

# Chapter One

It is exhilarating. Hair thrown back, knees tucked into my chest, the feeling of utter weightlessness for a split second as I don't know which way is down when I defy gravity. I extend my legs mid-air to slow my rotation, knowing the difference between landing on my head and landing on my feet is only a few microseconds, and in that moment, it is as if my whole body is frozen in time upside-down. I am facing the school, smirking, as I know that I am the only person with the ability to see the school from this perspective.

To the other students, onlookers of my unusual hobby, it is just a backflip. But for me, it is so much more. It is an escape from the rules of this world. Rules that I was never able to follow. Rules that I was never meant to follow. So I fly far above it all, until the pull of reality, the cyclical machine of school, pulls me back down to earth. My movement is refined, practiced to perfection, and I land one foot after another, with a soft *ka-thud*.

Parkour makes up part of my morning routine because it gives me a sense of unpredictability, a rush of adrenaline. I never know what I will do next, which flip I will perform, which object I will vault over, which surface to jump off of. This is something that nobody else can feel as they trudge through the cracked concrete of the parking lot and dread their first class of the day.

Before the morning bell rings, I dash across the street toward the entrance of the school, a set of double doors. I weave through the sluggish flow of students, all of which are either looking at phones or talking to one another. Their behavior is frighteningly mechanical, monotonous, even during the first week of school. Two years in high school have shown me exactly what I don't want to become: just like them.

I go to the office first, which is just to the side of the main entrance.

"Any cool announcements today?" I ask. There is value in being friends with the person who reads out the announcements every morning. It means I don't have to go to class early and partake in their conversations, and I can use the office as a place of refuge until class starts.

Allura turns around from her setup: a laptop on a lectern with a microphone dangling above the keyboard connected by a small wire. "Just the usual," she says as she shakes her head. "Unless you want to try out investing club, their first meeting is today."

"Are they still phonies?"

Allura sighs. "Never mind." She puts on the Jeopardy theme song after the song before, *Wannabe* by the Spice Girls, which I hear with a split-second latency from the hallway, counting us down to the first bell. "Oh yeah, and I hope you don't mind the songs we're playing right now. The teachers are doing all the recs for the first two weeks since they don't trust us. But we can take them from students afterwards."

I shrug. "So does this mean you can play Pumped Up Kicks later?"

She takes off her Blue Jays cap and rubs her forehead. "That's one of the two songs I will not play. The other being Never Gonna Give You Up, which I'm saving for April Fool's Day."

"So no Pumped Up Kicks?"

"You're probably half the reason why the school doesn't trust us."

I scrunch up my face in mock frustration. "Damn. I figured I'd be at least three-quarters."

As if on cue, the door of Ms. Paul's office opens and she steps out with that tense-eyed *I know what you've done* face.

“Allura, thank you for doing the announcements, and for taking my recommendation.” Ms. Paul says before turning to me. “Jason, can you meet me in my office?”

Let’s cut to the chase.

“I saw you doing a backflip outside,” she says, gesturing me to sit in the chair across from her desk. My eyes dart around every part of her room but her face. It’s not the first time that I’ve been here, but something real special about this principal’s office is that there are no framed trophies or awards or anything even though we all know she’s won a lot. Instead, the walls are lined with pictures of her standing next to the school band and DECA team and debate team and Model UN team and pretty much every club in the school. Some of them even have her standing with individual students who probably won a math contest or a badminton tournament or whatever competition Asians clamor over each other for.

“Jason, do you remember the conversation we had last year about parkour?” Ms. Paul asks again.

My eyes finally fixate on her. “No doing flips on school property, because if I get injured, which I won’t, for your information, the school will be liable.” I point my fingers toward the window. “But I was doing flips across the street, which isn’t school property and it was outside of school hours too, so unlike this conversation, parkour isn’t gonna make me miss any class.”

Ms. Paul shakes her head and sighs. “You’ll be out by the time ‘O Canada’ starts playing. It’s not the liability I’m concerned about. It’s your well-being. You told your guidance counselor last year that backflips help you de-stress. I didn’t just ask you here because I saw you doing parkour. I just wanted to know if you worked on finding a healthier coping mechanism as we discussed before the break.”

Pressure builds in my chest. I do not want to be held down on the first day of Grade 11. “Be more concerned about the many people in our school cutting their wrists because they fail to maintain a ninety-eight average,” I say, my tone cold.

It’s only when Ms. Paul’s face darkens, her brow furrows, and her neutral lip curves into a frown that I realize that I went too far.

“I- I take it back,” I say, my eyes dropping to her desk. The pressure that was once in my chest gets heavy and drags everything down to my stomach, and down and down even more until I feel like my whole body is on the ground even when I’m still sitting on her chair. I said a bad thing. I am disgusted with myself.

“Thank you for recognizing that wasn’t appropriate,” Ms. Paul says, her words separated, and her eyes scanning her wall like she’s never seen it before. Short pause. “But you still have a point. I’ve been thinking about the influences that parents have on their children. This isn’t something I can change.”

No punishment. What I said would have warranted a lunch of detention. I try to speak, but my vocal cords do not produce any sound.

Ms. Paul turns back to face me. “I don’t mean to let you off with a warning, but please stay safe.” She gestures towards the door, and as promised, I’m back to Allura’s laptop setup before ‘O Canada’ plays from the speakers. I savor the seconds I have left before the announcements begin, and I am thrust back into the routine of school: choppy, cyclical, mechanical; like the movements of the hands on a clock.

“Please rise for the playing and singing of our national anthem.”

The song plays. Ninety seconds.

“Please remain standing for a moment of silent reflection.”

Stillness throughout the office, a temporary wax museum. Twenty seconds.

“We acknowledge that Elgin Mills High School is situated on the lands traditionally used by the Mississaugas of Alderville, Curve Lake, Hiawatha, and Scugog Island, and we also acknowledge the enduring presence and deep traditional knowledge, laws, and philosophies of the Indigenous Peoples with whom we share this land today.”

The announcements play over my head. I grab my backpack. I try to remember where my first class of the day is. I squeeze through the students in the hallway.

“Good morning Vikings and happy Tuesday! Here are the announcements of the day. DECA DECA DECA! If you’re interested in business, check out the DECA club, which will be having an information session after school this Wednesday in the cafeteria. Do you like proving your friends wrong? If so, the Debate club will have their first meeting after school this Thursday in the Science pod. If you’re interested in health science, the HOSA club will be meeting...”

“... and lastly, the quote of the day is, ‘There’s a notion I’d like to see buried: the ordinary person. Ridiculous. There is no ordinary person.’ This concludes today’s announcements. I hope everyone has a good day!”

It’s Tuesday, September 10. It has been a week. Every new class a small variation of the same experience. Advanced Functions. Physics. Lunch. Now, Accounting.

Keeping my focus as I make my way to my desk is difficult. It is a linear set of tasks: walk into the classroom, find my assigned seat, put my backpack on the floor, sit on the chair, take out my binder, take out my pencilcase, put my laptop on the desk. All an effort to mentally prepare for class. Miss one, and I’ll find my mind drifting off a lot more than it should.

“Hey, Jason, ‘Intro to Accounting’ marks are on Teachassist. What did you get?” The student next to me asks. I forget what I am doing, I forget where I am, and I resist the urge to push him over.

I’m much better with faces than I am with names. I have no idea what his name is, and given that every student at school is the same person with a different flavor anyway, I don’t care either.

I check my phone. “Eighty-one,” I say as I remember to lay my laptop on the table as well.

I’m one of the rare few who use a laptop to take notes in Accounting class.

For one, I have accommodations, a fancy way to say “special permissions to do things other people shouldn’t normally be able to do.” I can’t think straight, and using Google Docs makes up for that, even by a little. Because people who can think straight can take notes from top to bottom, while I can only take notes from the middle, to another part of the middle, to something I forgot near the top, to the middle again, to some place near the bottom, and so on.

For two, using a laptop makes me feel special since I’m the only person using one.

For three, I’m rarely ever taking notes, even though it looks like I am. And I’m very good at faking it.

The same kid from next to me sighs. “Mr. Abbott’s a shit marker - I got ninety-seven. I got points off for my grammar.” His Mandarin accent is thick enough to pass as fresh off the boat, as is his insufferable desire to receive a perfect grade. He’s got a Big Mac meal on his desk - given that there are no McDonald’s near the school, he probably Uber Eats’d it with daddy’s hard-earned dollars.

This one exchange is enough to convince me to write him off as another insignificant waste of potential, in my class, where I could have instead made a friend. At least he earned himself a nickname, “Mandarin,” because that’s the one thing that separates him from everyone

else in the class. It's an assumption, I mean, eighty percent of the class, me included, is Asian, so the name is subject to change. Perhaps I will call everyone "Mandarin".

I guess I can't make too big of a deal out of him. Everyone's like this.

"Is these stocks?" Mandarin hisses over Mr. Abbott talking about credits and debits. He's craning his neck to look at my screen as if his parents never taught him basic privacy and manners.

I'm at fault too, for being on autopilot in class when I shouldn't have been.

"Yeah," I hiss back.

"How much have you made?"

"I'm up about two hundred percent," I say, my face straight. "Over two years. Three hundred over four."

Mandarin gives me a look that I've seen enough of to know exactly what he wants: *Your margins are impressive, but I want the dollar amount.* But his conscience rightfully tells him to shut up, and he does.

In that silence, I'm hit with a twang of guilt for not saying anything further, or maybe the hidden longing for a sustained conversation, and I gain the sudden urge to give him something to take home. "I've been in AMD for two years."

Putting the cover over the empty page on my binder, I move my three fingers over the trackpad and settle on the similarly empty Google Doc, untouched since the start of class.

Eyes fixed on the pull-down projector screen.

Mr. Abbott paces from one side of the room to another as he teaches, and the information that would have been on the screen is plastered on his body instead as he passes over it. Distracting. Can't see the information. The scent of fries emanates from Mandarin's table, hitting me with a new waft every time his hand creeps into his paper bag. It crinkles. Loud. Drowns out Mr. Abbott's voice. Crinkles again. My jaw clenches.

Mr. Abbott is explaining... something... I don't quite remember what this class is supposed to be about.

My phone vibrates. Calendar reminder.

How could I forget about the iPhone 11 announcement?

New tab open. Earbud in, hidden behind my hair, my other ear empty to maintain minimum awareness levels in class. Subtitles on the live stream for good measure. Tim Cook steps on stage and an enormous IMAX-type screen lights up behind him. Accounting class is forgotten.

"Innovation is dead," I whisper to myself in horror. The only improvements that Apple made to the iPhone Xs series are the addition of an ultrawide-angle camera, something that Androids had for years, a bigger battery, and the next-generation processor. No high-refresh-rate screen, no in-display fingerprint sensor, no reverse wireless charging, no improved optical zoom, and no design changes. Shameful.

Not to my surprise, Mandarin is craning his neck over to my side of the table. Attracting way too much attention. Stupid. One hand is on his desk to keep his balance as he watches my screen, his other hand clutches an iPhone Xs Max. Two of his chair legs are in the air as he leans over to get a good view. So much attention. He must have been dropped on his head as a baby.

"Hey, why do you support such a stagnant company?" I whisper.

"What?" Mandarin hisses back. Breath smells like fries. I grimace.

"Apple sucks. They don't innovate and they don't deserve your money," I say as I turn my laptop screen towards him. "Here, look at this."

"I mean... it just works-" he begins.

"Oh my gosh. You're part of the problem. People like you are the reason why there isn't any innovation in the smartphone market these days, caught up in that stupid anti-consumer walled garden-"

"Jason."

Mr. Abbott.

I close my laptop, shoving the guy explaining Apple's new ultrawide camera like it's a totally new technology into my keyboard. It's not. The LG G5 did it years ago. I suppress the burning urge to sink my fist into the face of the twelve-piece Szechuan-sauced chicken McNobody next to me and instead flash Mr. Abbott my cheeriest smile. "This counts as accounting, right? Because I invest in other phone companies that are actually innovative and I'm looking at competitors and this is stocks which I'm pretty sure is on the course outline?" I ask, looking up at him.

"Jason, please put your laptop away unless you're using it to take notes." Mr. Abbott says. "And please refrain from disrupting the class and having conversations with your classmates too."

"I'm using it to take notes," I say, flipping through my Chrome tabs. "Here, let me show you. I think they will convince you too. The new iPhone 11 series has-"

"I meant notes related to my lesson. I understand school may not be your first priority, but I would really appreciate it if you made an effort in my class," Mr. Abbott says.

"You seem like a nice guy so I'll be honest and I won't raise my voice," I say, my voice collected. "But given the statistic that a teacher around your age would be making about sixty-seventy thousand bucks a year, after taxes, I make more than you do. So my investments are a pretty high priority."

Mr. Abbott's face somehow turns an even deeper shade of red. "Please put your laptop on my desk."

"But the conference-" I protest.

"Class is almost over. You can continue then," he says. Then he walks back to the front of the room.

Groaning just quiet enough for him to not hear, I follow him and put my laptop on his desk.

"Good job," Mandarin whispers, putting his greasy fingers on my desk. Fries breath. This waste of oxygen stuck his nose into my investments, made it impossible for me to pay attention in class, and got me in trouble in the first week of class. I take one glance at the clock. One minute. To do as much damage as I possibly can.

"Fuck you and your dimwit cretin dad who forgot his fucking condom and thought he could pull out instead, the best part of you ran down your mom's thigh, you stupid McFuck."

My body stops shaking. The pressure in my chest disappears. Mandarin is too stunned to speak. He knows he deserved that.

The bell rings.

I continue watching as soon as the next class, Learning Strategies, starts. I am also thankful that Mr. Abbott interrupted my stream after the juicy bits because it turned out that all I missed was Apple talking about its increased focus on services.

The thing about Learning Strategies is that it isn't really a class. I don't really have a teacher for Learning Strategies, and it's more like a work period where we're put in the Resource Room. It's the greatest autism privilege. They call them "accommodations" but I feel

more special using the word “privileges”. The special education teachers give us chocolate chip granola bars and boxes of Minute Maid orange juice. It also has whiteboard desks, which would be real nice if the entire room doesn’t smell like marker ink and the desks themselves don’t feel smudgy and oily and gross.

I take a seat on one of the beanbag chairs near the back and take my laptop out of my backpack. After some thought, I come to the realization that it would be ridiculously uncomfortable. So I get up and relocate to the slimy whiteboard desk.

“Nice to see you here again, Jason. Don’t forget to sign in,” says Ms. Carol, the head of the Resource Room teachers. She’s also my Special Education Resource Teacher- or is she my guidance counselor? Are both roles the same? I don’t know, but her job is to occasionally pull me out of class to tell me I’m a bright student with special abilities, my focus on school not being one of them, but that it probably should be.

“Okay,” I say, getting up to sign my name and entrance time on a sheet of paper at the front. “What does this do, anyways?”

Ms. Carol looks up from her laptop. “It’s just to keep track of our accommodations and help us know how many teachers to have in the room,” she says.

“Okay,” I said, returning to my seat.

“Do you want a granola bar or a juice box?”

“Can I have both, please?”

“Of course. Orange juice or apple juice?”

My attention immediately snaps from my laptop. “Wait, we have apple juice now?”

“That’s right, we do.”

One hand on the box of apple juice I am sipping from and the other on the wireless mouse I bring to school every day, I continue through the livestream.

Apple’s really gone downhill after Steve Jobs died. Like, anyone can tell he genuinely cared about his products and had a passion for his craft, but now all the company cares about is subscribing their customers to Apple Arcade and making iPhone glass replacements cost half the price of a new phone and making repairs difficult and expensive.

Not even twenty minutes into the class, I am interrupted yet again. But this time, by Ms. Carol.

“Jason?” she says, hanging up the phone in front of the classroom.

I glide down the stairs to the office in school’s Business pod. Ba Ba and Mr. Abbott are talking while Ma Ma watches.

“Hello, Jason. I think you might know why I’ve called this meeting,” Mr. Abbott begins, turning to me.

“Of course I know why I’m here. In elementary school, whenever teachers use that phone in the front of the classroom and call on a kid, that kid’s going to the office, and that kid’s in trouble. So I’m in trouble,” I say.

Mr. Abbott adjusts his glasses. “No, you aren’t in trouble. I just wanted to clear things up with you. I don’t have any doubt that you’re an exceptionally clever kid, but as I said earlier, your education is important. Your parents and I discussed your accommodations and the work that you like to do. Now I understand Accounting might not be your favorite subject, but I’ll try my best to make this something you would enjoy. But you also have to promise me that you’ll work hard and give me your best work. Do we have a deal?” he asks, sticking out his hand.

“Yes,” I say, returning his handshake. I was never mad at him. Only Mandarin. “Also, when I said that I made more money than you, I wasn’t mad. Honest. I was just telling the truth and showing my passion for stocks.”

Ma Ma glares at me. “What did you say, Jason?” She asks, her voice an octave higher than it usually is. “Mr. Abbott, sorry for Jason’s behaviour. He doesn’t understand what he’s saying.”

I study my mother’s reaction. The sudden increase in pitch. The immediate apology. The, “he doesn’t understand what he’s saying,” that my parents have said on my behalf all my life.

The conversation becomes scripted. “I’m sorry, Mr. Abbott. I didn’t mean what I said,” I say, trying to make it sound like it was my first time saying such a thing. .

Mr. Abbott gives me a thin smile. “I’m sure you and I will get along very well for the rest of the semester.”

Ba Ba and Ma Ma drive me home from school soon after and the entire ride home is silent. By around the hundredth time they’ve been called to meet with the principal for my misbehavior, my parents now know better than to correct my conduct. When we get home, Ba Ba goes to the kitchen to do dishes. Ma Ma goes upstairs to do laundry. I go to my desk, sweep the mountain of papers I will never tidy up, and place my laptop in the empty area I just created. My grandpa, Gung Gung, appears from the kitchen and says the same four things in Cantonese.

“D-do you want Chinese tea?”

I nod.

“What t-tea do you want me to m-make?”

The tea I choose usually varies, but today I say, “*tieguanyin*,” a yellow colored tea with leaves that expand a lot after you put them in hot water.

“Good choice.” This response does not vary.

I nod.

“Do you want m-more money to invest with?”

I shake my head.

After giving me very bold tea in a cup with floral patterns and Chinese characters, I say, “Thank you, Gung Gung,” in Cantonese, the only four words that I can confidently say without fear of mistranslation.

Tuesday. Then, it’s Wednesday. After that, Thursday. Finally, Friday. All the same rhythm.

My parents don’t normally drive me back from school. I take the bus. Every day is just a small variation of the same thing.

By the time I get home, I am exhausted, but any fatigue I feel is overwritten by excitement. It’s a feeling that makes me want to get out of my chair, play Sunflower by Post Malone or some other upbeat song on all the Google Homes in the house, and do backflips to the music.

After leaving my backpack at the front door, I waltz into the kitchen. I am not looking for food, but to find something to put my hands on because keeping all that energy inside of my chest feels like leaving a mosquito bite unscratched. I open and close the drawers aimlessly, which my parents always told me wears out the hinges, but I don’t care.

“Where’s Ma Ma?” I call.

Ba Ba’s voice responds from the sink. “Laundry. And there is *Da hong pao* on the kitchen table for you.” He speaks in Cantonese, as he usually does.

I pick up the cup and let the steam enter my nostrils. Same floral-patterned cup. I can immediately tell that the tea leaves have been washed once, and the complexity of the scent indicates that the leaves are also high-quality. The craft of none other than Gung Gung.

"Where is he?" I ask, gulping down half of the cup in a single sip - lukewarm to the throat, clearly not how I'm supposed to drink it, but I am never one to adhere to tradition.

"Where is who?" Ba Ba asks, still scrubbing the dishes. He is always washing the dishes. He says it's a good hobby.

"Gung Gung," I say, scratching my neck.

This is the only way my family resembles a modern-day westernized Chinese family: everything they say to me is in Cantonese, and everything I respond with is in English. We understand each other, but never make the effort to speak in the other language unless absolutely necessary, like when I use this Cantonese term, 順路, my best attempt to define it being "conveniently on the way" in English.

"Gung Gung is at Ten Ren's," Ba Ba says.

"When is he coming back?" I ask.

"I don't know."

I don't need an estimation to know that Gung Gung would be there for a while.

As promised, Ma Ma is in the laundry room, folding clothes fresh from the dryer. The mess of her naturally brown hair is owed to the static electricity emanating from the clothes - it is so strong, I can feel the hairs on my arm stand up as I move closer.

"Mommy, I can't wait for Kadesh," I say. Those words are said like a child, my most primitive feelings externalized without any fear of judgment. I cannot talk like that anywhere else - home is a safe place, a place I can say exactly what's on my mind without a filter, even if I know it is blatantly obvious.

"I know," Ma Ma says in Cantonese.

"He's so boring," I say. "Mandarin. All of them. All my classmates. I'm so bored of everyone."

"I'm guessing he won't be a new friend," Ma Ma says, the sound of static electricity fizzling and echoing softly through the small room.

I shake my head. "Just like the rest of them," I say. "A robot. A chiplet, identical to all the other chiplets, created and sold in vast quantities. And discarded when no longer of use. Which is very soon, because schools plan the obsolescence of their students to continually fortify society with a freshly educated workforce, like how companies plan the obsolescence of their products so that customers will have to buy more."

Concern flickers on her face, one of the few emotions I can read as it comes up commonly in the mother of a troubled child. "Did you say this to him?" Ma Ma says.

"No. I'm smart." I say, to which Ma Ma immediately forgoes the next shirt in the dryer to pat my head, fluffing up my hair.

"*Lek zai.*"

My brain immediately jumps to its next idea. "Mommy, will people in university be like this?"

"I don't know. I think it will have to depend on the university and program you choose."

"What about generally?"

"People in arts will be very different from people in engineering."

I run my fingernails down the plasticky surface of the wooden door, pinching the wood grains as I go. "How many people are like me?"



It's a broad question, but I'm not looking for any specific answer.

"No one," Ma Ma says.

"Do you think Kadesh will have people I want to meet?"

"Yes. Do you remember the application questions? This program was made for people like you."

I nod and I head up the stairs towards my room, and I close the door behind me. The bottom-right drawer in the desk in my room is the only one filled with items. I don't have a lock, and I figured that if anyone would try to look through my desk, they'd go top-to-bottom, left-to-right, find nothing, and give up before hitting the very last one.

It's a moving time capsule. That's what I call it. I open the drawer and pull out a blue T-shirt, the rough, never-washed and never-worn fabric scratching against my fingertips. I unfold it and lay it out on the ground beneath me, and my index finger traces out the name, signed in black sharpie, on the back.

It's a stupid ritual, I know. I'm self-aware enough to know that. It's been- how many years? Don't remember the last time I went to YS. Even though I barely have a face to connect to the name, a promise is a promise.

One thing I know for certain is that there are very few people like me, if any, and that exact number will be made clear to me in exactly eighteen hours. I will be surrounded by people who talk about their interests until they are stopped, are willing to break the mold and stand out with vibrance in a world of grayscale, and see that there is more to life than getting into a good university, getting a good job, getting a stable income, and meeting death.

People just like me.