

# Part the Second

AS WRITTEN BY GRACE SCOTT

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Sam was driving out of the city now; a few minutes' drive wound the Super Value van through the narrow streets of the outer city, then beyond a stretch of industrial wasteland, and finally into the pastel mansions and vast green lawns of the suburbs. They were already hopelessly behind schedule. Georgia knew her inexperience was slowing them down. She was trying not to count how many times she'd picked up the wrong bin or accidentally knocked on the front door when the delivery instructions required her to ring the doorbell. So far, Sam had been kind enough not to mention it.

Sam took a sharp exit off the main road onto a wide lane with a line of trees down the middle. Dotted along either side of the road were cast-iron gates, each with its own guard post. The gates were plastered with bucolic names, which were hard to make out passing by, but in aggregate they were placid and reassuring. It had been years since Georgia had been to the suburbs and returning brought back faded memories of birthday parties and swim classes.

There were always families scrambling to leave the city. Those who had the means had evacuated

as soon as it became clear that the virus would not relent. Time was not kind to the middle-class who waited—plenty of families who might have been able to leave a few years ago watched as real estate prices in the sheltered suburbs soared into seven, eight, even nine-figures. The sprawl seemed even greater than it had back then. Even with the ridiculously inflated prices, the gated communities multiplied each year.

As they continued on, they passed increasingly elaborate gates, with gold leaf ornaments on the wrought iron and delicate barbed wire atop the walls. Sam signaled and turned right into a driveway, stopping before the metal bars. This gate was especially tall and narrow, and read, in cloying script, *The Woods*.

"Get the bins ready," Sam said, pulling up to the guard post. "The rest of our deliveries are all here." He rolled down the window.

The guard sat behind thick glass, with a little slot at the bottom through which visitor passes could be issued. He was fixated on some video on his phone.

Sam pressed a red button on the outside of the glass.

"We're with Super Value Foods," he said, taking an ID card

from his wallet. *Essential Worker*, it read, highlighted in yellow above his picture.

"Passes?" The guard responded, barely looking up. Sam slid his through the slot in the glass, while Georgia watched with wide eyes, once again entirely lost.

"I don't think I got a pass," Georgia whispered anxiously to Sam. He glanced at her before turning toward the guard.

"Are we good?" Sam asked, holding his hand out for his ID.

The guard leaned over to peer at her, before lazily gesturing them forward and fixating again on the screen of his phone. The gate swung open slowly.

"Make sure Janet gets you a pass for next time," said Sam, a sliver of warning in his voice. He tucked his ID back into its slot as Georgia shrank back in her seat.

Beyond the gate were rows of uninspired mansions, each like a sibling to the next. The houses were partially obscured, however, by a ten-foot-tall picket fence, which separated the road from the houses and the sidewalk. Signs posted along the fence read in block letters, *Current Vaccination Required Beyond This Point*. The white expanse of fence was interrupted at regular intervals by two doors: one, a large automated door, through which a vehicle could drive; the other, a small hinged door about the size of a rabbit hutch, several feet off the ground. Both doors matched the styling of the fence perfectly. Only the handles gave away their existence. Separate signs instructed

that deliveries should be left in this hutch, or "pod."

Sam drove slowly down the winding cul-de-sac, careful not to break the ten mile-per-hour speed limit. Georgia noted the blinking eyes of security cameras on every streetlight.

"You see that house?" Sam asked, gesturing to the largest mansion at the end of the street. Georgia nodded.

"That's Chloe Galt's house... as in *Galtech Pharmaceuticals*."

"No way," said Georgia, "I thought her show was set in Monaco?"

"Well, when a pandemic makes your father richer than God, you can afford more than one house."

They arrived at their next stop—the Campbell household.

"You want to take this one?" Sam asked. Georgia was eager to redeem herself in his eyes, so she nodded, with no idea what to do.

"In these neighborhoods, they don't want us inside, since we're not up-to-date," Sam said, nodding toward the vaccination signs. "So instead, you go up to that little door, push the buzzer, they'll unlock the pod, and you leave the groceries inside," Sam explained.

Georgia got out, unloaded the groceries, and pressed the pod's buzzer. The door clicked, and she placed the groceries inside. They'd left a five-dollar bill on the floor of the pod, which she understood to be a tip. She took it and closed the door again. There was a faint hiss

from within—the sound of sanitizing spray.

She began to walk back to the van. Before she could open the door, though, she heard a voice from the other side of the fence.

“Georgia? Georgia Johnson?”

Georgia turned. Her heart sank. Of all the gated communities, of all the suburbs outside the city—what were the chances? She plastered on a smile.

“Sophie! It’s so nice to see you.” Georgia waved lamely and began to return to the van, but Sophie was determined.

“You know, it’s wild to see you here, since you kind of fell off the face of the earth. Like, everyone from school thought you died or something.”

“Well, I’m still here.” Georgia laughed artificially. Though she couldn’t see much—Sophie’s face was obscured both by the fence and her designer mask—Georgia got the impression that she looked much the same as she had in eighth grade, when they were friends. Even from this distance, Georgia could sense the shark smile. She was suddenly very aware of her Super Value uniform.

“So, you’re working? That’s the worst. My mom made me get a job last summer. On her friend’s senate campaign. *So boring.* This looks fun, though, delivering groceries?” Sophie peered at Sam sitting in the van. “Ooh, and with a *view*. Did I ever tell you my last boyfriend was Black? Connor—you remember Connor, right? Anyway, it didn’t work out, obviously, but it

was so exciting. My mom hated him, of course, but of course she would *never* say that out loud.”

Sophie’s laugh was high and obnoxious, and it grated on Georgia just like it had in their shared freshman literature course. Georgia nodded, staring at her feet. She stepped backwards, inching toward the van, ready to give an excuse to leave.

“You ended up transferring, right?” Sophie asked, her voice calling Georgia back toward the fence. “Where do you go now?”

A lump was forming in Georgia’s throat. Her face was hot.

“I’m actually not in school anymore. My mom lost her job when the university shut down, and I guess you know about my dad, but now my sister’s sick.” Georgia trailed off. She couldn’t say any more without crying.

“Oh my god, I had no idea—you know, you should add me back on Snapstream and, like, if you *ever* need anything my family would be *so* happy to help.”

“Thank you. I’m fine. I should be going now.”

“Oh, I’m late for my yoga class anyway—”

Taking the exit, Georgia got in the van and slammed the door. Sophie was saying something else, but she couldn’t hear it through the window. Georgia put her head in her hands. She could feel Sam looking at her, but again, he was too kind to say anything. He started driving. They passed through the iron gates and turned back onto the wooded lane. Sam

put on the radio. A song trickled in through the van’s tinny speakers; something soft, and lilting, hopeful the way music had been before the virus. Georgia reached toward the volume knob to turn up the music and her hand bumped into Sam’s. They looked at each other and exchanged a smile.

They were the last drivers to return to the Super Value Foods parking lot. After they clocked out, Georgia finally checked her phone—five missed calls. She suddenly remembered that her mom had to leave to take a night shift, and couldn’t leave until she returned, since her sister couldn’t be left alone.

Georgia rushed out the door of the Super Value and ran down the block. Again, she heard a voice behind her. It was Sam, telling her to wait.

“Georgia, hold on a second.”

“Sam, I *really* need to get home right now.”

“Yeah, I’ll walk with you. I’m headed that way too”

Sam was different after work. He was less formal. They got to the first stoplight before either of them said anything. Georgia wondered if he would bring it up, or if she should. Sam cleared his throat.

“That was a friend from school?” Sam asked.

“Not really.” Georgia was still shaking, though the fear of returning home late had overtaken the emotions of earlier. “When I left school, I didn’t really tell anyone. I didn’t want them to know

about my mom or my sister or anything. A lot of people I knew from back then are about to graduate college. Some of them are like me, but some of them live in the gated communities now. Like Sophie.”

Sam nodded. “I just wanted to say—I’m sorry about your sister. Seems like everyone has someone they’ve lost or are about to lose.”

Georgia looked up at him.

*About to lose?*

“That’s not what I meant—she might recover, lots of people do—just, this job doesn’t pay very much.”

“I know, but my mom’s working too. We’ll have a little extra every month now.”

“I don’t know anyone who’s been able to buy the vaccine on minimum wage, even when they keep their jobs as long as I have. But, then again, you’ve already been getting a lot of tips.” He laughed gently. Georgia winced.

“Look, I know this is all new to you, but I’ve been at this for a while. You should know, there are other ways, if you want to find them.” They came to another intersection. Sam said goodbye and turned down the cross-street, leaving Georgia on the corner to guess what he meant.

She could remember a time when the sidewalks bustled with people at this time of day. Rush hour was no more. It was only Georgia and a few other essential workers coming home from the day shift. She suddenly felt keenly alone. Sam’s words rattled around in her

mind— she almost missed her family's building. She unlocked the door and started up the stairs, readying herself for what awaited her at home.

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