

PIECES AND PLAYERS

BY
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CHAPTER ONE STUNG

□ □ □ The man startled awake, stung by a jolt of pain in his neck. “Serves you right, you old fool,” he muttered to himself.

Lumbering to his feet, he glanced at the monitors that recorded each floor of the building. Dawn slid smoothly along the terra-cotta tiles, past carved stone and wood, the glow of old paintings, the shimmer of gold leaf, lacquer, and glass.

But what was this?

A draft ruffled the giant ferns in the courtyard. *Air moving*. It was too early for the relief guard to be arriving. And besides, he’d never leave the door ajar.

Something is wrong, the man thought.

Tossing empty bottles into the trash and covering them with a newspaper, he grabbed his cell phone and burst out of the security room, heart thudding.

“Hel-lo?” he called out, hurrying toward the inside garden.

“Shouldn’t have fallen asleep,” he growled. “Bad idea, celebrating St. Patty’s Day.”

As he stepped through an arch and into the open, a breeze poured down from above, stirring blossoms, vines, and even the edge of one of the tapestries. Next he heard the familiar creak of a broken window on the fourth floor, followed by the wail of wind moving through hinges, dragging the cracked storm casement open and then shut. *Scree-ka-ka-thunk!* Still, it didn’t make sense — not that much of a draft. His scalp tingled and the hair rose on both arms.

There was the ghost, of course. He shook his head; what a load of hogwash. Some thought she opened that pesky window in her old bedroom upstairs when she wanted to attract attention.

“Why can’t they just keep up with the repairs?” the guard grumbled.

Straightening his glasses, he rounded the corner to the Dutch Room — and froze.

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

Or rather, what he *wasn’t* seeing.

His cell phone fell and the case shattered, the shards of red plastic skittering brightly through shadow. Trembling, he sank to his knees, realizing that his life, as he knew it, was over.

CHAPTER TWO AN UNLIKELY THREESOME

□□□ Tommy Segovia followed his feet into the bathroom, head down and braced for the next shock.

He was stuck in foreign territory, and the worst part of it all was — he was home. He clicked on the bathroom light and peered into the mirror.

“Tommy!” His mom’s voice was losing patience.

“I’m *up*,” he called back, and his voice broke and shot up on the word *up*, which would have been funny a few months ago.

Stray hairs were appearing all over this spring, as if his body was a nightmare garden. Garden was too nice a word: How about *glob of dirt*? There was a black spear at the corner of his mouth this morning, and a small volcano was starting over one eyebrow. And his nose, meanly, seemed to be spreading across his face, melting into a larger and larger lump with each passing day. His nostrils looked like tunnels.

He stuck out his tongue — then knocked his toothbrush off the sink. Bending down to pick it up, he noticed that his right leg seemed to have more black, curly hairs than his left. Great. And he’d have to put on gym shorts today.

He stood up quickly, cracking his head on the edge of the sink. A bad word shot out just as the bathroom door opened and his mother’s face appeared.

He was still in his underwear, an old pair that looked more like Swiss cheese than anything else.

Reaching out, he slammed the door closed. There was too much going on here, and none of it felt good.

“See you later, honey,” his mom said apologetically.

Honey? Tommy sighed.

Becoming a man was ugly stuff.

□□□ Tommy and his mom lived in Chicago, in the Hyde Park neighborhood. They were caretakers with their own little apartment in the Robie House, a magical home built ages ago by the famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Tommy was only a few minutes’ walk from his school, and his mom was four blocks from her job at a University of Chicago library. There were big trees, generous gardens, deserted streets, and a great deal still to be uncovered. After all, many famous and wacky people had wandered through Hyde Park over the years, and must have dropped or hidden plenty of loot. Not long ago, living here had seemed like a dream to Tommy — he wondered why it didn’t still feel like one.

“Good, my life is good, and I’m lucky,” Tommy muttered to himself as he trudged down the block. He thought about his best friends, Calder Pillay and Petra Andalee. They lived down the street, and the three had done some amazing detective work. They’d rescued a stolen Vermeer painting a couple of years before — well, Tommy hadn’t exactly found it, it was the other two, but that wasn’t *his* fault — and had then saved the historic house he was now living in, in part

because of his fearless digging and trespassing skills. The three had also had a big adventure with an Alexander Calder sculpture in England, and his buddy Calder had almost died. Because of all this, their names had been in the news and they'd been interviewed on TV and the radio.

The problem was, months had now gone by and no one was thinking of them as special anymore. When a terrible, terrible art robbery happened last week at the old Farmer Museum, in the nearby neighborhood of Kenwood, nobody had asked for their help, or even for their opinion. The heist had drawn instant national and international attention — reporters and media trucks had flooded the area just blocks away. Someone had managed to get into the museum and turn off the alarms and security monitors for a short period of time without waking the guard, who'd apparently been asleep. They then left with armloads of art.

It had all happened practically around the corner, Tommy thought with a twinge of guilt, and the three of them weren't even *trying* to help. A few months ago, they would have talked about it nonstop and jumped into an investigation of their own without a second thought, but now it didn't seem as if they'd be able to add much, and no adults, not even the ones they knew, had suggested they get involved.

Tommy figured life was easier at eleven and twelve. Thirteen was such an obvious, unpredictable mess. Didn't everyone who looked at them feel like running? Tommy could see the headlines: "Teen Detectives Blunder onto Crime

Scene and Act Really Awkward.” Or, “Unbeautiful Teens Fail to Find Beautiful Art.”

The people who painted the stolen masterpieces had probably never ever heard of a zit. Maybe bad complexions hadn’t even existed when that old stuff was being painted. *No wonder it was so valuable*, Tommy thought bitterly. This was art from the Perfect Skin days, kind of like painted mummies from the Egyptians or marble statues from the Greeks. The thought of the three of them discovering and handling a Vermeer or a Rembrandt — getting photographed by reporters at this stage in their lives — was ridiculous. A bad joke.

It happens to everyone, Tommy reminded himself as he kicked at a large brown stone. *At least in this century*.

Oh, *scaz*! It wasn’t a stone — he must need glasses now, on top of everything else. The smell of fresh poop drifted up as Tommy stared down at the toe of his sneaker.

“SCAZ!” he growled aloud. It definitely helped. He and Calder and Petra had stumbled on the word a few weeks ago; an online slang dictionary said it meant someone so uncool that eventually they’re cool.

“That,” Petra had said, “is us.” They had fist-bumped three ways, muttering *scaz* each time. It felt good to use as a private swear, one which didn’t make grown-ups mad. The word was even beginning to spread at school. Yesterday Tommy overheard someone mutter it angrily after running headfirst into an open locker door.

“Scaz,” Tommy repeated as he wiped his sneaker viciously on a patch of grass. He wondered what else could possibly happen.

Now I smell and look hideous, I’m hairy as a dog, and I’m going blind, he thought to himself as he stomped up the stairs and into the University School.

The day was off to a horrible start.

□ □ □ At lunch, Tommy sat with Calder and Petra. Calder was quite a bit taller than him now, and although his hair was always greasy these days, he didn’t seem to have as many skin disasters, which Tommy thought was very unfair. Petra did share Tommy’s predicament, and on bad days she had stopped tying back her hair and chose to peer out from between two dark, corkscrew curtains. Sometimes, Tommy thought unkindly, she reminded him of an egg with a black triangle for a head, at least from behind. Her rear end had grown this year, and when she turned around — well, things didn’t always stay in place in the front when she ran. It was hard not to notice.

They made an unlikely threesome. Tommy was short, he had a chipped front tooth, and his head was as round as a marble. A finder and scavenger, he was great at spotting street treasures of all kinds, but school was not his strong point. Once a teacher started talking, Tommy’s mind floated away like a fish in a current — or, as Calder had put it, like something going down the toilet bowl.

Calder was thin and his hair stood up in scrub brush formation. Numbers and mathematical shapes made more sense to him than people, and most of his thinking happened with his set of pentominoes. He stirred the twelve pieces around and around in his pocket, and everyone who knew him was used to the clacking sound. Sometimes he pulled out a pentomino and muttered something aloud. Each piece had its own letter-name from the alphabet, and one or another letter could put the world into focus like a pair of glasses. Plus, the pieces somehow connected to puzzling stuff in Calder's life, although not in a way most grown-ups understood.

An only child, Calder lived with his mom and dad, and although the three of them were happy, he envied bigger families. The idea of being ignored was delicious. His mom taught mathematics and his dad had a job experimenting with which plants worked where in cities. Both numbers and leaves could grow in strange ways, he pointed out to his mom when she suggested they find out why one of his feet had gotten bigger than the other this year.

Petra was the oldest of five kids and her household was loud, busy, and jumbled. She loved the deliberate quiet of words. Whenever possible, she'd disappear into her notebook, where she could be the boss of her own ideas. She loved the way a sentence, once written, stayed where you put it. Her dream was to become a famous writer one day but that now felt unlikely. No, impossible. After all, homework

took more and more time and wasn't about to get easier as school went on.

Why did anyone think kids liked the word *responsible*? Petra told Calder and Tommy that she thought it had a clumsy, squashed feeling, like a hand-me-down winter boot. A real writer should be able to sit quietly in a peaceful spot, eating popcorn or staring out the window until they got a description right. Sometimes it felt like life was all about interruptions. That, or trying to dodge all mirrors.

This morning, Petra had a small white-topped mountain range on her chin. Every time Tommy looked at her face, he thought about the time bomb getting ready to erupt just north of his left eye. It might as well be Krakatoa, a volcanic island that destroyed everything within miles when it blew up. He and Calder had built a model in third grade, and it had sprayed goo — watery oatmeal propelled by a shaken soda — across a substitute teacher's face. They'd been heroes for a while there.

Not anymore.

The three were silent for a moment, and then Petra said, "I can't stop thinking about the Farmer heist. They announced on the news that it was the biggest art robbery ever to happen in the United States. And that gorgeous Vermeer is now the single most valuable stolen painting in the world! The three of us should be doing something."

The other two nodded uncomfortably, avoiding each other's eyes. Tommy scratched his nose, although it wasn't itchy.

Petra had recently gotten green-and-black glasses, and they made her look like a cross between an army general and a parrot. *Someone should tell her*, Tommy thought.

“Hello, you three.” Rescued! Their old teacher Ms. Hussey stood at the end of the table and grinned at one face after another, as if they weren’t looking as hideous as they truly were. She leaned toward them.

“Something big has come up. An opportunity. No, wait — that’s not the right word. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime challenge — and one that could rescue each of you from current distractions.”

The table of three froze, all mouths open. Were they that obvious?

Luckily, Ms. Hussey could say anything and they wouldn’t mind. And although she was sometimes puzzling, their old teacher never lied. When she sounded this way — as if everything that was about to happen mattered — it was important not to miss a clue.

“I would give anything, to tell you the truth, to be in your shoes,” she blurted suddenly. “To be a kid and to be given this — this — gift of confidence.” Was that a tear glinting in the corner of Ms. Hussey’s eye? Still standing at the end of their table, she turned her head to one side and in two swift movements shook her hair loose and then swirled it back into a bun. Pulling a pen from her back pocket, she stabbed it through the coil of hair.

“Our old friend Mrs. Sharpe isn’t getting any younger. In fact, she’s been feeling awful since the robbery — well, we all have, I know — and I’m worried about her. She’s calling a meeting in order to talk with you at her house. She’s also invited a couple of kids you don’t know. They’re around thirteen, too, and have both done some incredible detective work. Remember hearing in the news about that boy, Zoomy Chamberlain, who is legally blind and found a notebook belonging to one of the most famous thinkers of all time, in his town in Michigan? And the girl — her name is Early Pearl, and she rescued her family and identified a diamond theft with the help of Langston Hughes’ poetry.”

Before Tommy, Calder, or Petra could wrap their heads around this, Ms. Hussey continued. “All of you have spring break coming up at the end of this week, which will mean you have some free time. I’ll see you after school this Wednesday, four o’clock at Mrs. Sharpe’s house.” It wasn’t a question.

As she swished away, the three were quiet.

These two new kids sounded way too smart. And Mrs. Sharpe had apparently invited them over first. What was going on?

“I wonder what she thinks five kids can do,” Petra said, one hand covering the landscape on her chin. After a moment she added fiercely, “It’ll just mess things up, having two strangers along for the ride. I wish she hadn’t done that.”

Petra's mouth hardened into a line, a line with a fleck of potato chip at one end, like a sideways exclamation point. Calder's mouth was still open and he stirred his pentominoes, a sign that he wasn't sure whether things were headed in a good or a bad direction. For his part, Tommy wondered if Petra was going to think these new kids were way cooler than him. Of *course* she would. He hoped they wouldn't show up, but didn't want to say that out loud. Instead he passed his bag of Goldfish to Petra and Calder, who both grunted thanks. The three ate in silence.

As he crunched the empty bag in his fist in what he hoped was a manly way, Tommy mumbled, "Scaz," allowing the *z* to fizz for a long moment. Calder repeated it. Then Petra said it. The word drew a sort of stay-away triangle around them, and suddenly life felt a little better.