

# PROLOGUE

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**GO-CART GANG BREAKS UP!**  
Town Protectors Call it Quits

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Guest Writer

Ever since their explosive debut in 2026, Woodvale and the entire Prattcorn Valley community have quietly come to depend on the Go-Cart Gang. Who are they? Nobody knows, but we have all felt their presence just the same. Some have called them untrustworthy, others have labeled them criminal vigilantes, and still others refuse even to believe in their existence. However, as a survey of Prattcorn recently proved, most of us would say they are heroes.

Now, after two years of being in the public eye, these heroes are retiring to the peace they helped create.

“Most of us are moving away or transferring schools for our freshman year,” said one member of the elusive Gang in an online interview. “We’re already becoming kind of distant to one another...I guess it’s best that this is ending now.”

“I’m just glad Canarre’s finally in jail,” commented another member. “If we broke up before we finished with him, who knows what could have happened?”

Any citizen of Woodvale, no matter his or her viewpoint on the subject, is sure to be familiar with the long-fought war between the Go-Cart Gang and local teenage crime lord Burt Canarre. According to the Gang, this war actually began in 2024, when Canarre was nothing more than a common bully terrorizing the grounds of Barkley Elementary. One group of young friends discovered that they could succeed against him as a team where others had failed alone; thus, the legend was born.

## 2 THE GAUNTLET

In one sense, the Go-Cart Gang has been protecting us a full two years longer than we have heretofore believed.

But the first public incident involving the Gang, which occurred early in 2026, was not part of the greater battle against Canarre. This “Attendance Crisis,” as it has come to be called, was the brainchild of third party William Cray. Here was where the Go-Cart Gang truly became the protectors of the valley—they were ready, willing, and determined to take on anyone who tried to disrupt their home. Even their rivalry with Canarre eventually lost its personal touch: it had become just as much a fight for the good of all. This was especially true during the past year, when Canarre sought to rekindle the “Great Hallway War” in Woodvale High School, an event from near the turn of the century, simply to cause mass pain and destruction.

“It was always about more than just us, but if we screwed up then? Every kid in that school would’ve suffered,” said the Gang’s technician.

Fortunately, thanks to their diverse skills, the Go-Cart Gang was always able to stay one step ahead of their enemies. Not counting a few close calls, they will be ending their career with a perfect success record.

“Yeah, we’ve had a great run, and it wasn’t all Canarre like some people seem to think,” one of the Gang’s two leaders said. He then added, “And don’t be afraid that we’re going to break up just because some of us are changing schools! Our time’s just getting started!”

Despite these brave words, it is pretty much apparent that Woodvale has seen the last of its Go-Cart Gang. After their final confrontation with Burt Canarre at this year’s Woodvale High graduation, which landed Canarre in jail and effectively ended any chance of a Second Great Hallway War, nobody can deny that they deserve the rest.

So what’s the final word on the Go-Cart Gang? What are we supposed to do without them? What legacy do they now leave to their town? Underneath the legend and the mystique they created, they were always just a handful of kids trying to make a difference.

Perhaps one of their own said it best: “Hey, we’re just regular guys. We did what we did through teamwork. If everyone else can learn to stick by their friends, they’ll be fine.”

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**End of Article**

# ONE

“Ly-le! Ly-le! Ly-le! Ly-le! Ly—”

“Sssssh!” hissed Lyle. “Are you people crazy?! This thing’s gotta stay in perfect condition for the next minute and a half or else it doesn’t count!”

The teenager brushed the front of his light-brown hair back into its vertical position and turned around to survey his work. It was a huge stack of baseball caps, perched atop one of Woodvale High’s circular cafeteria tables. It was nearly three feet in height, yet there it stood, shakily balancing itself. Lyle, the stack’s engineer, was standing on a chair off to the table’s side, trying to admire the tower without disturbing it. Smiling in satisfaction, he turned his pale blue eyes in the direction of the burly young man to his left.

“Flint!” he whispered. “You’re timing this, right?”

“Yeah, and you’ve still got 40 seconds before you break the record, so don’t celebrate yet!” said Flint. He held his jet black hair away from his dark brown eyes and brought his watch in closer.

“Don’t worry about a thing! This tower’s rock solid!” said Lyle.

An instant later, the cap stack dissolved behind him with a few quiet clicking noises.

“What?!” Lyle whirled around just in time to see the last hat stop moving. Some of them had fallen onto the dirty floor and were already gathering dust. “Aw, man! Not again!”

“Rock solid, huh?” said Flint with a chuckle.

“Oh, just shut up!”

Now the excited chanting of Lyle’s name had ceased: most of the students in the audience had switched over to quiet snarls, their collective mood as tarnished as their hats were getting.

“Gah!” said Lyle. “Um...not to worry, folks! The record may not have been broken, but you’ll all have your headgear back and clean in a couple of minutes!”

The snarls continued.

“Um...er...yeeee....” Lyle turned left again and whispered,

“Flint! Mark! Hurry up and help me grab these hats!”

“I’m on it!” said Mark, getting down on the floor beside Flint. He pushed his glasses up his nose and squinted his brown eyes, which were almost the same color as his hair, as he started reaching for the hats.

“Y’know, I’m getting **really** tired of bailing you out of this same mess every week,” said Flint.

“This is the last time, I swear!”

“Where have we heard **that** one before?”

“I **said** shut up!”

Flint chuckled again and fell silent.

“Here ya go, Brett!” said Mark, standing up and handing a huge football player his cap with a smile. Brett snatched it up and walked away growling.

“Uh...come again!”

“Don’t waste time with pleasantries!” said Lyle, shoving Mark back down onto his knees. “Those hats aren’t gonna move themselves!”

“Sorry, Lyle!” Mark said quickly.

“See, everyone! No big deal!” Lyle said, spreading his arms to the crowd again. “Here’s yours, Carter.” Carter grabbed his cap and stormed off.

It took a very long five minutes to reunite all the audience members with their possessions and send them on their way. Lyle, Flint and Mark didn’t get much gratitude in return for their efforts.

“Well, what did you **think** they were gonna do, shake your hand?!” said Flint. “That crowd came here expecting to see you break the record for highest stack of baseball caps, and all you did was drop their stuff on the floor!”

“Hmph! It would have been worth it if the tower had stayed up long enough to count...”

“Lyle, you’ve tried **four times** to beat the record, and **this** is the closest you’ve come. Give it up!”

“All right, all right, I can take a hint. Maybe piling up other peoples’ crap isn’t the best way to get us noticed.” Lyle pulled the chair he’d been standing on back up to the table, sat down and began to think.

“Maybe you could join the track team and try to break one of their records,” said Mark. “Didn’t you used to be really into running?”

“Oh, that’s nice. What a nice idea. **Shut up!**” barked Lyle. “I need a **good** idea, for crying out loud! ‘The track team,’ yeesh! Any **clod** can join the track team!”

Mark shrugged and looked away, embarrassed.

“You know what? Nuts to breaking records!” said Lyle, punching the tabletop. “What we need to do is create a **new** standard! That way, people will be trying to live up to **us** instead of the other way around! All we have to do is get a little creative....”

*BRRRIINNNG!!*

“After class, that is,” said Flint.

“Bah! Once I’m famous, I can hire people to go to class **for** me!”

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“Hallway charging?”

“**Yes**, Flint, hallway charging!” repeated Lyle. “You got a better name for it?” He and his two associates had gathered upstairs between the second and third classes of the day. They stood at one end of the single hallway on the second floor; Lyle was crouched down like a runner at the starting blocks.

“The track team is old and predictable, but who’s ever tried to run the length of a crowded hallway?” Lyle laughed and gazed forward hungrily. “**This** oughta get me some attention!”

“From the paramedics, or just the school nurse?” asked Flint.

“Geez, you worry too much. What’s the harm in a little morning jog?”

“Through a mob! I give you five seconds before you hit someone and stop dead.”

“Why don’t you stick to football, Flint—statistics doesn’t seem to be your forte.” Lyle twisted around and removed what looked like a tiny, white marble from his pocket, then tossed it to Mark. “Here, hold this.”

“All right. How come?” asked Mark. He got his answer an instant later, when the marble exploded with a loud *pop!* and a small white flash in his hand. Mark cried out in fright.

“Go!” yelled Lyle, using the noise like the shot from a starter’s pistol. He was off like lightning, and it only took a few seconds for him to disappear completely in the sea of faces.

Flint started a countdown while Mark brushed off the dust from the

exploding marble.

“Five...four...three...two—”

“Aaaa!”

“Ow!”

“Watch it, jerk!”

A few feet down the hall, people started falling over like trees being chopped down.

“Wow. Early,” Flint said, smirking.

“Eeeesh. Shouldn’t we go help him or something?” asked Mark.

“Nah, he’ll be back in a second. See? Here he is now.”

Lyle stalked over to his friends with ruined hair and a frightening scowl. He didn’t say a word while he leaned down to pick up his backpack from where he’d left it on the floor.

“Bad idea, huh?”

“A small setback, that’s all. I forgot that I didn’t really have a captive audience for this one, so I gave up,” said Lyle.

“Hey, what was that thing you threw at me?” asked Mark, wiping away more of the residue.

“An orb-popper! Whaddaya think?” Lyle snorted. “Don’t tell me you couldn’t even handle **that**—referees use those things to start races every day! Now go on, you’re late for third period.”

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The infamous trio only had one class together: sixth period gym. When that time rolled around, they changed clothes quickly and met outside the locker room before the teacher arrived to call things to order. Lyle had used the last few hours to think up another idea.

“Here’s the deal...you know about the computer network around here, right?” asked Lyle, grinning.

“It doesn’t work,” Mark said.

“Of **course** it doesn’t work!” said Lyle with nearly-manic eyes. “That’s the whole idea! We’re going to **fix** it and upstage the entire technology department! They’ve had dozens of guys working on the problem since last year, and so far, nobody’s gotten the computers running without a crash for more than a week. Not **only** will we make life easier for the entire student body, but we’ll make Principal Barone and his friends look bad as a bonus! It can’t miss!”

There was a momentary silence.

“Lyle,” said Flint at last, “that is the stupidest plan in the universe.”

“Aw, come on! You can’t deny that it would get our names out there!”

“Uh-huh. And just how do you expect us to fix the school network?” Flint asked. “We don’t know **anything** about computers!”

“Bah! There’s probably just one loose connection. A trained monkey could fix this problem.”

“Even a trained monkey would have **training**, which gives him one-up on us!”

“Maybe if we still had Alroy around...” said Mark.

Lyle rounded on him with lips pursed.

“Don’t you **ever** say that name again!” he said, shoving an angry pointer finger in Mark’s face. “Alroy and the rest of our so-called ‘friends’ **abandoned** us, and if you ask me, we’re better off without them! If you don’t agree, then you’re just as big a traitor as they were!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! That’s not what I meant!” said Mark. “I was just remembering that Roy was good with electronics—”

Lyle stepped so close to Mark their faces almost touched. “I **said** forget about it!”

Flint squinted at Lyle out of the corner of his eye, but didn’t say anything.

“I...I’m not a traitor, Lyle,” Mark said quietly. “You know that, right?” Lyle had turned away from him, but now he looked back again, a cutting smile on his face.

“Sure I know that. Because **you** know never to even **think** of turning on us, right?”

“Right, never.”

“And why **would** you? You’re a loyal guy, right?”

“Right...”

“One who has **gratitude** for the people who help him?”

“Right...”

“Someone who’s always **said** how much he needed his friends?”

“Right! Lyle, you’ve done a lot for me. You too, Flint,” said Mark, nodding to each of his companions in turn. “I’m not just gonna forget that.”

*Tweet!*

That was the end of the conversation; the sound of the whistle

meant that the gym teacher, Mr. Andrews, had finally appeared from his office to start class. All the students stopped whatever they'd been doing and lined up into "squads" of five people each. The only purpose of these groups was to make taking attendance easier; once the real activities began, they were broken up and promptly forgotten.

Usually, it was easy to guess what the sport of the day would be, since the volleyball nets, bins full of basketballs or other equipment would already be out. However, Fridays were "fitness days" at Woodvale High, which meant that the gym was cleared for random acts of calisthenics. In the past, students had been subjected to power jump-roping, step aerobics, several overcrowded sessions in the school weight room and, once, a jog through the forest at the back of the grounds.

Mr. Andrews, though, was enamored of creating his own games, and his fitness days were almost always a surprise.

"**Flag Tag?**!" exclaimed Lyle in disbelief.

"Well, sorta," Mr. Andrews said. "The gym isn't really big enough for...uh...**conventional** Flag Tag. Accordingly, I've made a few adjustments to the rules. Let's start with what we know and go from there. Anybody remember how to play normal Flag Tag?"

"Oh, I don't believe this...." Lyle grumbled. He turned to Mark in the next squad and whispered, "Do you believe this?!" Mark just shook his head obediently.

"Ah, yes, Joe?" said Mr. Andrews.

"You get two teams, give them different-colored belts with two flags on them, and divide the field in half," said Joe, a boy in the middle squad. "Then you give each team about four or five footballs, and the object is for one team to get all the balls on their side. If somebody rips your flag off on the enemy side, you have to go to jail until someone tags you back in."

"That's about it," said Mr. Andrews with a nod. "Like I said, though, our version will be a little different. First, there will be only one ball per team, and it will be a dodgeball. Second, unlike in the regular version, if you all hold hands in jail you can **not** all be freed at once. Third, each round won will equal one point, and whoever has the most points at the end of the game wins."

"Whaaaaat? That's even dumber than I thought!" Lyle shouted out again. Mr. Andrews raised an eyebrow at him but elected to keep listening. "First of all, there aren't enough people in our class to **make**



two teams. Second, have I mentioned that this dodgeball idea is **stupid**? Third, we've only got **half** a gym to split—we share space with the seniors, remember?"

Lyle was correct: the large number of students at Woodvale High, together with inconsistent scheduling, meant that gym time often had to be shared. There'd be nobody in the room one period, and three different groups fighting for space the next. Lyle, Flint and Mark's sophomore class met alongside a group of about 24 seniors, and unless one class played a sport that involved going someplace else, neither could use the entire gym.

"Well you see, Lyle, I already thought of that," Mr. Andrews said. "Our class is going to play **against** the seniors. We don't even need to make teams that way. All right, everyone! Go over to the bleachers and pick up your belts! We're the gold team."

"Dah! Playing against the seniors?!" grumped Lyle, walking toward the bleachers with his friends. "This is another **fine** idea from our brilliant gym teacher. We're going to get slaughtered!"

"But it could be fun!" Mark said. "We haven't played flag tag since we were in sixth grade!"

"And why do you think that is, dingbat? This isn't a game you can **play** in high school—" Lyle interrupted himself to run off and shove his way past everybody else. He wanted to get his gold flags first.

"Well, **that** brings back memories, at least," said Flint. "That's the same thing Lyle used to do in sixth grade...."

## TWO

Lyle shoved his way back to the center of the gym after grabbing his flags, delivering the final blow to transform what had been an orderly line into a mob. This didn't bother Flint, whose size did the walking for him, but the more average Mark was forced to wait in back until the herd thinned out a bit. He couldn't even see the pile of flags by standing on his tiptoes.

"Hey, Mark!" Mark turned to his right and found a tall, blond-haired senior wearing a big grin.

"Oh, hey Kel," Mark said. "What's new?"

"Eh, nothing much. Getting ready to try out for the play next week," Kel said. "How about you? What's life like in Daley-land? I'll bet you've been out painting the town red every weekend. Break any laws, meet any women? If so, can I have their phone numbers?"

Mark laughed. Kel was a well-known member of the school drama club, the Columvale Players, and his irreverent humor always landed him good parts in their fall productions. Even though he lived right around the block, Mark didn't see him too often, but in all the years he'd known Kel, the older boy hadn't changed a bit.

"Actually, I don't do much going out on weekends," Mark admitted. "Usually I'm too tired from a week at this place."

"Ha! More like those two old ladies you hang out with don't know how to have any fun." Kel flexed his muscles as if he were lifting weights. "They oughta take lessons from me—I'm the town champion of partying!"

"I believe it."

"Dude, you really oughta hit up the malls once in a blue moon. I'll bet you'd have girls hanging all over you!"

"Somehow I doubt that...I've never been much of a ladies' man. In fact, gimme five," said Mark. Kel looked confused but still complied. "Congratulations! **You've** just gotten further with me than any girl!"

"Hahaha!" Kel laughed. "You're a funny guy, Mark, I mean it. Now, it's time for some serious retro-gaming! Whose idea was it to

bring back Flag Tag, your teacher's?"

"Yeah, Mr. Andrews loves any game where he can edit the rules," said Mark. "Have you heard what he's done to the Flag Tag we used to know? He's—"

"**Mark!**" Mark turned around; Lyle was waving to him from the gold side of the gym. "Stop fraternizing with the enemy! Get your flags and haul butt over here! How am I supposed to plan without you?!"

"All right!" Mark yelled back. "See ya later, Kel."

Mark hadn't even noticed that the mob around the flag pile had dissipated; he quickly grabbed a pair of gold flags and jogged over to his friends. Lyle seemed to have changed his attitude in the last few minutes—he was grinning and, judging by the expression in his eyes, the wheels of his mind were turning.

"**Finally!** You almost missed my newest idea!" said Lyle. He held up one finger. "The signature of a great man is when he can turn something bad into something good...like this stupid, **stupid** game! I see an opportunity for us here. What if we were the first sophomores to defeat a team of seniors? We'd be legends!"

"I...guess that would work," Mark said. He frowned, feeling like he was missing something about this latest plan.

"You came up with the cap-stacking idea, too, and that was a disaster," said Flint.

"I **thought** we weren't mentioning that again. **Everybody** is allowed one little setback!"

"One?! How about the—"

*Tweet!*

"Oops! We'll have to finish this later—the game's starting!" Lyle nodded to his companions. "It's you and me leading the charge, Flinty! Mark, you stay back on defense—don't let **anybody** through to that dodgeball!"

"Will do!" said Mark.

Both teams took their places, and within moments, the whistle was blown again and the game began.

It was hard to tell the clock was running at first. The attackers for both sides stood facing each other at half-court, examining the situation but not running just yet. The defenders on either team also had nothing to do until someone on offense made a move.

Finally, a single senior darted into enemy territory. Everybody

looked at him for a moment, and then the sophomores seized the opportunity to launch all their attackers at once. The border was now completely unguarded, so a few more seniors left their side while the rest doubled back to help defend.

Mark sprang into action. He ran forward and tore a flag off one senior, then turned around and caught another who was trying to sneak by. The rest of the sophomores were swarming their opponents as well, but one senior managed to get onto the mat that held the dodgeball. He was safe standing there, but since he was surrounded, escape was impossible for the moment.

While the captured seniors walked to a triangle of traffic cones that served as a jail, the sophomore offense met with even worse results. Though they had an advantage of numbers, the seniors were bigger, faster and more powerful than they were. Not even one sophomore made it to safety with the dodgeball; the entire group was caught.

Mark shuddered as he watched half his teammates get sent to the senior jail, leaving their offensive line totally empty.

*Now I know why Lyle's plan seemed too easy*, he thought, slapping his forehead. *He said it himself—we can't beat the seniors!*

"Mark!" shouted Lyle. "Are you watching that guy with the ball?! Don't let him get away or everything's ruined!"

"Hey! Pipe down in jail over there!" yelled Mr. Andrews.

"I'm just strategizing," grumbled Lyle.

Mark turned around just in time to spot the lone senior making a run for it with the dodgeball. Luckily, he needed to reach his own territory to actually score a point, so Mark had plenty of time to chase him down. It was a close call, but Mark managed to stop the play before it could be completed, tearing off one of the senior's flags mere feet from the half-court line.

"Ha! See, Lyle?" called Mark. "Nothing to worry about with **me** around!"

"Sure, whatever. Now **get me outta here!**"

"Keep it quiet!" Mr. Andrews said again. Lyle sat down on the floor grumpily but didn't say anything else.

Mark looked around: no more seniors were rushing in yet, and there were plenty of other defenders left on his side. He figured it couldn't hurt to go after Lyle and the rest. After all, his team would never score any points with their entire offense captured.

"Heads up, defenders! Here comes another one!" one of the seniors

shouted as Mark made for the jail. Their attackers pretended to go after him for a moment, but then quickly turned around and mounted another assault. They freed their own teammates and rushed the dodgeball area—with so many of them working together, it was easy to get a few players onto the mat.

While all this was happening, Mark was circling the seniors' jail and freeing his fellow sophomores one by one. He met little resistance—the handful of seniors playing defense didn't seem to care enough about the game to run very fast. Of course, Mark thought, they had been skilled enough to catch his friends, so he was still careful.

Most of the newly-released sophomores charged back to their side of the gym, but Lyle immediately headed for the dodgeball and got onto the mat unopposed.

“Ha ha! Yes!” he said.

*Tweet!*

“Round's over! The seniors have scored a point!” Mr. Andrews yelled.

“**What?!**” shouted Lyle. “When did—” He fell silent as a senior jogged up in front of him, carrying the dodgeball from the other side.

Mark was standing there gawking for so long that he didn't realize he'd lost one of his flags just as the round ended. Kel came up alongside him and waved it around with a smirk.

“Looks like someone's starting round two as a captive,” he said, shaking Mark from his trance.

“Good one!” Mark said, taking his flag back. “I didn't even see you do that! Man, I've gotta watch it.”

“Hey! Stop being such a good sport!” snapped Lyle on his way back to the sophomores' side. “Just get in the blasted jail!”

“Well, I see **he** hasn't changed much,” said Kel under his breath.

“Are you kidding? That's the best thing **about** Lyle—you always know what he's gonna say!” said Mark, laughing. “Oops, we're starting again. Later, Kel!”

Mark sat down between the traffic cones and watched the game play itself out. The sophomores switched to a defensive strategy, not even sending attackers over for a few rounds, but before long, they'd had three more points scored on them.

All the while, Mark waited and waited for one of his teammates to come save him, but since they could barely even get off their side of the gym, nobody ever did.

# THREE

The seniors came out of gym class screaming and dancing. The sophomores, by contrast, trudged into the hallway looking totally drained. After all, their opponents had never let up, and it had been hard holding the game to only an 8-1 loss.

Only Mark had any energy left over, but he still walked with the same exhausted gait as the rest of them. All that inactivity in jail had bored him half to death.

“Hey, Mark. You look pretty tired.”

Another boy appeared beside Mark from a different classroom. His hair was walnut brown and his eyes were a slightly darker shade—they were huge and expressive, and not the least bit muted by his glasses. He wasn’t tall, but he wasn’t short either; Mark could turn and look straight at him.

“Yeah, I **am** kinda tired,” Mark said. “And still half the day to go, too.”

“Want me to wind you up?” asked the newcomer. He laughed and walked behind Mark, moving his hands to mime a gigantic windup key on his back.

Mark forced himself to stand up a little straighter.

“Thanks,” he said in a deep, loud voice. “That’s **much** better!”

“Ha ha! Glad I could help,” the other teen said. “So what’s up? I thought I just saw you come outta gym class. Does it still have the same charm without me?”

“Egan, no gym class **ever** has charm. I don’t think you can change that,” said Mark.

“Awww. But I have so much cr...ca...**casizma**...!” Egan stumbled.

“And such vocabulary,” said Mark, chuckling. Egan raised an eyebrow at him, but then laughed again.

“So guess what we did in gym today,” said Mark.

“**No**,” Egan said immediately.

“Hmph, I shoulda seen **that** joke coming by now. Anyway, Mr.

Andrews made us play Flag Tag.”

“**Flag Tag?!?**” said Egan. “That game we played in elementary school? Ha! That must’ve brought back a lot of...wait a second, Mr. Andrews? Oh, no, that means you only got to play Flag Tag because he changed the rules!”

“Very good, grasshopper. I see you’ve had him before,” Mark said.

“Yeah, last year, when he created five-team volleyball.” Egan rolled his eyes. “Listen to **this** one, Mark. He took four nets and set them up in a square. One whole **team** stood on each side of the square, and they got a fifth one in the middle once Mr. Andrews realized nobody could reach the ball there. I forget how you score....”

“Or **who** scores—wouldn’t it be kinda hard to tell?”

“I don’t think **anybody** scored!” laughed Egan. “Notice that we’ve never played **that** game again. How’d Flag Tag turn out?”

“We played against the seniors and they beat us eight to one,” Mark said, giving Egan a half-smile. “I **did** have one good run saving everyone from the jail, but then I spent most of the game sitting there myself. My team could barely even get back on that side again.”

“Geez...that must’ve been really boring.”

“At least I didn’t get mowed down.”

“There’s a bright side to everything, I guess,” said Egan. He frowned and pointed to Mark’s face. “Yo, you know one of your eyebrows is white?”

“Really?” Mark reached up and ran his fingers across his eyebrow; they came back covered in a thin film of a gritty, white substance. “Oh, I know what this is! Lyle threw an orb-popper at me this morning and it exploded in my face.”

“A what?” asked Egan.

“An orb-popper...I’d never seen one before, either. They’re like little white marbles that make a loud sound when they explode. Lyle said people use them to start races.”

“Oh, I’ve seen those!” said Egan. “Dude, why would Lyle **throw** one at you? You’re supposed to chuck those things in the **air** before they go off!”

“It wasn’t his fault—I didn’t know what it was in time to do anything about it.” Mark shrugged. “Besides, it didn’t really hurt...it just got me a little dirty.”

“Uh...yeah, sure. Whatever you say,” said Egan, his voice quieting down to a mutter.

“Is something wrong?” asked Mark.

“Naaah, I’m just tired like you.” Egan nodded toward an approaching stairwell. “Well, I gotta go upstairs here. See ya later, Mark.”

“Okay! See ya.”

Egan paused for a moment in the stairwell door, watching Mark walk down the hall. He shook his head and blew out through his nose, then turned around, letting the door clack shut behind him.

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When the final bell rang, ending the school day, the exits of Woodvale High quickly became choked with people. Since this was the first Friday of the academic year, students were pushing and shoving even more than usual to be the first ones out, eager to suck down the last tastes of the fading summer air. The sidewalks in front of the building were totally obscured by jostling bodies—Lyle could see that better than anyone else from his perch on the roof.

“I can’t **believe** you talked me into this without even explaining it!” said Flint as he finished climbing the stairs; Mark was close behind him.

“Hey, you can’t deny that we’ve got a pretty nice view up here no matter what,” said Lyle.

“Yeah...I’ll give you that,” Flint admitted. For a few moments, the three of them stood silent at the edge of the roof, surveying the long front lawn in front of the school and the trees beyond. The steeple of a small church peeked out through the leaves, and a bell rang within, its peal flowing across the entire area.

“Welp! That’ll be enough of that!” said Lyle, clapping his hands a few times. “Time to break out the water balloons.”

“Water balloons?” asked Flint. Lyle handed him a metal bucket full of them, taking one out himself and tossing it up and down in his palm.

“**This**’ll be sure to get us some attention!” He snickered. “Those people down there look awful hot...maybe we oughta cool ’em off. Think of it as a public service.”

“Cool them off? It’s autumn!” laughed Mark. He kept on laughing until Lyle shot him an icy glare that instantly deflated his stature.

“Sorry.”



“As I was saying, we’re gonna aim for all the people nobody likes—” Lyle was soon interrupted again as the balloon he’d been juggling landed a little too hard and broke in his face. He spit out a piece of orange rubber in disgust.

“Ha ha ha! Looks like your ammo’s eager to get started!” said Flint.

“Rrrrrr...yeah, well I guess I did a good job making them easy to break,” said Lyle. “Enough talking! You get the point—grab some balloons and let’s get crackin’!”

Mark reached for the bucket, but Lyle snatched it up into his arms.

“Nonono, you stay back and make sure no one else comes up here,” he said.

“Aw, but I wanted to—”

“We need a lookout! We’re dead if we get caught doing this!” Lyle said. Although he looked disappointed, Mark knew that his friend was right—he headed over to the stairs.

“All rightey then, let’s go!” said Lyle.

“Uh...go where?” asked Flint. “How am I supposed to know who the kids nobody likes are...you know something, saying that out loud makes this sound like a really mean and awful idea!”

“Well, **obviously** I’m talking about the bullies and delinquents. Nobody likes **them**, right? Those kinds of kids should be easy enough to spot...like him!” Lyle pointed to a tall boy whose hair stood up in magenta spikes; he wore a black leather jacket with spiky shoulders and two studded bracelets to go with it.

“I’m thinking that guy won’t take a surprise shower lying down,” said Flint.

“Bah! Who cares...he looks like he could use some bathing anyway. Look! His hair is standing up!” said Lyle, chuckling. Flint just groaned and shook his head.

“Here’s to getting noticed!” Lyle said, letting one of the balloons fly. He was slightly off his mark, so only the ground immediately in front of his target wound up getting soaked. The punk boy looked up and saw where the projectile had come from; he scowled and threw some obscene gestures in response.

“Yeeeah, I’d say he noticed you all right,” said Flint.

“Dangit! Now I’ve gotta try again; you throw a couple too, Flint!” said Lyle, readying another balloon.

“Do your own dirty work!” Flint leaned over the edge of the roof

and looked down at the punk again. “Especially since he’s picking up a rock to throw at you.”

“Are you serious?! Double time, double time! We’ve gotta stop him before—”

Lyle had managed to get himself off-balance trying to rear back for a stronger throw, so the punk was able to fire first. Though Lyle narrowly dodged the rock, doing so made him topple over backwards. He tried to reach out his arms to catch himself, but only succeeded in catapulting the entire bucket of ammo onto his head, totally drenching his hair and most of his blue sweatshirt.

Even Mark was hard-pressed to stifle his laughter after that.

“Wow, that’s **four** flops in one day,” said Flint with a few final chuckles. “At least you broke **one** record.”

“Rrrrrrrrrnnnnnnnnnn...**that** does it!” Lyle said. He ripped the bucket off his head, revealing his flattened hair. “I can see that I’ve been thinking too small! Well, now I’m gonna spend the whole **weekend** brainstorming, and by the time Monday rolls around, I’ll have **such** an amazingly genius plan that this school will **have** to recognize my name! You just wait and see—I’ll **make** it happen, no matter what!”

With that, Lyle stormed back to the stairs, shoving Mark out of his way. Mark steadied himself and looked at Flint; Flint just shrugged. A few seconds later, they followed Lyle back down the ground, afraid of being seen by the teachers.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Mark, honey! Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, Mom!” shouted Mark. “I’m in the living room!”

“Okay!” Mark’s mother walked down the hall and found Mark sitting at the computer, playing a virtual card game. She was dressed in casual housewear, and with her long, brown hair and brown eyes, it was easy to see the resemblance to her son.

“Are you going out tonight, Mark?” she asked.

“No, I’ll be having dinner here, like I always do,” said Mark.

“Honey, you **never** leave the house anymore!” Mom said with a sigh. “I’m starting to worry about you...”

“Why? There’s nothing to worry about,” Mark said. “Nobody I know **does** anything on weekends.”

“What about Lyle and Flint? Or aren’t they your friends anymore?”

“No, Mom, they’re still my friends.”

“Well, I don’t see what kind of friends never call you or pick up when you call them!”

“That was only one time, Mom! Lyle and Flint don’t go out a lot, either!” Mark paused. “At least...not that I know of...” He shook his head and redoubled his focus on the computer screen. “Mother, **please!** I’m fine, really!”

Mark’s mom sighed. “All right...you know best, I suppose. Just promise me you’ll always use good judgment and keep your self-respect.”

“I promise.”

On that note, Mom left the room and Mark kept on playing his game.

# FOUR

The weekend flew by, and before long, the same masses who had fled the building on Friday were trudging back to school on Monday. Mark's dad dropped him off in the back parking lot, and after entering the building through the side door, he began the long walk to his locker at the center of Cafeteria Lane.

As he passed the lower office, Egan came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey! How was your weekend?" he asked.

"Okay. I pretty much just stayed inside playing video games the whole time," said Mark.

"Guess you needed to recover from Flag Tag," said Egan, chuckling. "So I've got a question—were you really up on the roof on Friday?"

"Yeah, briefly. How'd you know that?"

"Someone said Lyle was throwing water balloons from up there, and you're usually with him."

"Brilliant deduction," said Mark. "Well, I **was** there."

"That's **awesome!**" said Egan. "I would **love** to chuck water balloons on peoples' heads from the roof! Did it make you feel all godlike?"

"Well, I didn't actually get to throw any myself," Mark admitted. "Lyle made me guard the stairwell door instead."

"Aw, that sucks!" said Egan. "You shoulda told him to go do it himself!"

"He was throwing the balloons." Mark sighed. "And he was right—**somebody** needed to watch the door. I didn't really mind, anyway. I'd feel guilty soaking people if they didn't want it."

"Whatever, man." Egan pointed his thumb back over his shoulder. "Listen, I gotta get going to my locker now. I'll talk to you later, all right?"

"Sure. See ya."

Mark broke off and started heading in the other direction.

“Hey, Mark?” said Egan.

“Yeah?” asked Mark, turning around.

“Keep your head up,” Egan said with a jerk of his chin.

“Um...okay, you got it,” Mark said. “Maybe I’ll swing by your locker later.”

“Definitely!” Egan gave Mark a wave, and was gone.

Mark walked the rest of the way to Cafeteria Lane and opened up his locker. His conversation with Egan hadn’t taken as long as he’d thought, so once he was done exchanging books, he entered the cafeteria to sit down and study until the homeroom bell rang. He had a math test coming up that afternoon.

But he hardly got to open up to the right chapter before Lyle appeared and slammed his fist down on the table for attention.

“Ack!”

“Wake up, Mark!” Lyle said. “It’s go time!”

“What are you talking about?”

“You oughta know by now—I’ve been thinking it over all weekend, and now I’ve come up with an idea to get us famous that can’t miss!” Before Mark could even respond, Lyle had dragged him to a stand by his arm. “Come on, we’re going to the upper gym!”

“Okay,” Mark said breathlessly as he tried to keep up. “So what’s the plan?”

“Heh heh...you’ll see....” said Lyle. He shook a duffel bag in his right hand up and down; something inside made a metallic rattle.

The duo entered the upper gym through its farthest door, coming out in the alcove that held the entrance to the boys’ locker room. Despite the early hour, it was easy to hear loud noises of talking, laughing and running water inside.

“Listen to that,” said Lyle. “A buncha guys from the basketball team are in there. Tryouts are this afternoon, so they came to school early to get some extra practice in, and now they have to shower before homeroom.”

“All right,” said Mark. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I’m not finished yet!” Lyle snapped. “Don’t you remember the time Flint told us about a prank the basketball team played on the football team? They greased up everyone’s gloves or something—it cost them the whole game!”

“I don’t remember that!” Mark said.

“Well, it happened! And now we’re gonna pay them **back** for what they did and get ourselves on the good side of the entire football team!” said Lyle. “With those powerhouses backing us, we’ll be the most popular kids in school!”

“Waitwaitwait, slow down,” said Mark. “**How** are we gonna pay these guys back?”

Instead of answering, Lyle put down his duffel bag and opened the top compartment. His hands disappeared inside for a few seconds, then came up holding a pair of metal canisters. They were no bigger than ping-pong balls.

“Sneezing powder bottles,” he whispered with a widening and eager smile. “One for each side of the locker room. Those buffoons’ll be sneezing so much they won’t be able to play a decent game! **That’ll** make ’em think twice before pranking on Flint’s buddies again. And **we’ll** be the ones famous for pulling it off!”

“Don’t you think that’s... a little mean? You could ruin these guys’ whole season,” Mark said. “Besides, wouldn’t it be **dangerous**? There isn’t a whole lotta running space in there, and if they catch you, you’re dead!”

“Relax! This wooden paddle here,” said Lyle, taking the paddle out of his bag as well, “is for keeping them away if they notice. Not that they’ll have much of a chance **to** notice—it won’t take long to put the canisters down, and they won’t go off until a minute or two after the starter tabs are pulled, which is plenty of time to make a careful getaway.

“Besides, **I’m** not going.” Lyle slapped both sneezing powder canisters and the wooden paddle into Mark’s hands, then opened the locker room door. “**You** are!”

“What?!”

Before he could say anything more, Mark was shoved into the locker room and the door was slammed shut behind him. Studying for the math test was now the furthest thing from his mind.

His first reaction was fear—if any of the basketball players saw him, they’d probably give him a hard time without even knowing that he was supposed to be covering them all in sneezing powder.

Thinking fast, Mark crouched behind a nearby garbage can, squeezing as far into the corner of the room as he could. A pair of shoes passed by him soon after, letting him know that he’d hidden just in time. To be extra sure, he quickly pocketed the canisters, worried that someone

would see them and realize his supposed goal.

Mark's mind was racing. His opinions of Lyle and his quest for fame were changing before his eyes; there was nothing fun or funny about all this anymore. The longer he sat there on the floor of the locker room, the more he heard his mother's voice and pictured how much she'd be yelling at him for letting himself get even this far. A rush of new ideas and heightened senses came very close to overloading him, but through it all, Mark saw one thing clearly: he did not want to do what Lyle had asked him to.

Once he was sure that nobody could see him, he got up and exited the locker room quickly and quietly.

"Huh? That was sure fast," said Lyle; he was leaning on the wall with his arms crossed.

"I didn't do it," Mark said.

"**What?! And why the hell not?**" asked Lyle.

"Because I didn't want to."

"Didn't want t-t...oh, you big baby! I get it!" Lyle grabbed Mark's shoulders and spun him back around. "You're scared! Well, don't worry—the big, bad basketball players won't hurt you. They won't even **notice** you if you do it right! Now **go!**"

Lyle shoved Mark back into the locker room and shut the door. This time, it only took two seconds for Mark to burst back out again.

"I can't do it!" he said, shoving the wooden paddle into Lyle's hand. "I'm sorry, Lyle...it just doesn't feel right."

"But you'd be doing a good thing! The basketball team played **their** prank first! Don't you want justice for the football players?!"

"I'm gonna be honest with you—I don't actually remember hearing about that," said Mark.

"What, so you think I'm **lying** now? That's ridiculous! If it were **Flint** here instead, he wouldn't hesitate for a **second**—"

"I'm not Flint!" Mark shouted. He took a step back and looked down, avoiding Lyle's piercing gaze. "I...I'd never hurt **anybody**, not even someone who'd hurt me...."

"Yes, yes, we **both** know that, Mark," droned Lyle, rolling his eyes as if this was a tired subject. "**That's** why I've had to save your butt so many times over the years. Maybe if you **could** stand on your own two feet, you'd be less of a **burden!**"

Mark didn't seem to know what to say to that. He stood dumbstruck with his mouth opening and closing, reaching for words

that wouldn't come.

"Look, maybe you wouldn't defend **yourself**, but I **know** you'd stick your neck out for your friends if you had to, especially Flint—" Lyle interrupted himself and shook his head like a dog trying to dry off. "What am I arguing with **you** for?! Yours is not to reason why...so get going!"

"Since when do you treat me like the hired help?!" asked Mark, sounding hurt and surprised in equal measure.

"You **are** the hired help!" said Lyle, frustration overtaking him. "If Flint were around this morning, **he'd** be doing this with me and you'd just be guarding the door like always! You think I **want** to trust **you** with something this important?! I don't have a choice!"

Lyle kept on glaring and Mark kept on looking away. After a moment, Lyle sighed in exasperation and yanked Mark in close.

"Listen up, you," he said, "I don't have time to stand here and debate. This is my surest plan ever, and I will **not** let you screw it up!" He pushed Mark back, forcing his head to snap upward so their eyes finally met.

"You either get back in there and do this," Lyle said with a pointed finger, "or else you aren't welcome with us anymore."

Mark mumbled something inaudible.

"What was that?"

"I said...then maybe I'm not," Mark repeated. "Maybe I'm just **not** welcome with you guys anymore."

"Are you **kidding** me?!" Lyle exploded. "This isn't a question of being welcome or belonging! You can't **exist** without me—I **made** you what you are! Without me, you'd just be some quiet kid sitting in a corner and not talking to anyone! I **created** Mark Daley, for crying out loud!"

"If this wasn't about belonging, then why did you **say** that?" asked Mark, his voice hoarse.

"Shut up! Snap out of it and get back in that locker room!"

"I'm sorry, Lyle..." Mark turned around and walked away as fast as he could, exiting the gym. "I'm done with this."

"What?! Get back here!" Lyle headed into the hall, but Mark was already a good distance away. For a second, Lyle looked surprised, but then he just scowled again.

"Yeeeah, that's right! **Walk away** from the only real friends you've ever had, **keep** right on thinking you can just get up and change



everything! You'll come crawling back—you don't have the **capacity** to make it on your own! Yeah, you'll be back, and when you beg me to forgive you, you know what? I'm not **gonna!**"

But when Lyle finished his spiel, he realized that Mark hadn't been anywhere in sight for some time. His expression of surprise returned briefly, then he growled and stalked off in the opposite direction.