

# **HIGH SCORE**

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## Chapter One

# A FISTFUL OF TICKETS

Group project day had arrived, which meant that I was suddenly the most popular kid in class. When it comes time for gym, I'm radioactive—but the second Mr. Conover announced we were doing group presentations on natural disasters, I felt about twenty pairs of eyeballs shift toward me.

I might have started at Ella Fitzgerald Middle School a year later than most kids, but my rep spread pretty quickly: If you want an A on a class project, make sure DJ's in your group. I didn't do anything to advertise it, but I didn't try to stop it either. There are worse things to be known for.

"Not yet," Mr. Conover said as kids started to move from their seats. "I don't want everyone to just partner up with their friends. I've already assigned teams." He ignored the low moan that rolled through the class like thunder. "Once you hear your teammates, you can go find them and use the last few minutes of class to plan."

He called off two sets of four names before I heard mine.

“Group 3: Volcanic Eruptions. DJ. Maria. Tyler. Topher.”

As I heard the names, my brain automatically started spitting out possibilities for our project. I knew Maria was a fantastic baker. She'd probably love making a volcano model out of cake. And the class would love the chance to get to eat cake in class. Topher was convinced that he was Weird Al's long-lost son. He'd love a chance to rewrite “Under Pressure” to make it about volcanoes and perform it in front of the class. And Tyler could—

I shook my head as I got up to join my group. Simple. Keep it simple. People like simple.

When I got to the corner of the room where my group was, Tyler slapped me on the back, which just felt weird. Tyler's the kind of guy girls whisper about all giggly when they're in their little groups—but he looks like a seventh-grade version of Clark Kent, so I can't really blame them. Meanwhile, I dressed up as James Bond for Halloween one year and almost every single house I went to thought I was a businessman. I mean, I'm Black, so I'm never gonna be a dead ringer for Daniel Craig, but I was carrying a martini glass! How many businessmen go to work, cocktail in hand?

Anyway, my point is our coolness levels are nowhere near the same, but here I was, getting a backslap like we were buddies.

“Deej,” he said, giving my nickname a nickname, because he was just that cool. “My man. So, what are we doing? What’s the plan?”

My complicated ideas spontaneously bubbled back to the top of my brain. Maybe instead of a big volcano cake, we could do mini-molten lava cakes with the chocolate dyed orange-red like actual lava. And we could do a whole music video and film it before the presentation. I could ask the AV Club to borrow some video equipment and—

“Deej?” Tyler said, snapping me back to reality.

“What? Oh, right.” I did my best to rein in my brain. “Right, OK. I’ll do the research. Tyler, you can type the important parts into a PowerPoint. Maria, you can find the pictures. Topher, you can do most of the talking. It should be an easy A for everyone.”

That was clearly what they wanted to hear. I had no arguments from anyone about the assignment split—probably because I’d given myself the bulk of the work. But it was the only way to make sure things got done properly.

We barely had time to exchange cell numbers before the bell rang. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and started toward my locker, when I felt someone tap me from behind. It was Tyler again.

“Hey, buddy,” he said, giving me a friendly punch on the arm. “Listen, I have a big favor to ask. You know we have a big baseball game coming up, right? Against the Timberwolves.”

There wasn’t a single person at school who didn’t know, what with the banners that were plastered all over the hallway walls. My old school had been a basketball school, but the Fitz was definitely a baseball school. And, adding to his list of selling points, Tyler was the star player of our team, the Rockets. He was like one of those products they have infomercials about: He catches! He pitches! He juliennes carrots! What *can’t* he do?

“I’m gonna have to do a lot of practicing this week so, you know, I was wondering if—”

“You want me to do your part of the project,” I finished for him.

He gave me a sheepish smile. “I usually wouldn’t ask, but I really don’t have the time, and I know you’re good at these projects and—”

“It’s fine,” I said, before he wasted any more energy trying to convince me. “I don’t mind.”

“I don’t want you to think I’m being lazy or anything,” he said, like he didn’t believe me. “I’d do it if we didn’t have this big game, but—”

“Really, it’s not a big deal,” I said. I’d only split up the work so we could say to Mr. Conover that we all helped without lying. “I’m doing all the research anyway. I might as well type it into the PowerPoint too.”

“That’s just what I was thinking,” he said with another backslap. Two backslaps from Tyler in one day. If people were paying attention, my social standing was going to get a boost. “Great minds, right?”

“Sure,” I said. I was about to turn down the hallway to where my locker was, when Tyler stopped me.

“Hey, wait. Take this.” He took my hand and pressed something into my palm. I knew what it was before I looked down: a brick of Starcade tickets.

“Tyler, I don’t—” As I tried to give them back to him, he raised his hands up so I couldn’t.

“You’re the man, Deej,” he said, giving me finger guns before melting into the rest of the crowd.

I sighed as I pushed the tickets into my pocket and headed toward my locker.

Every school has a currency: contraband candy, rubber bracelets, actual money if you go to a school full of rich kids. At my old school it was these holographic trading cards from Japan. At the Fitz, it's Starcade tickets, which makes sense since there's a Starcade literally across the street.

It's one of the favorite hangout spots for kids looking to relax after a long day at school. With the smell of pizza in the air and the sound of dozens of game machines ping-ing around you, it's hard to think about whatever bad thing happened in gym or how you probably failed that pop quiz in English. And, on top of that, most of the game machines spit out tickets that can be redeemed for pretty good prizes. Not just little things like candy or stickers. On the top shelves, there are cameras and game systems and other big-ticket items.

Pretty much any kid with the tiniest bit of self-control was saving for one of those top-shelf items, which meant that a handful of tickets to the right person could get you anything from a stick of gum to the locker combination of your least-favorite classmate.



It wasn't so much the kids looking to trade tickets for Twinkies that I wanted to avoid by taking tickets from Tyler. Once it got out that you would do schoolwork for tickets, it was only a matter of time before that was your thing, and every lazy kid with an essay to write and some extra tickets lying around was hounding you at lunch, trying to hire you. Because of that, I tried to stay away from any even semi-shady ticket transactions.

But if it was just Tyler this once, it was probably OK. And if anyone brought it up, I could just say I made an exception for the golden boy. Everyone did.

When I opened my locker door, a green slip of paper fell out. I caught it before it hit the floor, and crunched it into a little ball. There was a new one in my locker every Monday like clockwork, and I always tossed them. So did a lot of kids. But a lot of kids didn't, which meant that Lucky's little lottery side hustle did good business.

You know how some people are rich because they're famous, and some people are famous because they're rich? Well, Lucas "Lucky" Ford was in that second category. Apparently, his older cousin had been some kind of Skee-Ball genius. When his family moved cross-country to

California where they don't have any Starcades, the cousin gave Lucky his stash of tickets. That alone probably would have been enough to put him in the top half of ticket holders at school, but Lucky wasn't just lucky. He was smart too. He didn't just spend tickets. He figured out ways to turn tickets into more tickets. One of those ways was the Lucky Lotto. For five tickets (attached to a green, official, Lucky Lotto entry slip and slipped into Lucky's locker before Friday), any kid could have a chance to win a five-hundred-ticket jackpot.

Of course, since there were about a thousand kids at the Fitz and around a third of them played the lotto on a regular basis, that meant Lucky was making double that five-hundred-ticket prize every week.

I didn't want anything to do with it, but I had to respect the hustle.

I swapped out my science textbook for my math textbook, slammed my locker door, and—

“Oof.”

I immediately walked directly into the back of someone significantly taller than me. “Sorry, Mr.—” I started, but when the guy turned around, I realized it wasn't a teacher. It

was a student. I didn't know him personally, but I'd seen him around. He was hard to miss, seeing as he was as tall as most of the teachers, broad as a linebacker, and he wore the same green military jacket all the time like a cartoon character.

He looked even bigger than usual now that I was face-to . . . well face-to-chest with him, looking up at his thick, frowning eyebrows and faint wisps of blond chin hair. I'd overheard bits of gossip about him over the past few months. That he was an exchange student from Russia. That he was expelled from his last school for fighting a teacher . . . and winning. That he'd been held back four times. That all three were true. I took the rumors with a grain of salt, but none of it seemed that far-fetched right now.

I took a quick step away from him. "Whoa. I meant . . ." Shoot, what was his name? I had no idea. I'd just been calling him "That One Scary Tall Dude" in my head. "Bro," I improvised. "Yeah. Sorry, bro."

He grunted at me and then lumbered away. I watched him go for a few seconds before sighing in relief, putting my book under my arm, and heading for class before I got myself into any more trouble.