

PART ONE
FREE PARKING

MY PARENTS ALWAYS TOOK my side when I was a kid, no matter how much I screwed up. When I smashed my brand new Sega Genesis during a temper tantrum, they blamed the game “Sonic the Hedgehog” for getting me riled up. When I lost my passport at the airport, they blamed themselves for entrusting it to me. So when I told them what Elliot had done to me, I was pretty surprised by their reaction.

“Maybe it was an accident,” my father said. “Accidents happen all the time.”

“I don’t think it was an accident,” I said.

“Are you sure you didn’t imagine it?” my mother asked. “You have such an amazing imagination.”

I struggled to resist the compliment.

“No,” I said. “It wasn’t my imagination. This thing definitely happened.”

It was Monopoly night and even though my father had rolled a

seven, he hadn't yet moved his wheelbarrow. It just sat there, on the wrong square, abandoned. Eventually, both of my parents got up and went into the kitchen.

"Mom? Dad?"

They didn't respond but I could hear them murmuring to each other on the other side of the door.

"He pushed me down the stairs," I said, for what seemed like the hundredth time of the night. "He pushed me, on purpose, in front of a lot of people. It was really crazy."

Eventually, my parents returned to the table. I noticed that my father was holding a beer. I had only ever seen him drink at weddings and funerals and I was mildly shocked. They both hesitated for a moment, hoping the other one would do the talking.

"The thing about Elliot," my mother said finally, "is that he's different from most boys."

I felt a sudden stab of guilt.

"Oh geez," I said. "Is he retarded?"

"No," my father said. "Not exactly."

"What is it then?" I asked. "What's different about him?"

My mother cleared her throat.

"He's rich," she said.

My father nodded.

"He's *very* rich."

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When I look back on the past five years of my life, which have been dominated by Elliot Allagash in almost every way, I can't help but think about how strange it is we met in the first place. By

the time he showed up at my school, in a white vest and boat shoes, Elliot had lived in seven cities, including London, Brussels, and Zurich. Elliot's father Terry liked to switch homes regularly, based on his whims. The only reason he had moved the family to New York, according to Elliot, was that his favorite glovemaker had opened up a store on Madison Avenue. The choice of Glendale Academy was far less arbitrary: it was the only private school on the East Coast that would consider taking Elliot as a student. While living in those seven cities, he had gotten himself expelled from more than a dozen top-tier schools. Only Glendale, with its dilapidated gym and dated chemistry charts, was financially desperate enough to overlook his record. By the time I met Elliot, his offenses included vandalism, truancy, unprovoked violence, drunkenness, hiring an imposter to take a standardized test, and blackmail. He was thirteen years old.

It's strange we crossed paths. But it's even stranger that we became best friends.

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Glendale was a small school and it was getting smaller every year. The three long tables in the cafeteria could accommodate about sixty students, but there were only forty-one in my eighth-grade class. When we ate lunch, the twenty most popular kids sat at the back table and the next twenty squeezed into the middle table. I sat at the third table.

Now I'm sure that if I wanted to I could have wedged myself into the middle table—I'd done it once by turning my tray sideways. But the truth is I *liked* the third table. It was spacious, quiet

and, as far as I was concerned, perfectly located. Most students treated lunchtime as a social activity. But I preferred to think of lunchtime as a kind of contest, the goal of which was to drink as many chocolate milks as possible. I didn't consider lunchtime a success unless I had consumed at least five cartons. At any other seat in the cafeteria, this would have been an impossible dream. But by positioning myself within ten feet of the lunch lady, and working closely with her, I could accomplish this feat almost every day.

I was working on carton number three one afternoon when I noticed that Elliot was sitting right beside me. He had no food in front of him, just a large black notebook.

I hadn't seen Elliot since he had inexplicably pushed me down the stairs four days ago, on his very first morning at Glendale. I assumed he had sat down next to me in order to apologize. But by the time I went up for my fifth chocolate milk, it was clear he had no intention of doing so. He never once looked in my direction during the meal. Instead, he just stared at his notebook, noisily scratching the pages with a razor-sharp fountain pen. He sat next to me at lunch the following day, and the day after that, and both times it was exactly the same. He never spoke to me or even looked at me. He just sat there, writing. Sometimes he ripped a piece of paper out of his notebook, crumpled it up and tossed it onto the floor. And once in a while he snapped his fingers before jotting something down with a flourish. I thought about asking him what he was working on, but it seemed important and I didn't want to interrupt. It didn't occur to me until years later that he might not have been working on anything. All that scribbling

and crumpling and snapping—that was Elliot’s way of saying hello.

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Whenever there was a physical altercation between two students, both of them got detentions, regardless of who started it. The policy seemed unfair to me, but I didn’t see any point in arguing with teachers. And besides, I didn’t really mind detention. It was only an hour long and Ms. Pearl, the elderly librarian who supervised it, let us each take two pieces of Laffy Taffy from her bowl at the start of every session. School felt crowded and claustrophobic, but detention was usually empty, except for me, Ms. Pearl and whichever boys had attacked me over the course of the week. It was a peaceful environment and sometimes, during stressful weeks, I actually looked forward to it.

Occasionally, Ms. Pearl made us fill out detention forms, but I knew from experience that nobody actually read them, so I never spent much time on them.

Name: *Seymour*

Grade: *8th*

Offense: *Fighting*

Describe what happened: *I was standing by my locker, humming a song from the radio, when Lance came over and started fighting me.*

What have you learned from this experience?

Apparently humming is one of the things that sets Lance off and makes him want to fight you.

What could you have done differently?

Nothing.

How do you plan to modify your behavior?

I will try not to hum around Lance.

There was a lot to like about detention: the quiet, the candy. But the best part was that Jessica was there. During the school week, I only caught glimpses of her. She was always surrounded by a buffer of boys who followed her from class to class and blocked her from view. But during detention, that buffer dissolved, and I got a chance to observe her up close.

Jessica earned her detentions by flagrantly violating the dress code, over and over again, in a variety of shocking ways. Her outfits were so obviously inappropriate for school that teachers routinely forced her to change into gym clothes in the lobby before classes even began. If she claimed not to have any gym clothes with her, the teachers would sprint to the Lost and Found and drape her with whatever garments they could find there. They moved with the urgency of firemen struggling to extinguish a five-alarm blaze.

It was astonishing to me how much someone's life could change in just a couple of months. In seventh grade, Jessica had been shy and mousy, a nervous girl whom teachers were constantly reminding to "speak up." But over the summer, everything about her had gotten much louder. Somehow, she had experienced all of the positive effects of puberty and none of the negative ones. Her face had grown angular without succumbing to acne. She'd sprouted several inches, but her teeth had remained

perfectly straight. And while certain parts of her body had swelled enormously, she had retained her size-zero frame. Her body had become so obscenely proportioned that even teachers had a difficult time interacting with her. They stuttered or tripped over their words, and occasionally, she would have to ask *them* to “speak up.”

Jessica never wore a backpack or carried around any objects that would suggest she was a student at our school. At the beginning of every class, a few boys would dash over to her table and lend her the supplies she needed to get through the next forty-five minutes. I sometimes overheard girls call her stuck-up, but they just didn’t know her as well as I did. Jessica was just a person, like everybody else. Sure, she sometimes screwed up and wore tube tops or face glitter. But who couldn’t relate to wearing the wrong clothes? I knew I could. On two separate occasions, I’d accidentally shown up to school still wearing my pajama bottoms. Was there any difference?

And besides, even if she *was* breaking the rules on purpose, who could blame her? I had never encountered a human like Jessica before, but I had read plenty of X-Men comics and I thought they provided me with a pretty solid frame of reference. In my mind, Jessica was like a brand new superhero who had only recently discovered her mutant powers. She had to get a crazy costume. It’s the first thing you did when you became a superhero.

Even though many months had passed, I still remembered our first conversation. We were sitting in detention at the beginning of the school year when she suddenly swiveled toward me and smiled.

“I’ll trade you my Laffy Taffys for a pencil,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

It was the longest conversation we had ever had, and I often replayed it in my head.

Ever since that day, I made sure to bring extra pencils to detention in case she needed one. On the face of it, our relationship was pretty superficial: I gave her one pencil each week in exchange for two Laffy Taffys. But there was more going on than a simple economic transaction. I would have given Jessica pencils for free, even if there weren’t any Laffy Taffys involved. And I liked to think that she would still have given me her Laffy Taffys, even if I had no pencils to offer her.

We didn’t know each other very well, but she always made sure to thank me by name.

“Thanks, Seymour!” she’d say. Or, “Thanks a bunch, Seymour!”

And I’d say: “Of course, anytime!”

It was one of the highlights of my week, right up there with eating the Laffy Taffys themselves.

I was displaying an assortment of pencils on my desk for Jessica to choose from when Elliot showed up to serve his time for pushing me down the stairs. Even though we’d sat together everyday at lunch that week, we still hadn’t spoken. He was fifteen minutes late to detention, but he moved incredibly slowly.

“Looks like someone needs a watch!” Ms. Pearl said.

Elliot did not respond. I noticed that he was wearing a very large and elaborate watch.

“Well, you still get candy,” she said, offering him the basket.

Elliot ignored her and took a seat in the back.

“No candy?” Ms. Pearl exclaimed. “Come on, all boys like candy!”

Elliot looked down at the detention form lying on his desk. After a long sigh, he picked it up and held it out at arm’s length, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger, like it was a piece of garbage. As soon as Ms. Pearl turned her back, he loosened his grip and let it flutter to the floor. Then he took out his notebook and started writing.

There were four of us that day: me, Jessica, Elliot, and Lance. Lance hadn’t attacked any specific person that week, but he had gotten a detention anyway for “general violence.” He was doodling a lightning bolt in the margins of his detention form when his pencil tip broke from the force. He held it up to the light and groaned.

I smiled as Lance rifled through his backpack, looking in vain for a sharpener. Sure, he had me beat in a lot of categories. He was stronger, funnier, more popular, less startled by noises, etc. But when it came to effective class preparation, I could teach him a thing or two. There was a reason why Jessica came to *me* each week for pencils. Because when everything was on the line, she knew she could count on me. And not just for pencils; for erasers, scotch tape and whatever else she needed.

Jessica scooped a handful of pencils off my desk and hurried across the room.

“Hey Lance,” she whispered. “Need a pencil?”

She fanned them out in front of his face so he could see them all at once. He stared at them for a while, smirking.

“Can I take two?”

Jessica nodded rapidly and Lance plucked out his two favorites.

“Thanks Jess,” he said.

She averted her eyes, embarrassed.

“Of course!” she said. “Anytime!”

She plopped the remaining pencils onto my desk, returned to her seat, and watched in rapt silence as Lance finish doodling his lightning bolt.

Some of my pencils rolled onto the floor, and when I stooped to pick them up, I noticed that Elliot was watching me. He kept staring at me for the rest of detention, even as he unscrewed his pen and flipped to a new page of his notebook.

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My parents rarely asked me how school was going. It’s not that they weren’t interested; the stakes were just too high. Glendale wasn’t particularly glitzy by Manhattan standards. It cost significantly less than those top-tier prep schools that lined Central Park and dotted the hills of Riverdale. But it was still an expensive school—the most expensive one my parents could afford. They never mentioned money around me, but our apartment wasn’t very large and if I stayed up late, I could hear them talking about their financial struggles through our shared bedroom wall, in the hushed, low tone they reserved for that subject alone. They were paying an incredible percentage of their income to send me to Glendale and I think they were both secretly terrified that their investment was coming to naught.

If my parents had told me my tuition cost a hundred dollars or

a million dollars, I probably would have believed them either way. Money was meaningless to me until it was converted into rock candy. My father had recently begun to give me five bucks a week to teach me the value of a dollar, but the five-dollar bill he handed me each week might as well have been a voucher with the words GOOD FOR ONE MEDIUM BAG OF ROCK CANDY printed on it, because that's the only thing I ever considered buying with it. When I tried to visualize the amount of money I was wasting by going to Glendale, I pictured myself wading through an entire *roomful* of rock candy, like Scrooge McDuck, scooping up the pieces and tossing them over my head. It felt that obscene.

On the rare instances in which my parents asked me about school, I felt tempted to confess everything: How I was the only student in third-year French whom the teacher had to address in English. How someone had sarcastically nominated me for class president at an all-school assembly, and it had prompted laughter so prolonged and intense that the principal actually had to bang some kind of gavel, which I had never seen before, to make it stop. How I had faked my last four fevers just to have an excuse to stay home and take a break from it all. But I didn't want them to think I was ungrateful. And besides, I had a feeling they already knew about all my problems, even though I never talked about them. They never asked me follow-up questions about school. If I told them the swim test had been "normal" with "no weird things" they took me at my word and allowed me to change the subject. And when I said I had a fever, they never consulted a thermometer. They just squeezed my shoulder, carried the television into my room, and told me to feel better.

Their standards for me were almost unbelievably low. They congratulated me on Cs and hung Bs on the refrigerator. If I managed to get an A on something, they immediately called my grandmother, even if it was late and she was ill.

“No!” she would exclaim. “I can’t believe it! I *don’t* believe it!”

“It’s true!” my mother would say. “Seymour, tell her!”

“It’s true,” I’d mutter.

And then she would start screaming, *really* screaming, like the time she won the Mediterranean cruise at our annual synagogue raffle. I appreciated the support; but sometimes I wished that the bar was just a little bit higher.

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One week had passed since Elliot pushed me down the stairs and he still hadn’t said a single word to me. He continued to sit beside me at lunch, though, scribbling in his notebook and staring creepily at me from time to time.

I was trying my hardest to ignore him. We had a French vocabulary quiz after lunch and I was determined to do well for a change. I was memorizing the French words for animals when I felt a firm tap on my left shoulder. When I looked over, Elliot was facing me. It was the first time we had ever made eye contact and I was struck by how tired he looked. His face was smooth and unblemished, but the bags under his eyes were dark and craterous. He somehow looked both young and old for his age.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

It didn’t occur to me until he started speaking that I had never actually heard his voice before. It was high-pitched and lilting, but

also weirdly phlegmatic. He sounded like an elderly British woman with a lifelong smoking habit.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The bell is about to ring,” he said. “And yet you’ve only consumed two chocolate milks. At this rate, you’ll never finish the five cartons you find it necessary to go through during each and every lunch period.”

I forced a laugh.

“I don’t always drink that many.”

“Yes, you do,” he said, flipping idly through the pages of his notebook. “In fact, you often drink as many as six.”

His eyes widened suddenly.

“On one occasion . . . you drank *seven*.”

I looked down at my lap.

“I didn’t think anybody saw that.”

“So?” he said. “What’s the problem? Are you ill?”

“No—just nervous, I guess. You know, because of that French quiz.”

He grabbed the book from my hands.

“Why are you looking at the animals page? The quiz is on job names.”

“When did he say that?”

“He didn’t,” he said. “But it’s obvious.”

“What do you mean?”

He curled his fingers and leisurely examined his cuticles.

“Mr. Hendricks never writes his own quizzes. He’s too naive. He always just photocopies them straight out of the book.”

“So?”

“So, there are only nine vocabulary quizzes in this chapter. And we’ve done the other eight in class. There’s only one left.”

He flipped my book open to the “Occupations” page and handed it back to me. I couldn’t believe it. There were five minutes left in lunch and I had neglected the only page that mattered.

“How did you figure all that out?” I asked.

“Basic reasoning.”

I started to study the page, but at this point, I was more interested in Elliot’s strange book.

“What are you working on?” I asked.

“It’s none of your business,” he said.

“Oh. Sorry.”

I quickly returned to my book. *The farmer, the businessman, the cook*—

“It’s research,” Elliot said. “I’m doing research.”

“Oh, really? On what?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that.”

He stared at me in silence for a while, until it was clear that I wasn’t going to press him for additional information. Then he started talking again.

“My father donated a sizable amount of money to this horrible place and it seems that I’ll be forced to stay here for a longish period of time. I’m studying the school to make my time here as painless as possible.”

He flipped through his notebook and showed me some of the diagrams he had made. One charted the frequency and duration of fire drills. Another ranked the teachers by seniority. There were detailed maps of the school, including the boiler room and main-

tenance tunnels, and a few random codes which looked like locker combinations.

“What’s this one?” I asked, pointing to a list of students’ names.

“It’s a status index,” he said. “I’ve been trying to chart everyone’s position. See? That’s you, at the bottom.”

“That’s *way* off,” I said.

“You think you should be higher?”

“No . . . that part’s right. But the rest of it needs some work. Like, Lance should be much higher. You didn’t even put him in the top five.”

Elliot nodded slowly.

“What else?” he asked.

I scanned through Elliot’s list. I noticed that he hadn’t put himself anywhere on it.

“Well you should probably put Jessica higher,” I said. “And the bottom’s wrong too. Some of these people have lots of friends.”

He handed me his fountain pen.

“Fix it,” he demanded.

I awkwardly took the pen.

“Okay . . . but, Elliot? Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Why did you push me down the stairs?”

Elliot shrugged.

“Amusement,” he said. “And research purposes. I wanted to test the extent to which they’d discipline me.”

“But why’d you decide to push *me*?”

“In order to standardize the experiment, I needed to commit a generic crime. Abusing you seems to be a pretty common offense

around here.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Let me ask *you* a question,” Elliot said. “Why are you so unpopular at this school?”

I could tell by his tone that he didn’t mean any malice by the comment. He was just genuinely curious.

“You have about as much money as the other children. You’re overweight, but not drastically. I mean, some of your classmates are actually obese.”

He pointed at them.

“So,” he said. “What is it?”

I thought about my unpopularity more or less constantly, but I had never actually had a conversation with anybody about it.

“A lot of reasons,” I said.

“For instance.”

“Well, for instance . . . I’m not so great at sports. Especially basketball.”

Elliot’s eyes widened.

“Status is determined by *athleticism* here?”

I nodded.

“That’s a big part of it.”

“So that black child who’s always jumping up and down to touch the tops of things—”

“Chris.”

“Whatever. That boy is considered powerful? Even though he’s obviously on scholarship?”

“People don’t really care about stuff like money at Glendale,” I explained. “It’s more about how cool you are and how good you

are at sports and whether or not people think you're stuck-up. Stuff like that."

"Is that what you really think?"

Elliot closed his eyes and massaged his temples, like talking to me had exhausted him. His limp blond hair, so fair it was nearly white, fell over his hands. He smoothed it back, opened his eyes and pointed at me.

"Has anybody ever told you that money trumps everything? That nothing else in this world matters?"

I shook my head stupidly.

"I could buy you all the popularity in this school," he said. "With a little research and some well-placed investments, I could make you a *king*. Admired by girls, respected by boys, feared by all."

I laughed nervously.

"What would I have to do?"

Elliot grinned.

"Everything I say."

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When I tell people stories about Elliot, they always ask me the same question: Why did he devote so much time and effort to improving your life if he barely knew you and the two of you had just met? It's a good question. And the only way I can even begin to answer it is by talking about video games.

Before I met Elliot, I played *a lot* of video games every day after school. And even though I wasn't crazy about playing basketball in real life, I was thrilled when my parents gave me NBA Slam

'97. The game was unique at the time because it allowed you to become the “coach” of a team. You could make trades, sub in players, and play an entire season against the other teams, all of which were controlled by the computer. I set the game to “easy” because it was my first time playing. And I chose the Sacramento Kings, because I liked their uniforms—purple and black with a slash of silver.

The computer suggested a starting lineup based on who the five best players were in real life. But I decided to use my coach status to mix things up. Mitch Richmond, a six-time all-star, was slated to start at guard. But that was what everyone was expecting! I decided to take him out of the lineup and replace him with Derrick Phelps, a random benchwarmer who had only played in three official games during his entire professional career. As soon as I entered the change, a line of red text appeared on the screen:

*Are you sure you want to substitute DERRICK PHELPS for
MITCH RICHMOND?*

I hesitated for a moment, aware that I had made an unorthodox coaching decision. But then I got angry. Who was the computer to tell me who I could and couldn't put into my starting lineup? I was coach of the Sacramento Kings! I spitefully hit the start button, and within seconds, Derrick Phelps was making his way onto the court. I won the tip-off, passed him the ball, and immediately made him fire up a three. It was a horrible shot, barely grazing the rim, and the other team easily got the rebound. Had I made a mistake? I decided to call a time-out and take a closer look at Der-