

BLOOD AND
BROTHERHOOD

Blood and Brotherhood

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Acknowledgements

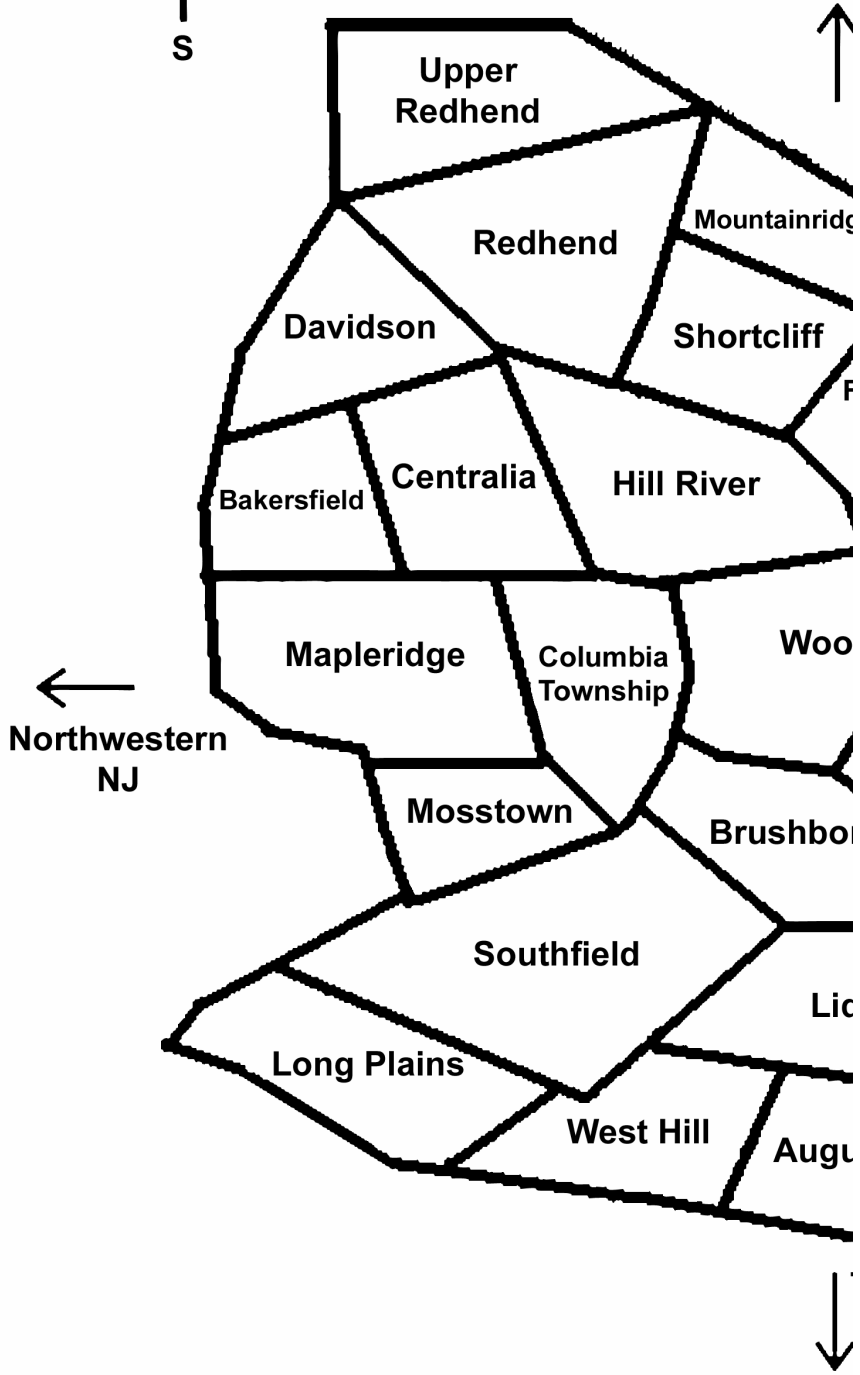
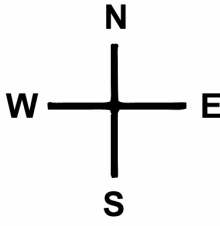
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And, as always, thank *you* for reading.

For my sister Meredith: collaborator, fan, and friend.

Blood and Brotherhood

School Kids SG Series
Year One: Epiphany
Episodes Two and Three

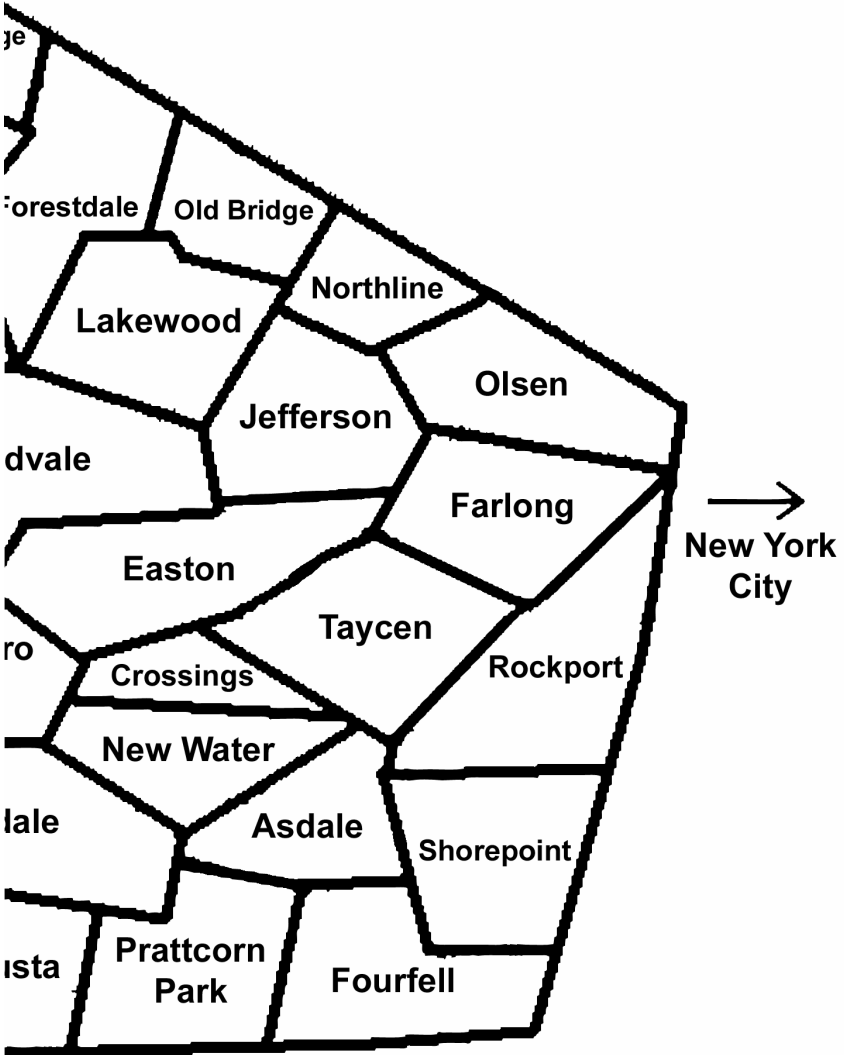


The Prattcorn Valley

and surrounding areas

2029 AD

NY State



The Shore

Prologue

Music drifted around the planks and through the doorway. The sound of whistling spread and faded into the empty street.

Ray studied the five cards in his hand, and took a glance around the table, looking each of his three companions in the eye for a split second. They all wore their poker faces well—it was impossible to read their expressions. No matter. Ray leaned back in his chair and looked at his holdings one more time, knowing that he could trust in Lady Luck to provide for him.

He continued to whistle. Two notes, two quicker notes, and then a long trilling sound. The same little song started again as soon as it ended. Ray's friends were never sure how to interpret his strange habit, but they'd stopped thinking it was a tell long ago.

"Allllllll right," said Ray, interrupting his one-man concert for a few words and a drag on his half-smoked cigarette. "I'll see you, and raise you five."

"Hrm...you're confident tonight," one of his friends remarked.

"Well, I'm not. I fold," said another, throwing his cards face-down on the table, an overturned wooden crate.

"Me, too," the third agreed, doing the same. "I'm already 50 bucks in the hole."

"It's your first night, Kent. I'm sure Ray'll cut you some slack," said the only player who hadn't folded. "Don't matter. Another minute and I'll have all the money, anyway."

"Guess that means you're all in, huh, Frank?" said Ray. Frank narrowed his eyes across the table and smirked.

"Guess so," he replied. He laid his hand face-up. "So let's see what you've got there, buddy. I'm holdin' three kings!"

"Wow," said Kent. "Definitely glad I folded back there. Hehheh heh!"

"Yeah, he's got a hell of a spread." Ray whistled one more cycle of his song before grinning sharply and slamming his hand down. He spit his cigarette off to the side.

“But three royals don’t match four of a kind,” he said, “even if they **are** four sevens. Pay up, **buddy!**”

Frank grumbled, digging into his pockets for change. “If I didn’t trust you, I’d **swear** you were cheating.”

“But of course you **do** trust me,” said Ray. “Ahhhhh, try not to be too sore about it. Luck never stays in one place for long...next week, you could win all this back from me in three hands!”

“How about **this** week?” Frank said. He picked up the deck and started shuffling. “Come on, Ray, one more round!”

“Maybe we oughta put the cards away for tonight, guys,” said the fourth player. He stood up and stretched his legs. “The others’ll probably be here any second.”

“They were **supposed** to be here 20 minutes ago,” said Frank. He realized he’d lost track of time.

“Smith’s got a point,” Ray said. “When the boys get here, they’re not gonna wanna sit around and watch you three give me money all night. Whaddaya say, Frank—next week?”

“You got it! I can beat you any time, anywhere.”

“Yeah, you just keep telling yourself that, and maybe it’ll come true.”

CRASH!!

Splintering wood interrupted the conversation; the boards nailed across the entrance had just been smashed in half. Three young men barreled inside, two holding the limp form of the third between them. A trail of blood, glistening in the amber lamplight, marked the path back out to the street.

“Oh, God! Tim, John, Nate!” cried Smith, leaping out of his seat. “What the hell happened to you guys?! Are you all right?”

“Me and...John are fine!” winced Tim, sinking to his knees. He pointed at the third member of the party. “But they got Nate pretty bad....”

“**No!!**” Frank exclaimed, half in anguish and half enraged.

“He was the only one we could carry,” John said, massaging his swollen right leg. “We lost everyone else a couple blocks back...it was a huge ambush! We never stood a chance!”

“This is **wrong!**” Frank snarled, pacing in a tight line. “They gave us their **word** this wouldn’t happen! What the hell happened to our deal?! I’ll **kill** them!!”

Frank jammed his hand into his pocket and came up with a small knife. Immediately, Ray turned on him with a commanding glare.

“Put that thing away,” he said. “We’re **not** gonna turn into them. If we do, they get what they want, and this kinda thing’ll keep happening to people like us!”

Kent looked ill—he moved closer to Ray. “B-but aren’t these...are they with...?”

“Yeah, they are.” Ray didn’t make eye contact. “Don’t worry about it, Kent. You came to me for protection and I won’t let you down. Like Frank said, I’m trustworthy, and I don’t break promises.”

“But then...” Kent swallowed hard. “Maybe we **have** to fight? Like maybe Frank is right? If what I heard is true they’ll just...kill us anyway!”

“Look, I told you already...” Ray abandoned his thoughts, whatever they were, for a moment, so he could turn his full attention to Kent. “Fighting them never worked for anyone. You know that same as I do.”

“**Dammit** Ray! We **tried** talkin’ to ’em and look what happened!” shouted John, pointing back at Nate’s body. “You don’t let us fight, you’re askin’ us to **give up**, and let ’em get away with what they did!”

“Did I **say** we were giving up?” Ray’s voice was louder, so he won the argument. “Runnin’ out into the street with a couple dinky **pocket knives** is giving up! That’s **asking** to die! A lotta good revenge’ll do ya when you’re dead afterwards!”

“Well, what **are** we gonna do?” Kent was shaking now. “W-what if you paid them off? Is that it, is that your plan? Or what if we gave them—”

“Nope. No money, no drugs, no favors even if I **felt** like doing those sons-of-bitches favors,” said Ray; he shook his head. “They don’t think like that. All they want is **us**, one way or another. We’re just a buncha outsiders to them—we either join up, or they kill us. We try to go at ’em direct, we’re dead no matter what.”

“We’re dead **anyway** if we don’t start movin’!” said Frank. “Ray, I love you like a brother, but I’m takin’ my knife back out no matter **what** you say, unless you give me a **really** good reason not to.”

“Been workin’ on it the whole time, Frankie. Tim,” Ray asked, “how many of them and how far away?”

“At **least** two factions.” Despite his best efforts, Tim couldn’t hide all of the fear in his voice. “The speed they were going, they’re probably right outside the door now.”

“We’re gonna die,” Smith muttered, “we’re gonna die...!”

Ray waved his hand toward the back wall of the room.

“Remember what we talked about a couple weeks ago? Someone fill Kent in. The rest of you know what to do,” he said to his friends. “I’ll take care of what I gotta take care of.”

“I thought that was a **joke!**” Frank exclaimed. His disbelief quickly ebbed into a quiet and subdued posture as he realized that Ray was serious. “But...Ray...if you go out there alone, you’ll—”

Ray was already almost in the doorframe. He looked back over his shoulder and flashed Frank a smile. “Hey, you saw: Lady Luck’s in my corner tonight. So just leave this one for me. I’ve got it covered.”

With that, he put his hands in his pockets and strolled outside, looking for all the world like a casual New Yorker on his way to some bar. His whistling resumed, echoing through the gutted buildings on the street.

Ray spotted a single person kneeling on the roof of the structure across the road, silhouetted by the moon and the lights of the city at his back. The massive force that had ambushed Ray’s friends was certainly nearby, lurking in the shadows, but Ray didn’t care about them for the time being. The one he saw was the only one of real importance.

Ray stopped below a street lamp, and called out a greeting.

“Hello, Denzal!”

“Ray,” returned the specter. “You got something to say to me?”

“Yeah...I’m pretty sure this goes against our agreement.”

“Agreement?”

“We don’t hang out more than two blocks from here, and you don’t bother us,” Ray said, as if reciting from a document. “You know, **that** agreement.”

“And I guess you thought that’d be the end of it,” Denzal said.

“And now I guess I see that it wasn’t. Fair enough,” nodded Ray. “You wanna add something to the deal?”

“Oh, no. I didn’t come here to waste another two hours negotiating.” Denzal drew a knife out of his belt and pointed the blade down at Ray. “This time, you’ve got two choices: join us, or you and your Family are about to get purged.”

Ray leaned back on the lamppost and crossed his arms.

“I’m **waiting**,” said Denzal.

“Hmf,” Ray snorted with a confident smile. “I hope I don’t sound too rude, but I’d really rather die than kiss your feet, Denzal. Yours **or** your Master’s.”

“Fine by me.”

Denzal raised his knife straight in the air, and turned the blade so the flat side caught the light of the moon. As soon as they saw the signal, his men pounced from the darkness and appeared on all sides. Ray frowned—Tim’s estimate had been off by several dozen.

They descended on the building like a swarm of insects, silently but with the force of a hurricane. It was over almost as soon as it began. Their work complete, the attackers vanished, leaving a desecrated home and a rain of blood in their wake.

Denzal sheathed his knife and turned away. He whistled a familiar five-note tune, listening to his own echo on the way downstairs to street level. He was slightly off-key.

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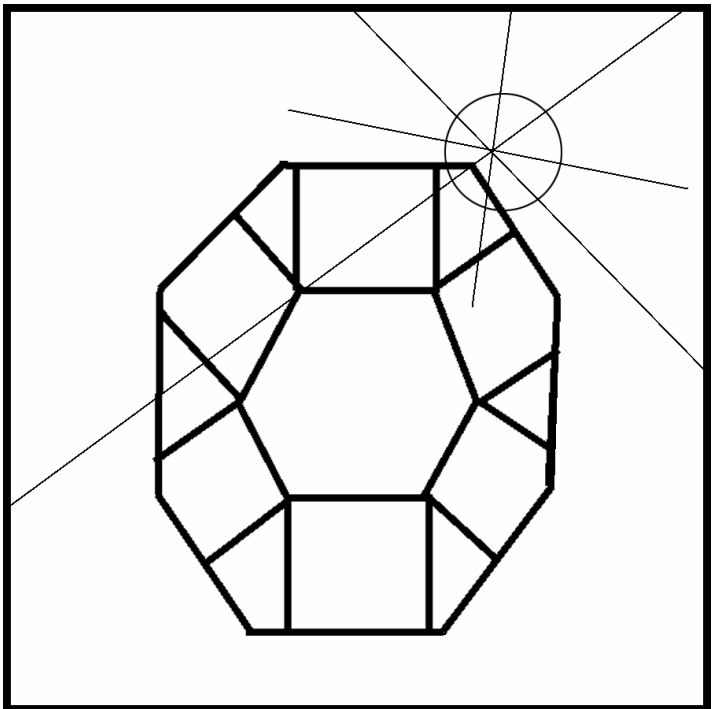
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2

BAD

COMPANY



One

He pressed the doorbell and waited on the front stoop of the green house on the hill, the last house on this side of the street. He was a lanky blond teenager who lived in the back part of the neighborhood. He didn't come down this way or visit this house often, but that day, he had a good reason to drop by.

A woman about 40 years old opened the door after a few moments, and smiled at the company.

"Hello!" she said. "Are you a friend of Mark's?"

"Uh-huh," said the teen.

The woman turned around and shouted up the stairs, "Mark! Someone here to see you!"

"What?!" exclaimed Mark's voice from a few rooms away. The sound of thudding footsteps accompanied his speedy trip downstairs.

"Are you sure?" he called out as he ran. "They're not supposed to pick me up for an hour! I'm not...oh. Hey, it's you, Kel."

"That's my name," chuckled Kel. "What's up, Mark?"

"Uh...nothing much, at the moment," said Mark, sounding as if he were asking a question. "Sorry if I'm a little out of it ...it's just that I wasn't expecting you to come over."

"It was a surprise—that's the whole point!"

"Well, I'm sure you boys don't want me getting in the way of your conversation," Mark's mom said. "Mark, why don't you take Kel up to your room?"

"Okay."

Mark led Kel upstairs and to the left; he closed the door to his room once they were both inside. Before he said anything, Mark opened his closet and took out his favorite orange, green and white-striped shirt, pulling it on over a dark gray undershirt. He went too fast and knocked the glasses off his face. As he knelt down and recovered them from the floor with his right hand, he smoothed out his hair with his left.

"You look like you just got outta bed," said Kel.

“The shower, actually,” said Mark. “My friends and I are going out to eat in a little while. Like I said, I wasn’t expecting anyone yet, so that’s why I’m not ready.”

Once he could see again, Mark found that Kel had flopped down lazily on the floor, with his back against the foot of the bed. Mark walked over and sat facing him.

“So, what **are** you doing here, anyway?” he asked.

“I think you know the answer to that question,” Kel said. His voice was casual, and he looked down at the carpet while running his fingers through it. Then, he snapped his eyes up and grinned at Mark.

“I want you to tell me about the Go-Cart Gang!”

Mark groaned. He rolled his head all the way back and around.

“Come **on**, Kel!” he whined. “Not today!”

“You’ve been avoiding me all month!” said Kel; he seemed to somehow increase the determination of his posture. “Sorry, man, but I ain’t budging until you talk.”

“How do you even **remember**—”

“What’s it been, like, three weeks? It’s not **every** day that Woodvale High turns into a war zone.” Kel shook his head in amazement. “You and me and everyone else were caught up in a six-grade riot that went on for an entire school day. I’ll remember it for the rest of my life: three weeks is **nothing**.”

“But I’m not asking you to talk about the hallway war. I’m only thinking of one part just before it ended. I was leaving the Band Room with you and your friends, and that kid with the spiky hair...uh....”

“Preston.”

“Right. Preston asked you something or other about the Go-Cart Gang.” Despite his persistence, Kel didn’t seem annoyed. He sounded more intrigued by the second.

“**Nobody** knows **anything** about the Go-Cart Gang,” he said, leveling his pointer finger. “Except, apparently, **you** do.”

“Our town used to be full of gangs that fought for control of the streets,” Mark droned, as if quoting a textbook. “There have been vigilante groups trying to stop them for the last 30 years or so, and the Go-Cart Gang was the last one. They were around between 2024 and 2028—”

“I **know** all that!” interrupted Kel. “For God’s sake, the **newspapers** know that the Go-Cart Gang was a vigilante group! I wanna hear something **interesting!**”

“What makes you think I know any more than the papers?”

“Because of what Preston said. It’s not just that he asked you about the Go-Cart Gang, it’s the **way** he asked. He said something like, ‘what did the Go-Cart Gang **feel** like?’ If you know what they **felt** like, you know more than anybody else.”

Mark started massaging his temples. His fingertips were so sweaty they kept slipping away.

“Look, I...why do you want to know so bad?” he asked. “I don’t remember you ever being interested in town history.”

“**Everyone** in Woodvale wants to know the dark secrets of the vigilante groups! It’s just that the Go-Cart Gang was the most recent one, so nobody’s had time to dig up their dirt yet!” laughed Kel. After that, he quieted down, and added, “But to be honest, I’ve always been interested in them because they made me into a better person. They saved me from making one of the biggest mistakes of my life.”

“Really?” Mark was taken aback. “This is the first **I’m** hearing of it.”

“It’s not something I’m very proud of. I...see, I almost joined the Canarre Gang—”

“What?!”

“I **said** I was ashamed. Besides, I was a stupid little kid. We’re talking way back in the eighth grade here, which would make you a...sixth-grader at the time, I guess. Anyway, I was kind of an outcast back then: I hadn’t gotten into the drama club or met any of my real friends yet, and I was depressed. I thought if I joined the gang, then it’d be kinda like...like a family, y’know?”

“But it was the way that the Go-Cart Gang always fought Canarre, and exposed him for the kind of person he really was...**that** was what changed my mind. I decided that wasn’t the kind of family I wanted to be a part of. And I’ve always been interested in the Go-Cart Gang because they made me see it.”

Mark’s eyes had wandered away. He sat for a moment after his friend was done speaking, deep in thought. Finally, he stood up and walked around the bed to his chest of drawers, opening the highest one and sifting through a few things. He eventually came out holding a photo, which he handed to Kel.

“There,” Mark said in an uncertain voice. “That’s a start: it’s a picture of the Go-Cart Gang. A **real** picture, not like the concept art the papers used to draw.”

“Whoa, whoa, no it’s not. You must’ve grabbed the wrong thing.” Kel waved the photo in the air. “This is a picture of you and some other kids from elementary school.”

“We’re saying the same thing in different ways,” said Mark. “Just listen to what I’m telling you, and try to let it sink in: **that is a picture of the Go-Cart Gang.**”

Now it was Kel’s turn to be thoughtful.

“But...,” he stammered, “that would mean—”

“Yup.”

There was a pause. Slowly, Kel’s mouth shuddered its way back open.

“Oh, **wow!**” Kel jumped up off the floor and grabbed Mark by the shoulders, shaking him around.

“Gah! Take it easy!” Mark exclaimed.

“No way, man!” Kel let go of his friend and took a step back, slapping his hands against his scalp and pulling back his hair.

“I went to Barkley Elementary with all of you, I’ve lived in the same neighborhood as you my whole life, and still I **never** woulda...” Kel’s voice trailed off, and, shaking his head, he pointed both index fingers forward at Mark. “**You** were a **vigilante?!?**”

“No! Not really...not like the others,” said Mark. “Compared to them, I was just taking up space. They all had their thing: Lyle and Flint were the leaders, Lee and Alroy were the tech guys, and Joel and Roger were the foot soldiers. I just did whatever little I could.”

“Who **cares?!?** This is still the coolest thing I’ve ever...” Kel stopped. “Wait a second—Lyle? Lyle Banister? The same Lyle Banister who started that riot...**whoa**...which was the same thing the Go-Cart Gang tried to **keep** from happening?!”

“Yeah.” Mark snorted. “Trust me, I get the irony.”

“Oh, wow,” Kel said again, more overwhelmed than excited this time. “I...**geez**, I **never** would’ve connected that day to the Go-Cart Gang, except maybe thinking that it was a shame they weren’t around to stop it. But you’re right, that’s a **hell** of an ironic coincidence. And hey, add that to the way the phone lines got cut by some of the people fighting, and that radio tower in Rockport that started burning so no one’s cell phones worked, either...”

Kel looked up, and though it sounded like he was telling a joke, his tone was flat and serious.

“It’s like the hand of God made that riot happen.”

Mark’s eyes became hard as diamond and dark as coal.

“God had **nothing** to do with that day,” he said.

He didn’t continue for a moment, letting the statement hang in the room by itself. Kel shifted his weight on his haunches.

“It wasn’t a coincidence,” said Mark. “That wasn’t just some riot you saw three weeks ago, it was the Second Great Hallway War. The first one happened in the late 90s, between the first vigilante group and one of the first gangs. Burt Canarre heard about it somewhere and tried to recreate it himself. You said it yourself: the Go-Cart Gang always fought to stop him from doing that.

“Lyle was used to being a hero back when he was a vigilante. After the Go-Cart Gang retired, he was nobody, a face in the crowd, and he couldn’t handle it. He tried a million stupid stunts to get famous some other way, and **that’s** why he started the Second Great Hallway War—because he thought he could gain from it. He decided that his fame was worth betraying everything he used to stand for.”

Kel gaped. This was a side of Mark he’d never seen before, and though it made him a little bit nervous, the story had sucked him in. It was more than he’d come to Mark’s house hoping for.

“The phone lines went out because someone kicked the wrong way once the fighting started and hit a . . . junction box, or something,” said Mark. “There was a **lot** of structural damage to the school. As for the Rockport radio tower, for all I know it started burning early that morning, and that was why Lyle decided to start the war then, thinking the cops would be occupied. It wasn’t an act of God, it was an act of a spoiled little brat who never got his way.”

“Wow.” Kel was wringing his hands. “I **double**-never would’ve thought the riot had anything to do with Go-Cart Gang internal politics.”

“What politics? What Go-Cart Gang?” said Mark. “It was Lyle alone. **I** had nothing to do with it, if that’s what you mean.”

Kel gave Mark a friendly punch on the arm.

“Except that **you** made the speech that ended the war, **and** you got to kick Lyle’s ass while you did it!” he laughed. “**That** musta felt pretty good. I remember the way he used to treat you.”

“I just got lucky, that’s all,” muttered Mark. He turned away from Kel. “It was a cheap shot, anyway. I aimed for...I kicked his leg where I knew he’d broken it before.”

“Maybe **you** call that luck, but I call it **smart**. Ended the hallway war pretty damn quick, that’s for sure. Lyle was helpless, and the last time I saw him, he was **still** in a wheelchair!”

Mark cringed. “Don’t tell me that.”

“Hey, it’s all in the past, right? You’ve moved on, and now you hang with those other kids, the ones who helped you out during the war.”

“The SG Crew,” said Mark. He turned back around and smiled. “Yeah, I **am** a lot happier now. One **day** with them is more fun than the whole four years I was in the Go-Cart Gang.

“Speaking of which, I really do have to finish getting ready now. We’re all heading out in a little while to grab dinner...we just haven’t decided where yet. I guess we’re just gonna drive around the highway until something catches someone’s eye.”

“Ha! Okay, okay...I can tell when I’m not wanted...” Kel hung his head and pretended to slink towards the door. But before he actually left, he spun around and grabbed Mark’s hand. It wasn’t one of his usual hey-I-was-only-joking handshakes, it was a genuine clasp that used both palms.

“Thank you, Mark. Really.”

“Um...you’re welcome, of course you’re welcome,” sputtered Mark. “Thank **you** for telling me your story. It makes me feel better about the whole vigilante thing to know that we were at least able to help somebody.”

“Don’t be dumb. Look around someday: the Go-Cart Gang made a big difference in this town, and it wasn’t just because you threw a couple of gangs in jail.”

Kel paused, frozen in place, staring right into Mark’s eyes. He could only hold it for a few seconds before cracking up again.

“Why, I doubt Principal Barone’s hair was ever grayer than it was after you guys came along!”

Mark laughed. “Bye, Kel!”

“Seeya!”

He listened to Kel descend back to the first floor. Somewhere between the creak of the first step and the last, after the front door clicked open but before it banged shut, the humor subsided and the

melancholy revived. Only when he heard the final latch of the door, thrown by his mother, did Mark give in and sink onto his bed with a heavy sigh.

When he felt like getting up again, he kicked the old Go-Cart Gang photo under the bed without looking at it.

Two

Beep beep!

Mark recognized that honk—this time, he didn't even need to wait for his mother to call him to know that the SG Crew had arrived. He grabbed his wallet and cell phone, looked in the closet mirror to smooth out his hair one last time, and ran down the stairs to the front door. It was already open, and his mom was standing there waiting for him.

“Do you have your phone? I.D.? Money?” she asked.

“Yes.” Mark rolled his eyes, but he hugged her. “We're just going out to dinner. I'll see you later.”

“Okay—be careful!” called Mom; Mark was already halfway down the path.

“I know, Mom!”

The front passenger-side window of the car rolled down, allowing a head and a set of arms to stick out. It was a boy with a smile so wide that his eyes scrunched shut.

“Hey, Mark!” he shouted. Then, he turned toward the house and added, “Hi, Mrs. Daley!”

Mark's mom waved to him. “Hi, Preston!”

Preston leaned even farther out the window and waved back. He started to lose his balance, but Damien reached over from the driver's seat and grabbed his shirt, steadying him.

Jenn opened the back door for Mark and got out for a moment so he would have room to climb inside.

“How are you?” she asked.

“I'm fine,” answered Mark. He squeezed into the back seat alongside her and his other two friends, Egan and Nick.

“Yo, Mark,” said Egan. Nick said something unintelligible, his mouth full of peanuts from a can in his hand.

“So, where are we going to eat?” asked Mark.

“We were thinking we’d just drive around for a little while, until we come up with something,” said Preston. “Unless you’re really hungry right now, Mark.”

“Nah, I’m okay.”

“And, of course, **Nick** is already eating,” said Jenn. “Not that it’ll spoil his appetite—nothing ever does.”

“Hnf! Mmn mah nnl pfft!” Nick said.

“Hey, Mark,” said Damien as he backed out of the driveway and turned around, “you know a lot of shortcuts. What’s the best way to Route 18 from here?”

“Turn right leaving my street, then take your...third left. That puts us right in the middle of Hill River,” Mark said. “We can cut over to the highway from there. But isn’t 18 gonna be, like, a solid **wall** of traffic this time of day?”

“Saturday—no commuters. Besides, I think it’s late enough that most of the people shopping are home already,” said Damien.

“If you say so.” Mark sat back then, knowing that could very well be the last thing he’d hear Damien say until dinnertime. Damien was known for his soft-spokenness.

Egan raised his hands for attention.

“Just to put this out there, I don’t care where we eat, as long as it’s not the Davidson Diner,” he said. “If you guys decide to go there, you can just **drop** me off at home.”

“Geez, okay! Man, you get shortchanged one time and you’re ready to torch the place!” Preston laughed. “And anyway, we’re not going to a **diner**. You only go to diners to order french fries at one in the morning.”

Egan leaned toward the center of the car as he spoke, closing in on Preston. “We **could** go to the Woodvale Diner. I wouldn’t mind **that**....”

“We’re not going to **breakfast!** The Woodvale Diner is a freakin’ pancake house!”

“There’s always the diner in Shortcliff....” said Jenn.

“Mpplbhs!”

“Are you serious, Nick? That’s way too expensive!” said Egan.

“I’m fine with anything,” said Mark.

“Well, **I’m** not...!”

“Did **anyone** listen to my suggestion?”

The debate continued all the way to Route 18.

In addition to its lineage of warring gangs and vigilantes, Woodvale was also famous for being the central suburb of the Prattcorn Valley. But though Woodvale was the hub, it wasn't the valley's busiest town—that title belonged to Southfield.

Residential Southfield was divided in half by a huge commercial district, which was itself partitioned into dozens of strip malls and a pair of full-sized shopping centers. Route 18 was the nexus around which the nerve center had been built, and since it went on to pass through the entire valley, it was also a key commuter route for all of northern New Jersey. This ensured heavy shopping traffic all day, every day. At night, when the malls and the street lamps lit up together, they started to look like a leviathan computer, processing thousands of cars.

Route 18 was only manageable from Saturday evening through Monday morning, when most of the stores were closed. The lighter traffic made it more noticeable when a car pulled over onto the shoulder and stopped underneath an overpass, its hood smoking.

"Dammit!" Damien jumped out of the car and walked around to the front. "I can't believe this! What a horrible place to break down!"

"Whoa! Chill out, dude!" said Preston.

The rest of the SG Crew followed Damien out of the car. Nick scraped around the bottom of his can of peanuts, making sure it was empty, then threw it down on the grass alongside the road.

"Guess it's better we broke down here instead of on an exit ramp or something," Nick said.

"What do you think happened, Damien?" asked Jenn.

"The heat gauge was all the way up in the red. I just didn't notice 'til we were already smoking." Damien leaned against the wall of the underpass with his arm covering his eyes.

"Don't be so hard on yourself!" said Mark. "There were six of us in the car and nobody else noticed."

"Because it's not your job, it's mine. I should've been watching, but I wasn't, and now we're **all** stranded!"

"It's okay, Daime. There was nothing you could've done. Let's just open up the hood and see what's wrong," suggested Egan. He

reached out and laid his hands on the car, but recoiled with a yelp. “Geez! That thing’s **hot!**”

“Here, I’ve got an idea,” said Nick. He leaned back into the car, and came up with an ice scraper from under one of the seats.

“Cool! This’ll do,” said Egan, taking the scraper. “Daime, can you hit the hood release?”

Damien sighed, nodded, shook off the worst of his angst, and walked back around to the driver’s side door.

“Hahahaha!” Preston elbowed Egan in the ribs. “Don’t you think you should’ve had him press the button the first time?”

“Shut up!”

Once the hood moved up the requisite millimeter, Egan used the blade of the scraper to find and hit the catch underneath, and the hood sprung open fully. The whole group fell back coughing and covering their eyes as the main cloud of smoke was let loose. It hovered above them for a moment, caught in the overpass.

“Okay, it’s open now!” choked Mark.

“Oooo, looks like you’ve got a broken hose,” Preston said. He pointed to the spot where a thin column of steam was still rising; a tube lay disconnected in plain view. Damien cursed under his breath.

“I’ve **never** had problems with this car before,” he mumbled.

“Well, then it was probably due. Don’t worry, bro, this stuff happens all the time,” Egan said. He pulled up the bottom of his shirt for a second and used it to wipe his brow. “We’ll get it towed back to the auto place in Woodvale, and they’ll fix it. Problem solved.”

“Here, you can call the number on this card—it’s the garage my dad goes to. They’ll tow you for free if you show them the card,” said Mark, reaching into his wallet. “He gave it to me just in case something like this ever happened.”

“Thanks, Mark,” said Damien. “Guess there’s not much else I can do. I’m so sorry, guys. I don’t know how you’re gonna get home...there’ll only be room for me in the tow truck, plus **maybe** one other person.”

“It’s all good. There are a million bus stops around here,” said Preston. “We can hike down the side of the road and find one.”

“Yeah, it won’t be any trouble,” Jenn agreed.

“I’ll stay to keep you company,” said Nick.

“You guys are really good friends,” said Damien, smiling. He took out his cell phone and dialed the number on Mark’s card. “Let’s all meet at my house when this is over—we can still have dinner together. I’ll give this back to you then, Mark.”

“Sure.”

With that, Mark, Egan, Preston and Jenn set out on foot. They tried their best to stay off the shoulder and on the thin islands of grass that framed Route 18. The traffic rushed by to their left, chilling the air with an artificial wind. On their right, the rapidly-setting sun was just beginning to sink behind the looming buildings of Southfield.

“I think that was the most I’ve ever heard Damien talk,” said Mark after a few minutes. “Not the way I would’ve wanted to hear it, though.”

“No kidding,” said Preston. “I guess I’d be pissed, too, though, if it were my car.”

“Could be worse,” said Egan. “We could’ve broken down a lot farther from home than this.”

“Egan, I’m **very** impressed with you,” said Jenn with a look of admiration. “You really kept your cool! That’s exactly what people need when there’s a crisis like this.”

“Uh...thanks?”

“Don’t act embarrassed! It’s a compliment.”

“Jenn’s right,” said Mark. “I don’t think I’ve **ever** seen you lose control. You’re always so solid...what’s your secret?”

“Easy: I don’t care.” Egan grinned. “The less you care, the easier it is to deal with almost **anything**. You should try it sometime, Mark.”

“**Bus stop!**” announced Preston, pointing ahead. There was a small, black structure with a clear plastic roof over three benches. A handful of people were there, waiting.

“Wow, that was fast,” said Jenn. “We oughta grab a schedule to make sure we don’t take the wrong bus.”

“Don’t worry,” said Preston. “It’s not like we’re big enough idiots to get on a bus that says ‘New York City Express!’”

“Says the guy who burned himself in the oven, then cooled his hands off by diving across a couch full of people and shoving them into a cup full of soda,” Jenn replied with a smirk.

Preston feigned being wounded. “That hurts, Jenn, it really hurts.”

“The schedules are over here, and there’s a million of them,” shouted Egan from the left side of the stop. “I don’t know which one we want, and I don’t feel like going through them all by myself!”

“We’re coming, you lazy ass!”

“I’ll check that side,” Mark offered, going around the other way. Nobody joined him, but sure enough, there was a whole second rack of pamphlets on the right-hand wall of the stop.

Maybe I can find the right one before they do, he thought, creating and entering a contest for himself in the same instant. He laughed quietly, amazed at how easy he was to amuse these days.

“Hey man.”

Mark was startled. He could tell he was being addressed, but he didn’t recognize the voice. He glanced over his shoulder, and found two boys, both of whom looked about his age. One was short, with blond hair and blue eyes; the other had dark brown hair and eyes, and judging by the expectant look on his face, he was the one who had spoken. They wore identical outfits—black pants with dark gray shirts.

“Hi,” said Mark. He turned back to the schedules.

Mormons, he thought, or somebody trying to sell me something, anyway. Maybe if I ignore them, they’ll go away....

“Whatcha **doin’**?” the tall one asked.

“Looking for a bus schedule,” Mark answered.

“Oh, really? Where ya goin’?”

“Uh... Woodvale.”

“Woodvale!” cried the shorter boy, sounding like he’d just recognized an old friend. “I know that place! They say it’s the Hub of the Prattcorn Valley!” He and his friend snickered.

“Yeah....” Mark was starting to feel uncomfortable. He decided that these people weren’t just going to give up and find another customer, so it was up to him to break things off.

“Well, here’s what I was looking for,” Mark lied, grabbing a random pamphlet out of the rack. “I gotta go get my friends now, so I’ll see you guys later.”

“Hey! Hey, wait!” The tall boy stretched out his arm, stopping Mark. “What’s this? I was trying to have a nice conversation, and you’re just walking away? That’s awfully rude of you.”

“I’m sorry, I...I don’t know you. Besides, I’m in a hurry. Now, I **apologize**, but—”

“Oh, you don’t **know** me, is that all? Well, I’m Dave.” He pointed to his friend, the shorter boy. “This here’s Gary.”

“Hi!” Gary said with a manic wave.

“Nice to meet you,” Mark stammered; he started walking backwards, holding out his palms. “Look, I’m **really** in a hurry! I—”

Mark stopped when he felt himself back into something solid. He turned around, and found a third stranger. This boy was the tallest by far, and his chest seemed to be several feet thick. He, too, wore the uniform, and he glowered down at Mark, invoking the full scope of his size.

“And that’s Ed,” said Dave, nodding to his massive friend and then to Mark. “Nice to meet you, too!”