

Sebastian  
and the  
**CHARACTER  
HACKER**

JONATHAN DAY

**Sebastian and the Character Hacker**

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PRESS

To Nina, *always*



“Everybody has a plan until you  
get punched in the face.”

–Mike Tyson



INTERNET NAMES

*Sebastian Kemp*: Beagleboy and Wolfdawg

*Lucas Sinclair*: Seein'I

*Caly*: Blondhound

*Jeremiah*: JoCur

The locations in this story actually  
exist in New York City.

At the end of the story is a glossary.





# CHAPTER 1

## **“I’M NOT GOING!”**

“You’re being negative again,” Mom says.

Our apartment is supposed to be a negativity-free zone. This doesn’t mean negativity doesn’t exist. Right now, on a scale of minus one to minus ten, I’m minus eleven. Two weeks ago, I was positive ten.

I’m vegging on the lumpy living room sofa. Science teacher Mom doesn’t believe I caught dengue fever overnight. She disproves my claim with stupid facts like that dengue is a tropical disease with zero probability of occurring in New York City in October.

“You’ll feel better once you get out of those pj’s.”

Since she’s encouraging rather than ordering, I can tell she feels sorry for me. I try, “The teachers told me I don’t have to come back because I learned too much yesterday.”

“You’re in a different learning environment, Seb, but it’s still a great school.”

“Grade school. It’s a grade school for dummies.”

“It’s your responsibility to make the best of where you are.”

“Right. Life isn’t there to entertain me. If the homework isn’t stimulating, I should write my own textbook.”

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“Don’t mock me.” Then Mom the mom gives me a makeup hug. “You remember what you learned from Mr. B?” He was our wonderful neighbor who gave lots of good advice about chess and more important stuff. “He taught you that life is a series of journeys and adventures. Right now, you’re on one that is different and maybe a little more difficult than the one you were on before at Amsterdam Academy. Do your best on your new journey, Sebastian. Show your *arete*.”

Mom the teacher often uses words my sister and I don’t know. It’s our job to look them up in the fat Webster’s dictionary on the coffee table, the book serving as our family’s discount alternative to IBM’s Watson. Until I search for its true definition, *arete* means *move your butt and get dressed for school now!*

That would be the 110 percent awful Berkowitz High, which I entered mid-semester yesterday. Today will most likely be the second-worst day of my life.

“Don’t you have math class first period?” Mom asks in the singsong voice she used when I was younger and didn’t want to eat broccoli. This morning, she updates the noun. “You love math.”



I poke my head in the open classroom door.

None of the thirty-one kids are sitting at their desks, which are arranged in four irregular circles. They’re talking loudly because they have to speak loudly to be heard above everyone else talking loudly. A kid with earphones is singing ... no, shouting along with a rap song.

Math classroom + Berkowitz students = chaos.

It's nothing like my old school, Amsterdam Academy. The one I just ... left. Before class, we sat at our desks attentively, waiting for the teacher to begin the lesson, another step toward becoming lawyers or doctors or computer scientists or bankers ... whatever they do.

"You Sebastian?" a kid with a long ponytail and rock band T-shirt asks me.

I just nod. Sometimes I can be a bit reticent, another Mom-the-teacher word.

"Welcome to ninth-grade math. I'm Ken Mathews."

We dodge and weave through the water bug-jittery mass of bodies to one of the desk circles. Along the way, a girl says, "He's almost cute," and another adds, "If he wasn't so short."

"This is your learning pod." Ken tries to introduce me to the seven students milling around it. They barely look at me.

"We study cooperatively here," Ken says in a friendly voice. "We learn by sharing and cooperating with our fellow podsters." Nice try, but not very funny.

He herds everyone to their pods. What? This guy with zits is the teacher? He looks just like the mangy students who jokingly called him "K-Mart."

Ken points to the whiteboard behind him. "Here are ten problems. You have the rest of the period to solve them."

He distributes blank paper to each pod. To me, he says, "Since this material might be new, Sebastian, I can give you other work."

"It's okay."

I don't like to boast, but these problems are easy algebra that I learned two years ago. I was already doing pre-calc at Amsterdam. I write the answers without really having to

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calculate. Then I look around.

These kids are different from the ones at my old school. The boys seem older. Three-quarters of them are taller than Amsterdam boys and have more muscles. One has a scraggly beard. Several have tattoos. Sixty percent of the girls look like my sister's friends, who are seniors.

A prepster finishes the quiz quickly and turns to whisper to a girl next to him. She giggles and abandons her work to whisper back. Ken walks among the pods, quieting conversations, tapping students' papers to get them to focus, and picking up a candy bar wrapper from the floor. His face is pointed with a soft, thin beard, and even indoors, he wears dark glasses. Sometimes humans remind me of animals. The prepster 'is a sleek racehorse. K-Mart's a meerkat.

He stops at my desk. "Are you having trouble, Sebastian?"

I shake my head. He scans my answer sheet. "Awesome."



I find a seat at an empty table in the cafeteria.

(Berko students + cafeteria + food) x minimal supervision = chaos<sup>2</sup>.

It's so loud I can't taste what I am eating, which is probably a good thing. The dirty orange goo on my tray must have escaped from a screwed-up chemistry experiment. Luckily, the apple actually looks delicious.

The racehorse kid has attracted four well-groomed girls at the next table. He is staring straight at me, almost like he's studying me. I duck as a sneaker covered in spaghetti sauce zips by my head. As I look up, a girl from my learning pod slides

into the seat across from me. The diameter of her hoop earrings looks to be about two inches, so the circumference is 6.28 inches.

“You a genius?” she asks.

I look down and don’t say anything because I don’t want my voice to crack.

“So you’re a shy boy. Shy’s nice, except when it’s not, you know what I’m saying?” She picks up my apple. “You don’t look old enough to be in high school, and you finished the quiz before I even started.” She puts her finger to her temple. “If I had as much up here as I do down here”—she points to her chest—“I’d be a genius.”

Her shirt’s so tight that it must have shrunk in the wash. I agree, in my head.

She takes a colossal bite of my apple, then mumbles. “What’d you do to wind up here, Shyboy? Shoot the mayor? Boost a Lexus? Forget to take your meds and shout racist shit in social studies?”

“I ... I didn’t do anything.”

She sways back and forth like she’s moving to some happy music I can’t hear. “You don’t get sentenced to Berko unless you did something, or not enough something, know what I’m saying?”

I just shrug.

“Well, we all got secrets. This is the last stop. The subway don’t go no farther. We all bombed out of one school or a dozen. Not many killers or rapists, but we got a truckload of learning disabilities, bedwetters, potheads, and ADHDs. We even got a nar-co-lep-tic,” she says in a sleepy voice. “He falls asleep for real in the middle of talking to you.” It almost sounds like she’s

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bragging about a National Merit Scholar. “Mostly we’re just screw-ups. You don’t look like a screw-up, but we’ll find out your secret.”

She eyes the apple with appreciation. “I’m Jazmin.” Then she pushes the macaroni and cheese away from me. “That shit’ll clog your brain, homie. I eat fruits and vegetables because I got dreams. Will you help me with the math homework?”

I shake my head.

“Great! We can meet in the library.”

Don’t Berko students understand anything, like a simple nonverbal negative reply?

She takes another bite. “The kids here are mostly cool, except Sammy the Psycho. He’s the slob with the tattoo of a skull on his neck. He acts all sweet and stuff around the teachers, but he’s a gangsta. The way he tells it, he killed another gangsta in a fight, but I think he’s just boastin’”



School today was like having a cavity drilled from nine in the morning ‘till three in the afternoon. Just escaping the boring classes energizes me to walk all thirty blocks to my apartment building, but it starts to rain. Perfect. It’ll probably rain on me every day for the rest of my life.

So I take the subway. Kids from Berkowitz and other high schools in this West Side neighborhood crowd the downtown platform. Some boys play shove each other so roughly and yell so loudly it seems like it could quickly turn into a real fight. Two stone-faced policemen lean against the station wall and keep their hawk eyes open for real trouble.

“Hey, Shyboy.” Jazmin is sitting on a bench with a baby on her lap. “Now you know my secret. Meet Sonya. She’s gonna be the second Puerto Rican on the Supreme Court.”

“You babysit? My sister babysits. That’s not a secret.”

“I’m the babysitter, diaper changer, bottle feeder, and proud mama.”

“Mama.” This doesn’t compute. “Mama?”

“She was eight pounds, nine ounces when she popped out. Man, did I howl! Don’t ever do natural childbirth, Shyboy. Hurts like a son of a bitch.”

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen next month. I’m a Libra.”

“You can’t have a baby when you’re fifteen.”

“I guess you missed the sex-ed class on how to make a baby, or didn’t the boy doll at your genius school have a ... banana?”

What am I supposed to say? Not one single girl at Amsterdam Academy has a baby. None of their older sisters in college have babies.

“I must have skipped the day they taught about how *not* to get pregnant.” Jazmin laughs sadly. “My baby’s daddy missed that one too.” She nods to the boy standing next to her. His Yankees cap points to the side instead of straight ahead, and his pants are dropped so low, they look like they are falling down. “Right, C?”

Is C his name or his grade average?

“I g-g-got an A in the c-c-c ... class about making babies,” he stuttered.

Her sly grin tells me she agrees. “C-Rod’ is studying hard to score A’s in the rest of his classes so his daughter won’t grow up thinking her papa’s a damn dope.”

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Oh man. A kid with a baby. The classroom and the cafeteria are wild as dog fights. Have aliens kidnapped me to a faraway galaxy where they will eat my brain until I can no longer multiply fractions in my head?



## CHAPTER 2

**MOM AND MY SISTER**, Lilly, are wedged side by side in the narrow kitchen when I get home.

They're both tall and have the same dark brown hair, usually pulled into ponytails. Sometimes it's difficult to tell them apart from behind. Not today. Ms. Smarty-shorts still had on her Amsterdam Academy soccer uniform.

"How was school?" Mom asks in a too-cheery voice.

"Oh, fine. The principal expelled the honors students for doing their homework. Some boys have beards like the guys on TV who hunt ducks, and one of the kids has a kid, and I'm not talking about goats."

"Someone in your grade?" Lilly asks.

"I don't know that, but she's in my math class. How can you do homework with a baby on your lap?"

"I'm sure she's trying to make the best of the situation," Mom says.

"There's something I want to tell you, Mom." Lilly is holding her stomach as if she is pregnant.

"So you skipped the how-not-to-get-pregnant class too. Great. You and your baby can join me at Loser City."

"We don't kid about that, Lilly," Mom says.

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I dump my backpack on the floor, go into my bedroom, and flop onto my bed. I wish my dog, Lucky, were here to comfort me. Instead, I get a mom. “It’s only your second day, Seberino. Remember how nervous you were at the beginning of high school at Amsterdam?”

“Well, I’d go back to that in a nanosecond. At least no one in ninth grade there had a beard.” I run my fingers over my hairless chin. “A kid named Sammy the Psycho has a tattoo of a skull on his neck, and he killed someone with his bare hands!”

“Aren’t you exaggerating just a bit?”

“Why can’t I go back to Amsterdam?”

“You know what you did was wrong.”

“I didn’t lie. I didn’t steal or cheat.”

“But you did hack into the school computer system. There are consequences for the actions you chose.”

“Right, consequences for me, but not for the real cheaters.”

“You’re just as smart as you were before, only at a different school. I’m sure you’ll get an A-plus average. You can still get into a great university.” She points to the pennants on my wall. She went to Michigan. Dad went to MIT. “Berkowitz has a computer club and a competitive math team, just like Amsterdam.”

“Berko’s math team was beaten by horses counting with their hooves.”

I can tell Mom is trying not to roll her eyes, but she does a little. “You’ll find kids like you, Seb. I met with the principal. Several of your classmates have close to genius IQs.”

“Mercury is the closest planet to the sun, Mom, but it’s still millions of miles away.”

I stand and flick one of the silver planets in the solar system mobile hanging over my desk. Usually I can make them spin

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in perfect, orderly circles. Today they go in wobbly, confused orbits.

Our apartment is a no-swearing zone, but I make a mental list of the top ten curse words. I'll shout them out as I drag my feet to school on what I calculate with 112 percent certainty will be the third-worst day of my life.



## CHAPTER 3

**EVEN THE ADVANCED** computer class isn't challenging.

Some students play video games or post selfies instead of working on the assignment to create a blog.

This teacher looks even more like the scruffy students than K-Mart, and he doesn't know or care how to get the class to focus. I have built almost an entire site when the racehorse kid slides his chair close to my desk. "You're as awesome with the computer as you are at math."

I shrug. "We studied this software at my other school."

"What?"

Sometimes I mumble, so I have to repeat what I just said.

"There's a rumor going around about why you're here."

I hoped the problem wouldn't follow me. "I..." My mind goes blank. Dumb! I should have made up a believable story.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," he says.

"What are the rumors?"

"That you and some other kids stole chemistry tests and answers from a teacher's computer."

I don't want him or anyone else to think I'm a thief or a cheater. "Two kids did steal tests and answers, and the teacher found evidence against them, but not me because I didn't take

anything. Even so, he believed I was a 'co-conspirator' because we shared the same lab bench."

"And you aced the tests."

I shrug. "I like science," I mumble.

"You all get booted?"

"They just got suspended."

"Really? You got expelled because you're innocent? That's grown-up shit."

"Well, not for that. I calculated that the cheaters hacked into the teacher's account on school computers, so I tried to prove it."

"Wow, you hacked the school computer system?"

"I tried. It identified me as an unauthorized user and automatically blocked access. The IT teacher traced the IP address to my home computer."

"Well, you're lucky. Berko's a better dungeon than most schools. I'm new here too. I'm Marty. Marty Blodgett."

"I'm Sebastian Kemp." I have to know. "How'd you screw up? I mean, why are you here?"

Marty holds his head high and spreads his arms like I've seen my sister do when she's pretending to be a bad actor. "I'm gonna be a staaarr! The theater teacher here is the best in the city. He's been booted from more traditional schools because he's demanding and temperamental. But I'm learning a lot of acting tricks in his class. I even got a part in the musical."

He's happy to be at Berko? Really?

"There's no pressure here—it's great. I only go to the classes I like and schmooze with the secretaries in the office so they'll mark me present in the ones I skip."

"I've never skipped a class. I did miss a total of seven when I had pinkeye and the school nurse made me stay home."

Marty laughs. “You’ll get cured of any attendance hang-ups here.”

He’s a new kid, like me. He might not be dumb because he finished the math quiz pretty fast. Maybe he’s one of the high-IQ kids Mom was talking about. And he’s friendly.

Class ends, and I have only a few minutes to use the bathroom before social studies. I’m washing my hands when a manatee-size kid comes in. Sometimes I wish I could magically become big and strong. If this kid had the same wish, it didn’t come out so well. He looks powerful and flabby at the same time. Oh man, it’s Sammy from math class. He snatches my backpack and dumps all my stuff on the floor.

“Hey!” I blurt out.

“No pills! No Adderall, and you still aced the math quiz!”

I spot a tattoo of a skull on his neck. Sammy the Psycho!

The bell rings. “I’ve got to get to class.” My voice cracks.

He blocks the way out and leans his face close to mine. His breath smells like dog poop. “K-Mart’s giving another quiz next week, and I want to get a hundred, so share the answers with me.”

“How can I give them to you before I know what the problems will be?”

“Because you got booted out of your last school for ripping off the answers to tests.”

“No, I didn’t. Please—”

“At Berko, we cooperate,” he says in a pretend-serious voice. “We help other students so we learn gooder.”

He picks me up and carries me to the open window and pushes me halfway out. We’re only on the third floor, but I start breathing fast and shallow because I’m afraid of heights. I

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struggle to get free, but his grip is as tight as a vise in my dad's workshop.

“The answers ... and you tell any teacher or your mama or your papa about our friendly chat, and I'll toss your ass out this window.”



## CHAPTER 4

**I FIGURE THE PROBABILITY** Sammy will act on his threat is 99.7 percent, so I don't dare tell.

I could trust my best friend with this. But Brendon at Amsterdam doesn't answer his phone or reply to my texts or posts on his Facebook page. Strange. We share almost everything. We don't keep secrets from each other.

Until I met Brendon last summer and we both tried out for the competitive math team, I was more comfortable with animals than humans. But Brendon and I did math problems together and played chess with *The Simpsons* or *South Park* on the TV in the background. We laughed at the same jokes. We're both a little timid.

Maybe Brendon isn't replying because he's sick, and if he is, I might be able to cheer him up. On the way home from school, I go to his apartment only a few blocks from where I live.

I press the intercom button, and somebody buzzes his building's front door open. Brendon's dad, Mr. Spitz, is waiting for me on the sixth floor, where their apartment is. His eyes are too bright on the inside, so he sort of scares me sometimes. Like now.

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“Get back in the elevator, Sebastian,” he orders and steps in with me. The door slides closed, but he doesn’t push any of the buttons. “Do you know what I do for a living?”

I know he uses math in his job because he has helped Brendon and me solve complicated problems more than once. But he doesn’t tolerate wrong answers or wild guesses. “No.”

“My company designs, builds, installs and maintains elevators. I built the one we’re standing in. Businesspeople and mothers and fathers and children ride in my elevators, so I have to make them absolutely safe. If I cheat by not calculating how strong the cables need to be, or my workmen cheat by using inferior steel, people can die. When you cheat in school, it becomes a habit, and cheating is rust that compromises the integrity of everything you do or make.”

The walls are closing in. It’s hard to breathe. “But I didn’t—”

Mr. Spitz cuts me off. “In real life, there are no buts.” He pushes the open-door button and gets out, then reaches back in to press the lobby button. “You are not welcome in our home. Brendon is forbidden to be with you or talk with you. Do not communicate with my son in any way.”

The door slides shut. Why doesn’t Mr. Spitz understand that the assistant principal at Amsterdam made a terrible mistake? Brendon’s father knows me pretty well. Why doesn’t he believe that his son’s best friend is telling the truth? It’s so unfair.

The elevator opens into the lobby. I’m as dazed as when I banged my head on the sidewalk after falling off my Razor scooter.

“Are you visiting a friend?”

I look up. A lady with her baby in a stroller can’t get on the elevator because I’m blocking the doorway. I step aside, mumbling, “I don’t have a friend.”



It's pouring outside.

I sit near a leafless bush, my teeth chattering and my whole body shivering from the cold, cold rain. Thunder booms across the sky and echoes off the tall buildings surrounding Central Park.

My dog, Lucky, the best dog in the world, died suddenly from a heart attack ninety-three days ago. I thought only old people had heart attacks. The vet said maybe something happened to the dog's heart when he was a stray before Lilly and I found him in Central Park. Lucky would always nuzzle next to me and make me feel better when I was sad. He's close, but he can never comfort me again.

After our family had him cremated, we spread some of the ashes under Lucky's favorite bush. He'd rest here after playing fetch the stick or running with other dogs in the nearby open field. I pat the cold, wet earth where his ashes are.

Mom hurries up the hill. "There you are, you crazy kid. I've been looking all over for you. What's going on?" She wraps a raincoat around my shoulders.

"Brendon stopped being my friend."

"Why? What happened?"

"Mr. Spitz believes I'm a cheater, and he told Brendon he can't see me or even talk to me."

"Brendon has to obey his father, Seb." Mom pulls me to my feet. "Let's get out of this rain."

"Lucky was loyal. He never would've abandoned me." I take a long deep breath. "Animals are better than humans, Mom."