

THE ARC OF TIME

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Thank you to my mom and dad, Ed, Andi and the rest of the Bardians, my grandmother and godmother, and all of my other family, friends, teachers and loved ones.

And, as always, thank *you* for reading.

For Annie Cheryl.

The Arc of Time

School Kids SG Series
Year One: Epiphany
Episodes Four, Five, and Six

Prologue

The Chaos Master didn't get out much anymore, but then, he didn't need to. As leader of the Church of Chaos, which was known on the streets as a gang called the Incisors, he had thousands of children to carry out his work in the world for him.

The children did their jobs as assigned to them by the Brothers and Sisters, recognizable by red armbands bearing the symbol of their religion—the fang. Just as their factions' worth of children reported to them, so did they report to the Mothers and Fathers, of which there was one for each of New York City's five boroughs. These regional sub-bosses got their instructions from the Master himself, and thus the chain, and the family, were complete.

Aside from the Mothers and Fathers, most of the gang-cult rarely saw their Master. He remained hidden in a hooded cloak, distorted in voice by an electronic scrambler, and locked up in a dark throne room in the Chaos Temple, the center of the Incisors' power. Very few knew what this place was, and even fewer had been trusted with its location.

Running a religion was hard work, so it had made sense for the Chaos Master to delegate some of his authority, freeing him up for tactical tasks that he could just as easily complete from the temple. It didn't matter that he was rarely seen on the streets: even from his seat, the Master exerted an amount of power so terrifyingly great that many New Yorkers preferred simply to doubt his existence.

But on one cold night in mid-November, the only thing the Chaos Master saw fit to do was read over a folder's worth of information.

The stapled pages in his right hand seemed to be of greatest interest:

*INVESTIGATION OF POSSIBLE EMERGING
VIGILANTE GROUP: "THE SG CREW"
LOCATION: WOODVALE, NJ / WOODVALE HIGH*

The name "SG Crew" sounds like a standard, yearbook-type name for a group of high-schoolers, not like the name of a vigilante group. There are six of them total, aged between 16 and 17. Five are in their junior year, and the sixth is in his sophomore year. A list of them (in alphabetical order) follows. *Updated 11/25/29* – as requested, I have performed additional inquiries into each of the six individually. I will continue to expand on these inquiries until further notice.

Battano, Nicholas – Physically, he seems to be the strongest of the group, but reliable sources testify that he is a pacifist who will not directly attack anyone under any circumstances (though evidence from the Second Great Hallway War [see *previous report*] would seem to suggest that he sometimes compensates by fighting indirectly, i.e. scare tactics). Eyewitness accounts of the Daccat incident confirm this. Battano was also once known for his promiscuity, which stems back to a year spent in private school (St. Peter's Academy, Old Bridge, NJ).

Cordova, Damien – Oldest of the group and the only licensed driver. Known as a quiet and relaxed sort of person. Nothing else of interest. *Updated 11/25/29* – According to the local newspaper, Cordova ran away from home earlier this month, accompanied by two other Woodvale High students, one of whom was Spencer Raleigh, a former Brooklyn resident and member of the Division Gang. With this information, we now know how the incident on Division Street took place: Cordova and the other two drove to the Dividers' hideout, got trapped there by our forces in the area, and when they did not return, the rest of the SG Crew went looking for Cordova and got involved as well.

Daley, Markus – The youngest of the group (this is the sophomore) and also their newest friend (he has only been seen in the company of the others since September of this

year). Daley is the only one with any discernable ties to the Woodvale vigilante culture—rumor has it that he is himself a retired vigilante, which would make him a member of the most recent vigilante group from Woodvale, the Go-Cart Gang (2024-2028). He was also the one who gave the speech that prematurely ended the Second Great Hallway War. Members of the Daccat faction say he's stronger than he looks, but this is based mostly on two brief fights, one of which had nothing to do with Daley and the second of which occurred in the dark. None of this information can be confirmed yet.

Manara, Preston – Manara is rarely serious about anything. He does appear to be fiercely dedicated to his friends, but only in the sense of having a happy, social lifestyle—not to a point that would suggest a vigilante or gang-style brotherhood. The former Daccat faction has stressed that his loyalty *can* lead to combat on behalf of his friends, but only defensively. This hardly seems out of the ordinary, but it should be noted that he obviously works out (judging by his appearance), and therefore he is the strongest member of the SG Crew who could conceivably hit someone.

Parsons, Jennifer – Valedictorian of the Woodvale High class of 2031. She is well known in the school for her planning skills, which, when observed in practice, appear to form a counterbalance to her friends' general disorganization. They joke that she is their “mother” or mother figure—however, there is no reason to suspect a link between this distinction and the Mothers and Fathers of our order. The nickname was in use long before the group made contact with the Daccat faction or Mother Rhaia's forces on Division Street. That said, the fact that she was willing to fight Mother Rhaia one-on-one cannot be ignored, but based on my observation of her here, I think her victory was only a fluke.

Wellington, Egan – Painfully average in many ways, and probably the least athletic of the six. He very rarely seems to connect emotionally with any of his friends, so it's hard to imagine him with the zealotry necessary for being a

vigilante. However, members of the Daccat faction have confirmed that this is the one against whom their former Brother, Ari Daccat, held the grudge that led him to challenge the SG Crew and subsequently desert the Incisors. Therefore, it is only because of Wellington that we have been made aware of these six teenagers at all.

In conclusion, even in light of the new evidence added on 11/25/29, it is my opinion that the SG Crew is not a vigilante group, and shows no signs of desiring to become one. Only the link between Wellington and Daccat and the links between Daley, the Go-Cart Gang and the Second Great Hallway War are cause for concern, but all of these things seem to have run their course. There is no surface indication that the SG Crew is anything other than a bunch of high-school kids. Therefore, my verdict is that the SG Crew's involvement in both the Daccat and Division Street incidents was unwanted and unintentional, and only happened because of unforeseen personal connections. Since they have no further personal connections with the Church of Chaos, we should never hear from them again.

The rest of my monthly report is attached.

Heart, Body, and Mind
Nexus, Force, and Master

—Faye

*She dismisses this SG Crew too quickly, thought the Master. She mentions the Second Great Hallway War, but acts as if she has forgotten that the hand of Chaos was there as well. Someone may have set Woodvale High in riot to satisfy a personal need, but without **our** clandestine intervention, the war would never have occurred. The purpose of the war was to begin bringing out the Chaos already in Woodvale, and the fact that it was stopped early...that makes **three** times the SG Crew has interfered with our affairs.*

*The Church of Chaos may be able to weather the loss of the Daccat faction, and we may have banished the Dividers from Brooklyn in the end regardless.... He clenched his fist. But it is not enough. We will be expanding into the suburbs by summertime, where the persistent Woodvale vigilante culture will become a concern. Woodvale breeds vigilante groups at a fairly steady rate, and I **know** for a **fact** that this SG Crew...this....*

The Chaos Master let his thoughts trail off. He raised his hooded head, and a rare smile spread across his darkened features. Were it not for the gleam from a single, bare light bulb upon his teeth, that smile might not have existed at all, swallowed by the shadows that bathed him.

He got up from his throne, stepped down off its raised platform, and walked over to the far left side of the room. This was the planning wall, where a series of corkboards held pushpin-studded maps of the city boroughs and key neighborhoods, along with pages of notes and printed charts. More recently, the first maps of the Prattcorn Valley suburbs had begun to pop up in the far corner, signaling the start of the Incisors' interest in the areas just west of the city.

Only one corkboard stood out as different. It hung in the middle of the wall, taking full advantage of the light, and the Master had kept it bare for years, as if waiting for something worthy of filling its space. Over the last two weeks, he seemed to have found that something at last—every picture of the SG Crew that his agents had sent him, shots of the whole group together as well as of its members in other configurations, had been pinned there in plain view.

He stopped at this board, bracing himself against the wall with one hand so he could lean in and examine the central photograph. It was the first he'd received, along with the original report he'd asked for on the defeat of the Daccat faction, and it showed the entire SG Crew

assembled in the halls of Woodvale High on a normal day. All six of their faces were clearly visible.

Then again, thought the Master, his smile widening, Faye's opinion matters little, as long as she continues to compile the facts. I already know the only truly important detail...all that remains is to decide how best to reach it. When the time comes, I will take care of that myself, and the truth of this world will rise up and overwhelm the falsehoods...then, all will be as it should be.

He stepped back from the board and crossed his arms.

*The beginning and the end are drawing nearer...perhaps **now** is the time for the Mind to begin playing a more active role....*

Scre-e-e-e-e-e-e!!

A dirty, brown car covered in rust spots peeled around the corner, merging onto Bushton Avenue on two wheels. At rush hour, this almost certainly would have caused a crash, but now, at midnight, it only invited honking from the one other car on the road. The driver and passengers in the old four-door barely noticed—they had other things on their minds, and panic on their breath.

“Oh, my God, man!” wailed Lenny. “Ohhhh, my God, man! We’re gonna die!”

“No, we’re not!” said Will. He seemed to tighten his grip on the steering wheel, and he leaned back until his elbows locked.

“Everything’s gonna be okay! All we have to do is get on the BQE, then get out of the city. We’ll drop him off after we pass the Bronx—”

“**How** did I let you talk me into going along with this hostage situation?!” Lenny looked into the back seat. The hostage was still there, but he barely paid any attention to his captors. Instead, he watched through the back windshield as if he were waiting for something.

“They had us surrounded! It was the only way!” Will insisted.

“We hadda either take one of their ‘children,’ or they’d have killed us right there!”

“But now they’re gonna kill us even **worse**, man!” said Lenny.

“They stick together like family! They’re coming...I can feel it!”

A traffic light turned red, and Will glided the car to a stop. There was no one else waiting at the light with him, only the dark, parked

cars on the sides of the road. He could see the Manhattan Bridge a few blocks ahead—the entrance to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway was even closer than that. A few more minutes, and they'd be in the clear.

“Ohhhh, **why** didn't we leave when Zack told us to? **Why** did we have to stick around to visit Hercules?! There are **plenty** of dealers outside the city—” Lenny sputtered and gestured ahead. “What are you **doing**, man?! Run the light! We can't just **sit** here!”

“Yeah, **great** idea. Let's get pulled over by the cops with an Incisor in the car and two bags of weed on us!” said Will. “Then we'd be stopped even longer, and we know the cops are afraid of the Incisors, so **they'd** be no help when Rhaia catches up to us.”

“Mother Rhaia will catch up anyway,” said the Incisor in the back, his voice shaky but confident. “You were dead the moment we found you. Kidnapping me won't change anything!”

“Shut up!” yelled Lenny.

“Uh-oh....” Will looked in the rear-view mirror, twisting it back and forth to get a better view. “We've got company!”

The Incisors appeared as they always did—melting out of the shadows onto the sidewalks and rooftops, moving with the speed and silence of wasps. Will could see about a dozen of them, including a girl with long, dark hair and a red armband who was just stepping out of an alleyway on the right. She glared at the car and raised her right hand, revealing a single, black leather glove with four whips trailing from the fingers.

“It's Rhaia!” Lenny put his hands on the dashboard and ducked his head down. “That's it! We gotta move—gun it, Will!”

Will knew he had no choice: it was do-or-die time. He stomped on the gas and shot through the red light, keeping up the pace until the next block, where he'd be taking the right turn for the BQE. There, he found a truck in the way, the driver trying to back up and correct his heading after taking the turn too wide.

“Come on...come on...!”

He looked in the mirror again. Rhaia and the Incisors were in pursuit, running as fast as they could. They'd be caught up in less than a minute, and even if the trucker succeeded in making his turn, Will and Lenny would still be stuck behind him.

“Something's wrong!” said Lenny, his fear becoming laced with confused dread. “Why aren't there more of them? We used to see

dozens of Incisors on Division Street—they call for backup from all sides so guys like us can't escape!"

He had a horrible thought. "Will, what if they **want** us on the BQE? What if they're only chasing us from behind 'cause they want to **lead** us there?!"

"We've got no choice! It's the only way out! We drive over the Manhattan Bridge, we've got Arjuna and **his** factions on our asses before we hit Midtown!" Will cut the wheel sharply left. "Oh, **screw this!**"

He swerved around the truck just as it was getting back up to speed; its loud horn rang in his ears. He ignored it and merged onto the BQE, accelerating as fast as he could press the pedal. The Church of Chaos controlled all five city boroughs, but even they couldn't keep up with a moving car on an elevated highway.

"Oh, God!" Lenny sat back and sighed heavily. "We made it!"

"Not yet," said Will. "I won't be happy 'til we're in Westchester County. After we drop off this kid, we've gotta find some way to hook up with Zack and go into hiding."

"Maybe we shouldn't," said Lenny, sounding like the thought depressed him. "We might wind up leading the 'Cisors straight to the rest of our friends!"

"It doesn't matter what you do," said the hostage. "When we decide it's time to find and punish you former Dividers, nothing will save you."

"Shut **up!**" barked Will. He turned back to his passenger. "Where else are we gonna go, Lenny?! Zack'll understand...he'll take care of us."

The truck that Will had cut around was now passing him in the left lane, its driver making obscene gestures. In a few seconds, they were looking at its back loading door as the driver switched into the right lane and got directly in front of them. Rhaia was there, clinging to the door with her feet braced on its lip, her hair and whips trailing back toward Will's car in the wind.

"**Yaaaahh!**" Lenny screamed.

Rhaia jumped, letting herself fall with all four limbs splayed out like an insect's, and landed on the hood of the car. She glanced at the hostage, giving him a supportive nod, then glared at Will and drew a knife from her belt. She reared back, preparing to use its handle to smash the windshield.

“Hang on, Lenny!” said Will. He turned the wheel in harsh movements, making the car zigzag with sickening intensity. He had to correct his course onto a nearby off-ramp to compensate for the swerve it took to finally throw Rhaia off. She sailed over the right-hand guardrail and plummeted toward the street below.

The hostage tensed; he got up on his knees and looked back, following Rhaia’s flight path with his eyes.

“Ha! Gotcha,” said Will, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Crack!

Though they couldn’t hear it in the car, that was the sound of Rhaia throwing all of her whips at once, wrapping them around one of the lampposts on the edge of the highway. She clenched her fist and swung around the pole, redirecting herself over the off-ramp. This part of the BQE had exits that followed lazy curves back down to the ground—Rhaia had plenty of time to aim for the retreating car’s roof before she launched herself.

Tump!

“Shit!”

Lenny and Will knew what that sound meant, and two seconds later, the handle of Rhaia’s knife came down over the windshield. Broken glass sprayed in Will’s face, forcing him to shut his eyes.

“**Aaaaaahhhh!**”

BOOM!!

The next thing Lenny knew, he was wiping blood off his forehead, and when he opened his eyes, the front of the car was crunched against the stoop of a four-story walk-up. He glanced back, and saw that the captive Incisor was still there, shaken but otherwise all right. Then, he looked at Will, whose head was resting against the steering wheel, his hair matted with blood.

“Will?” asked Lenny quietly. He reached over and shook Will’s shoulder, but got no reaction. “Will? Man, come on, Will!”

Ka-cuk.

Someone opened the car door from the outside—the lock had been broken in the crash. Lenny felt himself being grabbed and hauled out onto the sidewalk, at which point he realized for the first time just how much pain he was in. His legs were stiff and achy, his neck seemed to crackle when he tried to unbend it, and he thought he felt blood pooling under his shirt. He looked down instinctively, but a hand grabbed his face and twisted his gaze forward.

He recoiled and forgot his pain—he was staring into the eyes of Rhaia.

“**There** we are,” she said, smiling in an unsettling way. “That’s better.”

“Oh, God...” Lenny whimpered. “Oh, God!”

“Be a man!” Rhaia snapped. She jerked Lenny back and forth by his shirt. “You’ve got some pretty serious stuff to own up to here...you kidnapped one of my children, and now you’re going to face the consequences!”

Lenny looked around. The rest of the Incisors were coming out of the woodwork now, though there were still only about 12 of them. He wasn’t surrounded at close quarters, but he was surrounded nonetheless. Escape was impossible.

“Please...please don’t kill me,” he whispered, since whispering was as loud as he could make his voice go.

“You **moron**. I was **never** going to kill you. I only wanted information, and you, being a former Divider, might be able to give it to me,” said Rhaia. She stared deep into him, her eyes hard. “I might even be willing to overlook the fact that you abducted Sandy, if you cooperate. What do you say?”

“Yes! Yes, **anything!**” cried Lenny.

“Good.” Rhaia smiled again and pulled back a little bit. “All you need to tell me is how I can find a guy named Brandon Danbury.”

There was a pause. Lenny panted even harder.

“I...I don’t know...” He sounded like he couldn’t believe what he was saying.

“Yes you **do!**” Rhaia yanked him so hard he almost fell to his knees. She took out her knife and pointed the blade into his chest.

“**Tell me! Tell me or you die!**”

“I don’t know!”

“**Tell me!**” Rhaia pressed the blade forward more—Lenny cried out in pain. He could feel the point pricking his skin through his clothes.

“All right all right all right!” he said at last. “Listen...listen, I don’t know him, we never talked, that’s the **truth!**”

“Then you’re **useless** to me....”

“Wait, wait! But I...I know who he might have moved in with! I heard he got an apartment in Brooklyn with a guy named Jimmy

Orton...he was a Divider, too!” Lenny retreated to quiet trembling. “Please believe me...that’s all I know....”

“Oh, I believe you. I’d be able to tell if you were lying.” Rhaia smirked. “A mother always can.”

Lenny felt Rhaia’s grip on him relax a bit. He sighed, relieved. *Squit!*

Rhaia’s knife went in and out of his chest so fast it was a blur.

“But you are **not** my child,” she said as she let him drop to the ground. “And **as** a mother, I have to **protect** my children **from** you.”

She wiped her knife on her pant leg, then turned to the hostage, who had just staggered out of the back seat of the car a few moments before.

“Are you all right, Sandy?” she asked.

“Yeah...I’m fine....” He looked at her with shining eyes. “Thank you, Mother Rhaia! Thank you for saving me.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” said Rhaia. She pointed her knife straight into the air, raising it above her head. “All right, everyone! Gather round!”

Even the Incisors who were on the rooftops seemed to dart up to Rhaia quickly. In seconds, they’d formed a tight circle reminiscent of a football huddle.

“For those of you who didn’t hear, we have a new lead—James Orton. We find him, we find Danbury.” Rhaia nodded. “You know what to do.”

They did. The Incisors vanished as suddenly as they’d appeared, fanning out into Brooklyn to continue the search.

Rhaia sheathed her knife and walked up the street alone, leaving the accident and the two fallen Dividers behind her. She wasn’t worried: there would be no investigation into the deaths. The police and city government knew well enough to leave the Church of Chaos alone—as the Incisors had grown in power and numbers, a clandestine covenant with the law had emerged. So long as they were allowed to wage their battles with the rest of New York City’s gangs in peace, the Incisors would refrain from turning their strength on innocent citizens. The police were content to let gangs kill other gangs under the circumstances, and now that the Dividers were gone, even that sort of fighting would stop; the Incisors would be able to conduct their business unopposed.

Despite controlling the entire New York underworld, for all intents and purposes, the Church of Chaos did not exist. But Rhaia's work that night had nothing to do with her church.

We'd better find this kid soon, she thought, annoyed. If only I could just go to Woodvale myself and track down the suburbanites who humiliated me on Division Street. But the Master has spies in their high school—he said so himself. There's no way I could go there without arousing suspicion, and I don't know how else to find them.

But soon I'll have Brandon, and he'll tell me everything I need to know. Those kids have something in common with the Master...and once I figure out what that something is, I'll have the means to start chipping away at his mask.

Rhaia thought then, as she often did, about her first defeat at the hands of the Chaos Master—her first defeat by anyone. That battle had brought her into the Incisors and won the Master her respect and cooperation, at least as long as she was sure he could still best her. Though joining the Church of Chaos had allowed her to continue her work in the world, Rhaia had never considered it a permanent engagement. She'd been biding her time all along.

*All this time, I figured you knew something I didn't, she thought, fantasizing about the confrontation with the Master she now felt was imminent. You claimed to have shed your humanity, and you said **that** was what gave you your power, your control over the Incisors. I didn't believe you for a **second**...I told myself that you were still a person, and that **every** person has a weakness. But I was so concerned with trying to **find** that weakness, I didn't realize that it was staring me right in the face all along.*

*Inhumanity that isn't real is meant to **hide** humanity, and when you hide something, **that's** your weakness. Something about those Woodvalers interests you...you researched them, knew about them even before **I** did, and if I believe what you **and** that Jennifer girl said to me, then you **must** have something in common with her and her friends. As soon as I find out what that is, I'll know something that **matters** to the man you're trying to leave behind.*

*All this time, I've been so concerned about facing your reality, I never stopped to think about the building blocks that **created** it. But now I know that the way to defeat you is from the inside out.*

Rhaia smiled sardonically to herself. *For the first time, I'm starting to wonder...who **are** you, my Chaos Master?*

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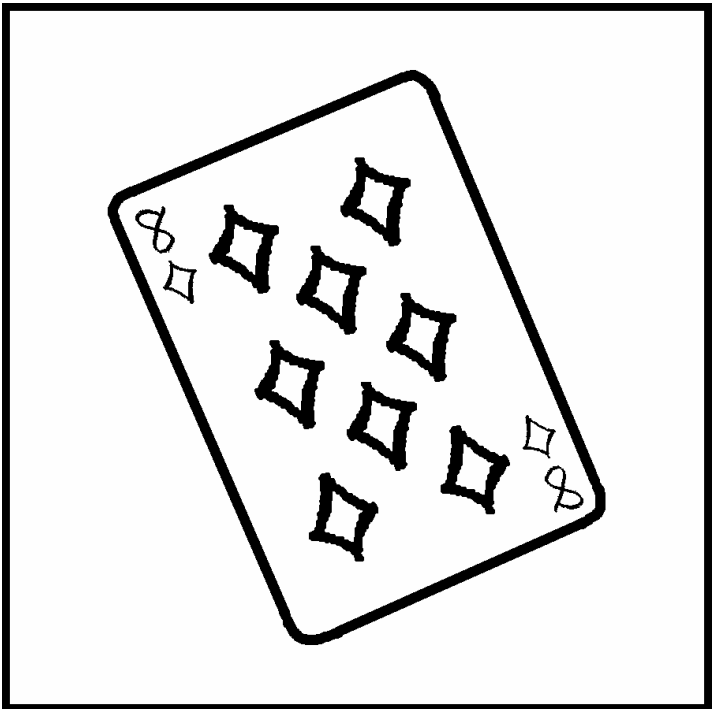
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“Nope...no...no...um...no.”

The door to the bathroom creaked open. A head of long, wavy, almost-black hair peered halfway in, and once the girl had confirmed that her sister wasn't naked or anything, the rest of her body followed. She moved far enough in to shut the door again, ensuring privacy. She could see herself in the mirror, reflected over her sister's shoulder.

“Hey, Jenny,” she asked, “what's taking you so long?”

“I'll be out of your way in **two seconds**, Kristen, I promise,” said Jenn. She tried on what seemed like her fiftieth pair of earrings, decided she didn't like them, and tossed them back into the box with the rest.

“Don't worry about me—I could just use the other bathroom if I had to,” said Kristen. “It's your friends who are getting impatient. They've been waiting outside in that van for, like, 15 minutes. I already went out there twice to tell them ‘she'll be right out.’ Do you **like** making me into a liar, Jenny?”

Jenn swore under her breath. She paused for a moment, thinking hard, then shook her head violently and just grabbed the first pair of earrings she laid hands on.

“I like the outfit,” Kristen said with an approving nod. Her sister wore a plain, forest-green dress with a band of white faux-pearls around her neck. It came off almost like a combination of formal attire and the green sweatshirt Jenn usually insisted on wearing everywhere.

“You **should** like it, it's yours,” said Jenn with a quick smile. “Thanks for the loan, Kris—I really appreciate it. Do you think these earrings are okay, though?”

“They're—”

“Whoop! No time!” Jenn darted past Kristen and out of the bathroom. She remembered that she was wearing heels just in time to stop at the staircase, instead of inadvertently hurling herself down to the first floor.

“You know, this is pretty unusual for you,” Kristen said, following Jenn downstairs. “Since when do you care so much about putting on

an appearance? Especially for something that happens every year like Homecoming? It's not like this is your prom or anything."

"No reason," said Jenn, shrugging. She hadn't really given the matter much thought—dressing nice had just felt natural this time.

"Have you got a **date** or something?" probed Kristen in a curious, delighted voice. "Or maybe you're just trying to catch the eye of a special someone?"

"What?! Kris, **please!** It's nothing like that," Jenn exclaimed. She grabbed her purse off the table by the front door and hung it from her right shoulder. "You said it yourself—the kids waiting for us out there are my **friends**. We're gonna hang out, maybe drop by some of the game tables, dance a little as a **group**, and then probably go home. I doubt I'm even gonna **see** too many other people tonight."

She gave her sister a snide grin. "Don't worry. I promise we'll stay out of your way while you try and seduce that Jeffrey guy!"

"Classy, Jenn. **Real** classy." Kristen giggled. "You'll cover for me if he and I go out afterwards, right?"

"Hey, what's a big sister for?" Jenn laughed and gave Kristen a hug before they stepped out the front door and headed down the walk.

The red home of Kristen and Jennifer Parsons was on the end of its block, and a fire hydrant marked the edge of its brief front lawn. Thanks to this, guests were usually forced to park around the corner, but since the van idling at the curb would only be there long enough to pick up two people, the driver had just switched on his hazard lights and squatted.

On a normal night, Jenn and her friends would squeeze into Damien Cordova's light blue sedan, which took them wherever they wanted to go. At first, the sight of the van had been a surprise, but Jenn quickly reasoned that giving her sister a ride would put the usual car one over capacity. Damien must have realized this and borrowed a larger vehicle.

"Hey, guys," said Jenn as she pulled the sliding door open. "Sorry if I kept you waiting...Daime?"

"Uh, from what I've been told, he's still grounded," answered the tall, black-haired twentysomething in the driver's seat. "So you'll have to settle for me and my van tonight, okay...uh...Jenn, right?"

"Right." Jenn's face scrunched up as she tried to remember where she'd seen him before. "You're Egan's brother, right?"

“And yet I’ve **still** gotta sit way back here. **Great** job, Jason,” grumbled Egan Wellington from his seat in the third row of the van, beside the spiky-haired Preston Manara and a strangely fashion-conscious Mark Daley. Mark couldn’t seem to stop adjusting and re-adjusting his outfit, and the struggle had rendered him oblivious to everything around him.

“I called shotgun when you got outta the car at Mark’s house,” yelled Nick Battano from the front seat. “If your brother still gave it to you after that, it wouldn’t have been fair!”

“Sorry, Egan, but he’s gotcha there. **You’re** the one who bought that pocket handbook on the rules for calling shotgun,” said Jason. He reached into the glove compartment and pulled out said book, waving it around. “Besides, I really can’t stand nep...neo...net....”

“I think you mean **nepotism**, Jason.” Jenn sat down in the middle seat, beside the window, and buckled up as Jason pulled away from the curb. She turned and looked over her shoulder, lowering an eyebrow at Egan. “I see great vocabulary runs in your family, honey.”

“Oh, shut up. And **you!**” Egan turned on Mark. “Will you **stop** messing with your tie every five seconds?!”

“I’m sorry! It’s just...I’m not used to wearing a dress shirt, okay?! The last time I wore one was...it’s been a long time!” whined Mark. He didn’t stop smoothing out his tie and retucking the bottom of his shirt even while he spoke. “Do I look okay?”

“Gah! You—”

“You look **fine**, Mark,” said Preston. With twinkling eyes, he added in a stage whisper, “Don’t let Egan get to you—he’s just being a wuss over losing the front seat! Hahahaha!”

“I only **lost** it because I had to get out of the car and go into **your** house to see what was taking so damn long!” Egan snapped at Mark half-seriously. “What is this, anyway? We haven’t had this much trouble getting you to come out with us in months! How come you’ve gotta be dragged around tonight?”

“I **told** you, I didn’t wanna **go** to Homecoming,” said Mark. “You’ll see—as soon as we get there, you guys will start hunting for girls, and all I’m gonna be is a fifth wheel.”

“A **fifth wheel**?!” Preston started laughing again. “Dude, where have you **been**? Picking up chicks is, like, the **ultimate** form of male bonding!”

“Uh, excuse me? Let’s not forget that **I’m** along for the evening, too,” said Jenn. “I doubt **I’m** gonna be picking up any girls, Mark.”

“Well, duh,” said Mark, cracking his first smile of the night.

“Seriously, though, I don’t think I’ll do any cruising, either. Gotta stay off the market for a while if you want **them** to want **you**,” said Preston in a jokingly suave tone. And then, all of a sudden, his face lit up. “Waaaaait a second! Did you think you were gonna be a fifth wheel because **you’re** not getting any?”

“No! That isn’t—”

“Manara, you moron! Why didn’t you figure it out right away?” Preston asked himself, smacking his forehead. “I mean, here we’ve got a town hero on our hands, and he’s never ever had his first kiss! That’s gotta be a freakin’ crime!”

“I’m **not** a—”

“Egan! How’s this for tonight’s project?” Preston barreled ahead, grabbing Egan by reaching across Mark. “Before the dance is over, we get Mark a kiss from a pretty lady. Hahahaha!”

“Yeah... yeah, I could **totally** get into that!” said Egan. He extended his own arm and gave Preston a high five, then went back into his thoughts; his expression looked more purposeful now that he had something to plan.

“Really, guys, don’t feel like you need to make a big deal over me,” Mark insisted, waving his hands in front of his chest. “I just wanna hang out—”

“No! We’re helping you jump-start your lovelife, and we’re doing it because we’re good friends who like you. End of discussion!” Preston couldn’t hold his serious face for long. Less than five seconds later, he was laughing again, and he gave Mark a slap on the shoulder.

Mark sighed and sat back.

“All right,” he muttered. He thought, *This is what normal people do with their friends. I guess I should at least try to appreciate it.*

“Don’t worry, man! I promise we won’t turn you into some kinda man-whore like Nick over there!” said Preston. Nick turned around at the mention of his name. “Although I gotta say that watching him in his natural habitat could at least give you a couple pointers... of what **not** to do!”

“Ha, ha. Yeah, Preston, just keep talking, and maybe some girl will wander over to see what’s wrong with you!” laughed Nick. “As for me, **I’ll** be in the middle of a hot hook-up while you’re still playing

cards at the game tables. Just 'cause I haven't gone out in a while doesn't mean I've lost my skills!"

"That's right—you've dated half my neighborhood!" said Mark, recalling some of the first stories he'd been told after meeting Nick. "We haven't talked about that in forever!"

"Oh, man! Nick's dating stories used to be **all** we talked about whenever he was around to tell them!" said Preston. "We got some pretty good sleepovers outta his lovelife. It seems like that was all he even **did** when he went to St. Peter's last year!"

"That's because St. Peter's **sucked**," Nick broke in, citing an appraisal of his former school that he took every opportunity to restate. "HIA was the **only** good thing about it!"

"HIA?" wondered Mark.

"Holy Innocents Academy, our sister school," Nick explained. "We got together with the girls at dances and stuff, and **every time** one would come home with me! What can I say—I was in demand there, probably because I was the only one with the brains to realize my school bit ass!"

"Or maybe it's 'cause going to an all-girls' school gave them lower standards!" laughed Egan. "Face it, Nick—you haven't had date one since you transferred back to Woodvale High! That says something!"

"Hmph. Why should I care what you think? The only ones who need to respect my skills with the ladies **are** the ladies!" Nick turned back around to face the windshield. "Just wait, you guys. By the end of the night, I'll be the one with a hot girl on my arm, and you'll all **wish** you were nicer to me so I'd introduce you to her hot friends!"

Kristen looked over at Jenn. She was leaning against the side window, and the warm air from her nostrils fogged up the cold glass as she watched the suburban streets glide by outside. It looked like her mind was a million miles away.

"Jenn?" asked Kristen, reaching over to tap her sister's shoulder. "Hey, are you all right?"

"Mmmm? Oh, yeah, yeah, of course," said Jenn, shaken from her trance. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I dunno. You looked like you had something on your mind."

Jenn gave a half-smile. "Kris, I'm the valedictorian of my class. I **always** have something on my mind. It's just what I **do!**"

Still, after she and Kristen shared a laugh, Jenn went right back to staring out the window. Her reflection stared back at her no matter

how she tried to see around it, and it showed her an expression of sagging eyelids and taut lips that was disturbingly unfamiliar.

Two

Although it was 9:00 on a Wednesday night, the student parking lot at Woodvale High School was as full as it would have been at 7:45 AM, right before class, on any normal day. The small patches of forest that surrounded the building reverberated with bass beats from the annual Homecoming Dance, the only event that could get the students of WHS this excited on a cold November night. The dance helped mark the beginning of the holiday season, and, as signs around the building reminded the students, the school's annual Spirit Week was now only five days away.

Since Jason wouldn't be staying, he didn't bother looking for a parking space, and instead brought the van to a stop at the side of the lot. The door slid open and the SG Crew started piling out.

"Thanks, Jason," Egan said, giving his brother a quick wave as he stepped onto the asphalt.

"No problem. Have fun, you guys!"

"We will!" Jenn, Egan and Preston said together. Jason gave them a nod and drove off. Nick didn't even glance back before starting to walk across the lot toward one of the side doors, where a few other students were making their way inside.

As for Mark, he was staring over the top of the school, looking pensive. A quiet moan buzzed up his throat.

What am I doing here? he thought. *I **never** have fun at Homecoming! And now I've gotta worry about meeting girls....*

"Niiiiick! Wait up!" shouted Preston.

"**You** can wait up! I'm the only one who didn't bring a coat! I'm **freezing** out here!" Nick yelled back.

"Don't listen to him. Don Juan probably just wants to get a head start on us," Preston said to Egan, laughing. He called out, "At least chill inside the door so we can catch up! Come on, everyone!"

"I'll see you guys later," Kristen said to the group. She patted Jenn on the shoulder and jerked her head to the left. "I gotta take care of something before I go inside. And if I don't see you, don't worry—I think I can find my own ride home."

Jenn didn't even need to wait until her sister changed course to figure out where she was going. A black car had just pulled into a parking space several rows down, and the first person to get out was Jeffrey, recognizable from the pictures in Kristen's room. Jenn smiled and silently wished her good luck.

I really admire her sometimes, she thought. She hangs around with the popular kids, but she's still a strong, independent girl...not like the rest of the airheaded cheerleaders from Jeff's crowd....

As soon as the SG Crew entered the building, the otherworldly atmosphere that always pervaded high-school dances seemed to draw them in. A half darkness filled the edge of Junior High Wing, casting strange shadows off the walls and onto the tiled floor. Blinking lights of red, green, blue and yellow latched onto these spectral figures, splitting them and making them dance as excitedly as the students inside the lower gym.

The line to pay the \$5 entry fee extended almost all the way to the exit; it seemed as if half the student body had arrived at the same time, nearly an hour after the formal beginning of the dance. Egan and Preston groaned, while Mark turned to a closed classroom door on his right and took the opportunity to continue fussing around with his outfit. He was trying to use the little pane of glass above the doorknob as a mirror—it didn't work very well, but he kept at it.

"The line's moving fast," Jenn said to her friends, peering ahead to the ticket table. "We'll be inside before you know it. It's not like this is gonna sell out or anything."

"Oh, man! Imagine if school dances could sell out like concerts," said Preston. "That would **suck!**"

"I think it'd suck worse to be sold out of a concert than the Woodvale High Homecoming...." Egan trailed off, slowly turning around as he sensed Mark's frantic movements behind him.

"What is the **matter** with you?" exclaimed Egan with a pointed laugh. "Chill out, dude! We **told** you that you look okay...those shirts are **supposed** to get a little wrinkly on the bottom."

"I'm sorry! I said I'm not used to it!" Mark said. "Besides, if you and Preston are going to **insist** on introducing me to girls, then I've gotta look my best, right?!"

"Mark, look at me: I'm wearing the same thing you are. The only difference is that my shirt's green!" Preston reached over and mussed Egan's hair. "Hell, look at **this** kid! He's wearing the same damn shirt

he wears on a **normal** day, except tonight he actually bothered to button it up! Hahahaha!”

“Dude! That’s not funny,” said Egan, fixing his hair.

“Guys, it’s our turn!” Jenn interrupted over her shoulder. They had reached the front of the entry line.

The usually irate history teacher, Mrs. Richardson, was in abnormally high spirits as she took the teenagers’ money. More than likely, it had something to do with Mrs. Timothy, the math teacher to her left, who was in charge of the cash box and a clipboard full of papers. The two of them were old friends, both Woodvale High graduates themselves, and they barely paid the entering students any mind at all while they laughed and talked to each other.

“Man, why did we even **get** in line? Why did we **pay**?” wondered Preston as he and his friends turned right, down Junior High Wing and away from the table. “We coulda just walked through and they wouldn’t have even noticed!”

“Right, and then we’d get thrown out of the dance when someone decides to take that list Mrs. Timothy was making and check it against the guests,” said Jenn. “Didn’t you **see** that she was checking off every student who walked in?”

“Oh, nobody ever bothers going back to that thing later,” said Preston. “I bet kids who’ve never even **gone** to this school could get in, no problem!”

“Hey, I’ll go get us a table or something,” said Nick, heading for the gym while the rest of his friends stopped at an open classroom containing a massive pile of coats.

“Okay! See ya—”

“Whoa, hang on!” called a voice from off to the side. A girl with a highlighted brown ponytail, green eyes and a bouncy step ran up to the SG Crew. “Before you split up and stuff, mind if I take a picture of you the way you came in? I’m trying to get a bunch of group shots for the yearbook.”

“Sure, Faye!” said Jenn, recognizing the girl from her Spanish class. She grabbed Mark and Egan by their shoulders. “Come on, come on! Get in here, everyone!”

The five friends jockeyed and struggled with one another to settle on a pose that would make all of them visible to their liking, while Faye backed up a few feet and raised her camera to her eyes. The

setup only took a few moments, but just when it seemed like the photo was ready to be taken, Faye lowered the camera again.

“Hey,” she asked, “where’s the other guy? Aren’t there usually six of you?”

“You mean Damien? He’s grounded,” said Nick. “Just take the picture. We’ll find you again during Spirit Week or something and get one with him in it, too.”

Faye nodded. “All right, definitely. Smile!”

At her command, the five friends instantly froze with huge grins on their faces, the kind that would reflect the burst from the flash bulb. When she was done, Faye nodded to thank them and darted off in search of more photos before the SG Crew even had time to break out of their poses.

“All right, let’s go,” said Nick through a heavy sigh as his friends ducked briefly into the open classroom.

“We’re comin’, we’re comin’!” said Preston, tossing his coat onto the pile. He punched Nick in the arm on his way back into the hallway; Nick punched him back, but didn’t pursue it. Preston led the whole group a few feet farther down the hall and through the double doors of the lower gym.

The atmosphere of the dance dwarfed the pale shadow of itself that had been able to leak out into the hallway and the parking lot. Here, amid the shadows, swirling lights, pounding music and tendrils of smoke, was the heart of the night. The left side and center of the room were completely dark; the hanging, caged-in gym lights on the ceiling had been shut off. A DJ wielding digital turntables, huge speakers and globes of colored lights stood against the near wall at half-court, moving and swaying along with the dozens of kids on the dance floor. The right side of the gym was given over to a collection of tables, where a handful of students rested and treated themselves to refreshments from a serving area along the wall. The back corner was partially lit to facilitate several card and board games that the teachers hoped would give the dance something for everyone.

The SG Crew walked around the main body of dancers and found themselves an open table. Almost immediately, though, Nick sprang back up from his chair.

“Well, I think I’m gonna go hit up the floor,” he said, stretching out his arms over his head. He chucked his chin in the direction of a

girl with black hair, blue eyes, and lots of eyeshadow and lipstick. “See you guys later!”

“Oooo, good choice,” Egan said, sounding almost like he was in a little bit of pain. Nick looked back and winked at him before he departed.

“Okay, what about you, Mark?” asked Egan, diverting his attention. “Let’s pick out a target for you and get this show on the road! You wanna get your first kiss tonight, right?”

“Uh...I guess....”

“Well, then, you’ve gotta get started early, so you have enough of the night left to make your moves!” Egan stretched his neck to gaze into the crowd on the dance floor. “Come on, Preston, help me look for someone good...ooo, how about that girl over there?”

“Which one?” asked Mark, trying to follow Egan’s eyes. “Point to her so I can see.”

“Dude!” Egan exclaimed, his tone suggesting that this word was meant to substitute for a harsh “no.”

“Well, **I’m** the one who has to see what she looks like, aren’t I?!” asked Mark with aggravated confusion.

“Lesson number one: you **can’t** be obvious. Not even a little bit. **No** girl likes a guy who looks like he’s interested in her.”

“Oh...okay...I’m sorry....”

“It’s okay,” said Egan quickly. He leaned a little farther forward. “Now, **without** staring, look about two rows from the DJ...she’s wearing pink pants and there’s a blue...hair-thingie on her head—”

“Oh! I know her—she’s in chemistry with me,” Mark said. “She’s already dating someone.”

“Dammit!” said Egan. “Oh, well. Still plenty of ’em out there.”

“Yo, what about her? The one standing over there with a drink,” said Preston, pointing toward the back of the gym. Egan reached over and slapped his hand down. Preston yelped and pulled his arm under the table.

“What was **that** for?!” he cried in a high-pitched voice.

“**No** pointing! Didn’t you hear what I just said to Mark?!”

At least that makes it easier to see who he’s talking about, thought Mark; he was getting grumpier by the minute. Still, he managed to isolate the girl in question. She was alone, probably waiting for her friends to return from the bathroom or the snack table. She had long, brown hair with straight but puffy bangs. It was too far for Mark to

see her exact eye color, but her eyes were shiny even in the dance's half light. Her clothes were less overtly tight and attention-grabbing than some of the other girls' outfits on display, but her dark jeans, studded rock-star belt and fairly plain white shirt still gave the impression that she had a style in mind.

"Huh," Mark heard himself say automatically, "she's not half bad looking...."

"Yeah, man!" said Preston. He gave Mark a thumbs-up. "And she's all alone, too! This would be the **perfect** time to make a move."

"Really?" Mark gulped. His skin and hands suddenly got cold and shaky. His stomach lurched forward then down, and he felt a weight dragging through his torso toward his feet. It had all been talk until now—now, things were getting too real for comfort.

"**Go!** Gogogogo, before you miss your chance!" Preston stage-whispered.

"Right! Right right right, I'm going!" blurted Mark, moving forward after a hesitant, jerky start. Somehow, the notion of missed chances was enough to spur him onward, making him skip the part where he thought things through. He melted into the crowd and vanished from sight.

Preston crossed his arms and sneered at Egan.

"See? While **you** were giving lectures on stupid rules and smacking my hand, **I** was taking the time to pick a girl other than the first one I saw, and oh wait! **Who** actually got him interested in someone? **Who** got him to go do something?"

"Shut up, man!" laughed Egan, reaching over and shoving Preston's shoulder.

Jenn sighed.

*They're raising his hopes too high, she thought. Her face twisted in contemplation. You can't just **make** these things happen...both sides need to want something real. Or something at **all**, for that matter. Wishing for it isn't enough.*

"Yo!"

Startled, Jenn broke her train of thought and realized that Preston had been talking to her.

"Sorry," she said, closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose; all of a sudden, she felt a headache coming on. "What did you say, Preston?"

“I was just asking you to tell Egan that **I** did a better job helping Mark—are you feeling all right, Jenn?” asked Preston. “You were totally spaced out there for a second.”

“Yeah...yeah, I’m fine,” Jenn said, continuing to rub her face. “Maybe I feel a little off or...something...but don’t worry.”

“Are you sure?” Preston tilted his face to one side and leaned across the table. “Maybe you oughta put your head down for a few minutes or something, if you’re feeling sick.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think it’s anything like that....”

“Hi!” greeted Mark in an extra-sunny voice backed up by an extra-sunny smile. He had popped back up in the chair next to Egan, and his arrival had been so quiet that nobody knew how long he’d been there. It was as if he’d never left, or else had teleported back into his seat.

“What th—?!” Egan sputtered. “Hey! What are you doing back already?! Did you talk to that girl or not?!”

“Well, it’s like this: I got halfway over there, and then I realized that I didn’t know her name.” Mark shrugged. “How am I supposed to start a conversation if I don’t know what name to call to get her attention?”

Egan groaned and threw his head down onto his arms. “How about introducing **yourself** and then **asking** for her name?!”

“No! That’s....” Mark shook his head. “Look, if I do that, it’s gonna be completely obvious that I’m hitting on her! **You’re** the one who said I can’t be obvious! I just...I don’t think I could deal with screwing this up right from the start and getting rejected!”

“Okay, that makes sense. But listen, man,” said Preston, “you can’t let doubts like that stop you every time you wanna do something. Otherwise, you’d never do **anything**! Nothing really good ever happens to you unless you take a risk once in a while.”

Mark grinned fleetingly. “I guess you **would** know about risk-taking. I don’t think any of us plan ahead **less** than you, and you seem happy!” He and Preston laughed, but then Mark got serious again. “See, here’s the thing, though—”

“Excuse me for a minute, guys.” Jenn stood up. The pain on her face was gone now, and it had been replaced by an expression of quiet determination.

“Hey! You’re feeling better!” said Egan.

“I don’t know if I am,” said Jenn. “There’s just something I have to do.”

With that, she left the table and walked out onto the dance floor.