “And you’re in violation of the court order. You’re supposed to stay a hundred feet away from me.”

Susie expressed her opinion of the court order in a short, obscene sentence. “I’m gonna make you pay, Kent.”

“Maybe,” Marta said levelly, “but not right now.”

The five-minute buzzer sounded, underlining the words, and someone opened the door of A-7. Marta stepped past Susie and headed for the door.

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In the confusion of finding all her new classrooms, Marta nearly forgot about Susie, but not quite. As she was gathering her books preparatory to visiting her locker and dropping them off for the duration of her lunch period, the subject returned to the forefront of her mind. Lunch period would be the perfect time for Susie to attempt to make her “pay.”

‘CJ,’ she thought.

‘Huh? What’s the matter?’ her brother’s voice said in her mind.

‘I have a problem. I ran into Susie and her friends this morning. She says she’s going to make me “pay.” She hasn’t learned a thing.’

‘Did you expect her to?’ CJ asked. ‘Nobody that matters will blame her for doing the stuff she does, so she doesn’t take anything the courts do seriously. Not even the stuff this summer.’

‘I guess not,’ Marta said. ‘But what should I do if she starts something? I don’t want to call Dad. It’ll look funny if Superman keeps showing up every time I get in trouble.’

‘Well,’ CJ said, ‘I’m stuck in class for another hour. Eighth graders have the second lunch period. Why don’t you go to the office and report that she violated the court order?’

‘I guess,’ Marta said. ‘I just didn’t want all this stuff to start up again so soon.’

‘Yeah, but you’re probably not going to have a choice,’ CJ said. ‘Look, try to stay with a lot of other people. If she actually manages to hit you, we’re going to have problems. And better call Dad anyway, and let him know what’s happening. Maybe he’ll have a better idea.’

Well, it wasn’t the solution that she had hoped for, but it was

fairly practical advice. Marta got to her feet and hurried to the door with a crowd of other students. The last class before lunch was Algebra, and Marta had discovered that the things that they were covering were the same as she had studied in the last couple of months in her sixth grade class, in which she had excelled. That was one good thing, anyway.

“You’re Marta Kent, aren’t you?” one of the girls asked.

“Huh? Yeah,” Marta said. She didn’t recognize the speaker, although, on second thought, she looked familiar. She was a tall girl with very dark skin and a flock of freckles across her nose. Her black hair was braided fashionably and gathered into a braided bun at the nape of her neck. A pair of tiny pearl pierced earrings adorned her earlobes and Marta was briefly envious.

“I’m Allynda Myers,” the other girl said. “I go to the Metro Tai Kwon Do Dojo, too. I’ve seen you there a few times. I’m in the class after yours.”

“Oh,” Marta said. The class after hers was an advanced brown belt class. “I guess that’s where I’ve seen you before.”

“Probably,” Allynda said.

“I guess you’re headed for lunch?” Marta asked. Maybe if she had a witness, Susie and her friends would be a little less eager to make trouble.

“Just as soon as I get rid of my books,” Allynda said. “My locker’s over by C-building.”

“So’s mine,” Marta said. “Mind if I walk over with you?”

“Nope,” Allynda said. “Let’s hurry. I’m starved.”

The two of them hurried out the door and walked quickly toward C-building. As they crossed the blacktop, Marta saw Susie and her friends coming toward them. Susie must have seen that she was with Allynda and stopped, scowling. Marta headed for her locker, which was only a short distance from Allynda’s.

The books were soon deposited in the lockers and the two girls made a direct line for the cafeteria. Susie and her friends had vanished, and Maria met them by the doors. “Hi, Marta.”

“Hi.” She turned to Allynda. “This is Allynda Myers. She’s in my Algebra class. Allynda, this is Maria Hernandez.”

“Hi,” Allynda said. “Aren’t you in Mrs. Phelps’ English class?”

“Yeah,” Maria said. “I sit a couple of rows across from you.”

“Great,” Allynda said. “Come on; let’s get some lunch.”

The lunch wasn’t anything to get excited over, but it was all right, Marta supposed. It was some sort of casserole with green beans and a limp green salad. The three girls found a spot together at one of the long tables, and set their trays down.

“I’m in PE next period,” Marta said. “I hope we don’t get field hockey first. I don’t like it.”

“Me, either,” Allynda said. “That’s my next class, too. I heard a rumor that they’ve got a Judo teacher, and sometime this year we’ll all get six weeks instruction in it. I always wondered what it would be like to try something different from karate, just to see what it’s like.”

“Me too,” Marta agreed. “It sounds like fun.”

“I’m in PE next period, too,” Maria said. “I hope it’s not softball right away. I’m terrible at it.”

“Yeah,” Allynda said. “I heard it’s volleyball, though. That’s not so bad.”

“I like volleyball,” Maria said.

Out of the corner of her eye, Marta saw something come whizzing toward her through the air and reached up instinctively to catch the missile. It was an apple, and it smacked firmly into her palm instead of striking her. A glance in the direction that it had come from showed her that Susie, Lynn Montgomery and Darlene Fry were seated four tables away, and, judging by the voice that uttered the under-the-breath cussword, it had been Darlene who had hurled the apple. The girl made an obscene gesture at her, and she looked quickly away.

“Wow!” Maria said. She obviously had missed the by-play.

“Good catch!” She glanced over at the other table and turned back, making a face. “Looks like they’re still at it.”

“Who?” Allynda asked.

“Three girls from my old school,” Marta said. “They were the school troublemakers.”

“You never get away from them, do you,” Allynda said. She glanced briefly in Susie’s direction and her brows went up.

“Susie Jones?” she said.

“You know her?” Maria asked.

“Yeah. She was in my modern dance class this summer. She’s a real —” Allynda broke off. “She’s not very nice,” she amended.

“I know,” Marta said. “I’ve got a court order that says all three of them are supposed to stay away from me, but they aren’t doing it.”

“You should tell the office,” Allynda said at once. “If it’s the law, they have to keep her away from you.”

“I’m going to, right after we finish eating,” Marta said. “I ran into them this morning. Susie’s already threatening to get me.”

Allynda shook her head. “Some people never learn,” she said. “They think the rules are for everybody else but them.”

“Susie sure does,” Maria said. “She used to steal other kids’ lunches — and sometimes their lunch money.”

Marta didn’t comment. She concentrated on finishing her lunch. As long as Maria and Allynda were with her, the chances were that Susie and her friends would keep away. They never went after other kids when there were equal numbers — a sure sign, her mom had said, that Susie and the other two were cowards at heart. Maybe, but they sure knew how to cause trouble. Marta hoped it never came down to them against her, because she sure wasn’t going to stand there and let them beat on her. They might not be able to hurt her, but they were certain to hurt themselves on her nearly invulnerable body, and she was bound to be blamed. If it ever came down to that, she decided, she wouldn’t injure anybody, but she would put up just enough resistance that an ordinary person could be expected to give them. Maybe it would provide a reason to leave her alone in the future.

But it would still be better if it didn’t come to that. Marta finished her lunch and waited while Maria and Allynda finished, and then got to her feet. “I’m going over to the office.”

“I’ll go with you,” Maria said.

Allynda also rose. “So will I.” She glanced over her shoulder toward the other three girls, but said nothing.

Marta also glanced back. Susie, Lynn and Darlene were also getting up.

“Looks like they’re following us,” Maria said softly.

“They won’t try anything with a lot of people around,” Allynda said. “Come on.”

They left the lunchroom and headed toward the office. Susie, Lynn and Darlene followed.

As they made their way toward the office, Marta glanced quickly around. There were only one or two people within sight. Mostly everyone else was still eating.

“Hey, Kent,” Darlene’s voice said. “Wait up.”

“Hurry,” Maria whispered.

The three girls increased their pace. From behind them the sound of footsteps speeded up as well. A glance over her shoulder showed Marta that the three girls were gaining, and were quickly closing the distance separating the two groups. Susie was grinning in a way that didn’t look a bit amused. The larger girl reached out and grabbed Marta by the back of her shirt, yanking her to a halt.

“I’m not finished with you, Kent,” she said. She looked past Marta at the other two girls who had spun to face her. “Get out of here,” she said. “And if you say one word, you’ll be next.”

Marta yanked her shirt free of Susie’s hand. “Leave me alone!” she said.

“Fat chance of that.” Susie reached out again, and this time grabbed the front of Marta’s shirt. Marta struck the hand away.

“Don’t touch me,” she said levelly. “Maria, go to the office and tell them what’s happening.”

“If you do, you’re gonna pay,” Susie said. She grabbed Marta by the neck of her shirt again. “You know what happens to people who report me.” She looked at Allynda. “And you, too.”

“I don’t think so,” Allynda said. She, too, glanced at Maria. “Go on,” she said. “Get one of the teachers or someone. Tell them what’s going on.” She turned to look coolly at Susie. “Are you sure you want to take on both of us?”

Susie hesitated, apparently surprised at the black girl’s reaction. “This is none of your business,” she said. “Do you want to get hurt?”

“I won’t get hurt,” Allynda said. “But you will.” She shifted position slightly, balancing on the balls of her feet. “But if you want to find out for sure, come on.”

Marta reached out, seized Susie’s hand, exerting just a little extra strength, and removed it from the front of her shirt. She, too, shifted her balance, and reminded herself not to put any super strength into her defensive moves. “I told you not to touch me,” she said. “Go on, Maria.”

“Don’t do it, Hernandez,” Susie said.

Maria looked Susie in the eye and her face hardened with resolution. “I’m tired of you,” she said clearly. “I’m tired of you pushing smaller kids around. If you think you can handle all of us, let’s see you try.” She clenched her fists.

For a long moment, the scene held static. Susie, Darlene and Lynn looked at each other as if they couldn’t believe what they had just heard, and back at the three girls facing them.

Ms. Walker, Marta’s algebra teacher, stepped around the corner and stopped at the sight of the confrontation. “What is going on here?” she asked sharply.

Silence for a second. “Nothing,” Susie said.

“Are you sure?” Ms. Walker said, dubiously.

Marta looked straight at Susie. “Nothing,” she said. “We were just talking.”

Darlene and Lynn nodded vigorously.

“Well, all right,” Ms. Walker said. She regarded them for a moment. “We have very definite rules about fighting on school grounds. I hope you remember that.”

The six girls were quiet as the algebra teacher walked away. Susie glared at Marta. “You’re still gonna pay. All you got is some time. You won’t always be with your friends.”

Marta smiled faintly. “Maybe not.” She deliberately turned her back on Susie and the other two girls. “Come on,” she said to Allynda and Maria. “Let’s find something to do ‘til the bell rings.”

“Aren’t you going to tell the office about the restraining order?” Maria asked as they walked away, leaving the trio looking after them.

“I think my dad and mom should do that,” Marta said. “I think they have to give the office a copy of the court papers, anyway.”

“Probably,” Allynda said.

“Thanks for helping,” Marta added.

“No problem,” Allynda said. “Let’s go over to the library. I need to get a book about South American tree frogs. Would you believe my science teacher already assigned research projects?”

“Are you kidding?” Maria said. “Who have you got?”

“Mr. Jenkins,” Allynda said. “Room C-6.”

“Oh no,” Maria said. “I’ve got him for sixth period.”

“So do I,” Marta said. “Oh well, maybe we can work on the reports together. Would you and Allynda like to come over to my house after school?”

THE END