

## A Normal Game of Manhunt

The sun began to set as the kids of Lovegrove lane came out to play. There were six of them in all, ranging from eight to thirteen years old. Kenny had moved in two summers ago, to the small brick house between the Manchesters and the Thompsons. Soon after moving in, he met Connor Manchester, and was quickly invited to their secret Manhunt games.

Tonight was the first night since school ended, making it the first official Lovegrove Manhunt game of the summer. Kenny, who had just turned 10 a few weeks ago, slipped onto his back porch once he could no longer see the orange hues from the sunset. He trekked through the woods bordering the neighborhood, the smell of wet leaves filling his nose as he padded quietly along his makeshift trail. He held a flashlight in front of him, and his eyes shifted through the woods, occasionally hearing a twig snap or the rustle of a branch in the wind.

His heart was pounding in his chest by the time he arrived at their meeting location. He seemed to be the first one there, which had never happened before.

Wind brushed his face, sweeping his overgrown blonde hair out of his eyes. He shifted uneasily as time went on, wondering why the other kids had not shown up.

Leaves rustled behind him, and he whirled around, hoping to see Lanie or Connor. He shone his flashlight through the woods, the shadows of the trees dancing as he waved the beam around.

“Guys?” He called, his voice shaking more than he wanted it to, “Guys this isn’t funny!”

Kenny’s mom told him that he had a whiny voice when he was scared, and he could hear it now as he called out to the woods, “Please guys, just come play manhunt!”

A cold hand grabbed his arm, and Kenny screamed, hurriedly spinning around to see Cole Thompson smiling at him with a mischievous grin.

“Gotcha!” he giggled, as Kenny shoved him away.

“Kenny that was amazing!” A voice guffawed loudly as Kenny pointed his flashlight where the voice had come from. Kenny blushed profusely, realizing Connor had seen him scared like that.

Cole’s twin, Maya, and their older brother, Beau, peaked out behind a different tree, their laughs echoing through the woods.

“Kenny!” Maya cackled, holding her stomach as she moved forward, “You scream like a little girl!”

Kenny rolled his eyes, turning back to Connor, “Where’s Lanie?” he asked. Lanie was Connor’s little sister, and the nicest of their group.

“They went to go get the new kid, Preston.” Connor told him, shrugging.

They had all gravitated towards the center of their meeting spot, where Beau had placed an electric lamp. It used to be a campsite, a firepit sat in the middle with logs to sit on and a brick circle in the center. The bricks were now cracked, and the logs were rotted through, so they all stood in a circle. Old camping equipment laid around the ground, including stakes for a tent, bungee cords, and a dirty cooler.

Kenny sighed, his flashlight back to skimming the woods. He noticed two dark shadows, and Lanie stepped into the lamp light first, followed by a boy Kenny had never seen before. He

was taller than Kenny by a lot, and bigger too, even though he guessed they were around the same age.

The boy's eyes shifted around each kid, and he glanced back at his feet.

"Guys," Lanie called out, "This is Preston, he's gonna play manhunt with us." she beamed at the rest of the group, holding her hands out towards Preston as if he was a prize she had just won,

"Yeah, no shit Lanie." Beau chided, pointing his flashlight directly at her face "Did you tell him the rules?"

She squinted at the bright light, "No, I did not. By all means Beau, go ahead and tell him." She crossed her arms over her chest, stepping back, like she was giving Beau the nonexistent stage.

"Okay," Beau smiled wickedly, striding to the middle of the circle. Beau had wavy dark brown hair, unlike Cole and Maya, who had bright red hair, "Welcome everyone, to the first manhunt game of the summer." Beau announced, his brown eyes shifting to each face, "I'll explain the rules quickly so we can begin quickly. First, there's the hunter and the runners. The hunter has to protect this base," he gestured to the fire pit, "And the runners are trying to get to the base before they get killed by the hunter. The game starts with the hunter counting to sixty, and the runners hiding out in the woods. The hunter then goes out to attempt to kill as many runners as they can before they can get back to base. The hunter wins if they successfully hunt down all the runners, and a runner wins if they get back to base without getting killed."

The rest of the Lovegrove kids nodded as Beau talked, already well acquainted with the rules.

Beau glanced back at the new kid, “Do you get it?” he sneered,

Preston nodded, gulping, “Who gets to be hunter?”

Beau smirked, “That’s the fun part, since we’ve been playing this so much, we had to spice up the game a little bit.” he slowly stalked through the circle of kids, their faces all illuminated by the orange lamp in the middle, “No one gets to know who the hunter is but me, so I get to pick who it is when everyone’s eyes are closed.”

“Oh, like Mafia?” Preston interjected, realization dawning on his face.

“Exactly.” Beau stated, nodding slowly. The sound of cricket rang around the group, filling their ears with the sound of a perfect summer night, “Now, does everyone have their flashlights?”

The group nodded, and Kenny held up his with the rest of them. “Perfect,” Beau stalked towards the lamp in the fire pit. The orange hue illuminated his pale skin, contrasting with his dark eyes as he skimmed his gaze over each of them, he held it up, pressing the switch on the side, “now turn them off.”

Immediately, all the lights shifted off, leaving them in complete darkness. They sat in silence a moment, all closing their eyes. Beau stepped quietly around them, choosing the hunter.

“Okay, I picked.” Beau whispered, “Cole, remember to stay out of the trees, we can’t have you breaking your arm again.” Silence followed, and Kenny searched the darkness, looking around at each figure. Beau’s voice cut through the silence as he yelled, “Now run.”

They all surged forward, splitting up. Kenny headed towards the creek, a new place to hide in mind. He guessed the hunter would either be Beau because he loved tagging, or Lanie

because she hated it. Kenny moved cautiously, afraid to trip on a root as he ventured through the wooded area. The moon began to shine as he moved, and he was thankful he didn't need to use his flashlight just yet. He stepped over branches and zig zagged through the dense trees.

His breath had become more ragged as he jogged, and the sound of nature around him filled his ears. The night was humid, and the wind had stopped blowing, leaving his hair to stick to the back of his neck from sweat. He observed each potential spot as we moved, deciding how predictable it would be to hide there. He rounded a tall oak and found what he was looking for. A small ravine was below, with the creek at the bottom. A tree had fallen over it a few months ago, leaving a perfect covering for hiding in.

He crept along the side, determining the best way to get down. The ravine was about four feet deep, and Kenny knew even if he jumped in, he would need a way out to get back to base. Kenny's eyes widened as he heard footsteps in the distance. He glanced down to the creek below and decided that he'd figure out his escape later. He hopped in the ravine, one foot landing on the mud, and the other splashing in the shallow cold water. He stayed crouched a moment, and after waiting for more steps, he slowly lifted himself up and turned towards the fallen tree. He snapped a few branches as he crawled under the canopy, and he eventually got himself situated, sitting in the damp mud.

As the night drew on, Kenny waited patiently. He had discovered the perfect method was to wait for the other kids to go, and while the hunter was after them, he would sneak by and get to base.

Screams echoed in the distance, and Kenny chuckled to himself, assuming Maya or Cole had probably been caught. A few moments later he heard a yell that sounded more like one of the

older kids, but he couldn't be sure. He decided now that at least two people had been caught he could get started towards base.

He crawled out of the canopy, examining the side of the ravine. He eventually decided to climb up the tree, his knees scraping as he crawled up the branches. Another yell sounded faintly in the distance. The amount of yelling was not common for their games, since normally they tried to keep quiet. He assumed they were just excited since it was their first night back to manhunt in a while.

He darted off the tree, wiping off his hands on his shorts, and pulling out his flashlight from his pocket. They weren't allowed to go past the creek, so Kenny was virtually the farthest away from base as he could get. He followed the path he had taken to get there, moving as cautiously as possible.

Kenny began to feel a crawling feeling as he ventured through the woods. He couldn't place the feeling of wrongness. He stopped walking suddenly, and slowly turned his head. A drawn-out whisper came from behind bush to his left, "Kenny." His heart stopped, sending him sprinting in the opposite direction.

*Stupid Beau*, he thought, *he always does this trying to scare me*. Once he was confident that he had outran Beau, he began to slow down. As he looked around, he came to the terrifying realization that he didn't recognize anything around him. He tapped the switch on his flashlight, but he was still in darkness. "No." he hissed to himself, shaking the flashlight. He lifted it closer to his face, and he realized the battery cover at fallen off, along with the two triple A's inside.

He shifted uneasily, attempting to find any recognizable tree or marker in these lonely woods. The wind blew again, making Kenny shiver. The trees all looked the same to him, and he

didn't even know which way he had come from. Leaves rustled around him, and he suddenly realized what felt wrong. The woods were silent. There were no crickets or frogs. Just the quiet rustle of leaves as they danced in the wind.

Footsteps pounded near him, a shape of a person forming a few feet away, "Who's there?" He called, his voice wavering, "Beau, this is not funny."

A body crashed into him, almost throwing him off his feet.

"Connor?" Kenny exclaimed, looking up at the older boy's panic-stricken face,

"Kenny," he breathed, "you gotta run, someone's following me, and I don't think it's a Lovegrove kid."

Kenny's heart lurched, "What?"

Connor was panting, "I heard Lanie, she screamed really loud, and now I can't- I can't find her anywhere." His head whirled around as he spoke, fear flooding his voice, "Something doesn't feel right. This isn't a normal game of manhunt."

Another scream rang in the distance, and as fast as he had gotten there, Connor bolted.

Left alone again, panic was beginning to set in, his breaths becoming short as his head whirled around. A high pitch crying sounded to Kenny's left, exactly where the scream had come from. The voice sounded young, and the wailing became louder and louder, filling the silence with racking sobs. Kenny's heart was in his throat as he edged towards the voice.

"Hello?" he called hesitantly, "Who's there?"

He saw a small, seated figure in the distance. He couldn't make out much in the dark, except the sheen of red hair from the glow of the moon.

“Maya?” he asked, “What’s wrong? Did you get caught.”

The figure was silent, and Kenny took a few more steps towards her. “Hey, it’s okay that you didn’t win, we have all summer.”

He stepped up behind her, her shoulder leaning against a tree. He reached out to touch her small shoulder, “Maya, talk to me.” he whispered, an eerie feeling creeping in the back of his mind.

The second his hand touched her shoulder, she slumped over, her legs splayed out, and her face on the ground. “Maya!” he cried, crouching next to her. He grabbed her shoulders, lightly shaking her, then turning her over.

He screamed, falling back. His eyes were wide with horror but he could not look away. Blood covered her face and neck, her glazed over eyes open wide, her pale skin covered in red. Her neck had been cut open, blood still slowly spilling out.

A sob racked Kenny’s chest as he crawled away from the body of his neighbor. “Help!” He called, and he screamed and screamed and screamed, his voice going ragged with the complete and utter terror he felt.

Maya’s flashlight laid next to her lifeless body, and after running his voice ragged until he could no longer breathe, Kenny eventually reached out to grab it. He flashed it on, shining it around. He quickly stood up and began running. He knew the base had to be close, and he’d know where to go from there.

Kenny could see the base in the distance, and his heart swelled with hope. He ran as fast as he could, determined to return to safety. His leg caught on a lump on the ground, sending him



crashing face first into the mud. Pain coursed through his nose as he wiped his eyes with his sleeves, he hurriedly stood back up, pointing his flashlight at the spot he tripped on. He couldn't process it at first as he stared at the next lifeless body on the ground. Lanie's limbs were bent at odd angles, her dead eyes facing the sky. Her shattered glasses laid next to her hair, now matted with mud.

Bile rose in Kenny's throat, and he turned quickly, emptying the contents of his stomach on the floor of the woods. Someone was after them. He thought back to the bush, whispering at him, and questioned whether whoever said his name was hunting them.

He turned back, stumbling towards base. The lamp had been turned back on, sending off a welcoming glow as Kenny reached the center. His chest rose and fell heavily as he sat down on the rotten log. Tears sprang in his eyes as he calmed down. He knew where to go now, but couldn't seem to move. His limbs were exhausted from moving, and all he wanted to do was curl up here and sleep this horrible night away.

A drop of rain splashed on his face, then another. He wiped the droplet off with the back of his hand. He rested his head on his knees, silent tears flooding from his eyes.

*They're all dead*, he thought to himself, *someone killed them. And the murderer is still out here.* Another drop of rain crept down his neck, causing him to shiver. His hand shook as he swiped it away. Instead of the clear water he suspected, his hand contained a splash of red.

Kenny's eyes slowly rose as another drop fell, sliding slowly down his cheek. The trees overhead blocked the light of the moon, the only light was from the small lamp in the makeshift firepit. A shadow swung above as kenny squinted harder to figure out what it was.

Kenny's heart was in his throat as he lifted the flashlight slowly.

A body hung from the branch high above. Cole's purple tennis shoes, now caked in mud, swung slowly, his neck tied up by the bungee cords. Blood seeped out of a gash on his head, his eyes closed.

Kenny couldn't think, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't run. He stared in utter horror at the little boy who he had seen alive and bright only mere hours before. His whimper cut through the silent wood. "No no no!" He cried, covering his eyes with his hands.

He turned to run, only to collide with a body.

His horror turned into shock when he peered up at Beau looking down at him.

Kenny screamed, "Get away from me!" he shuffled backwards, toppling over the rotten wood, narrowly missing the firepit bricks.

"Kenny please," Beau begged, "you don't understand." He walked forwards, an indistinguishable look in his eyes, "just liste--"

"No!" Kenny roared, scooting farther back, his vision clouded from tears. "Don't kill me Beau, please!" Fear racked his voice, his eyes glancing up to the body hanging from the tree, "You killed Cole, Maya, and Lanie. Please let me go."

Beau stepped forward more, still a safe distance from Kenny, "Lanie's dead?" Beau asked, his voice filled with despair.

Kenny nodded, "And you killed her!"

Beau shook his head, "Kenny, that wasn't me. I swear!" His eyes were filled with tears, "I- I would never do what he did." His voice cracked as he began to cry.

Kenny stared; he no longer knew what to believe. He had never seen Beau show any type of emotion other than anger, “If you didn’t kill them,” he stated cautiously, “then who did?”

Beau shook his head, still crying, “I don’t know, I don’t even know who I tapped to be hunter. It was too dark and I just tapped someone random!”

Kenny slowly stood up, still standing a few feet from Beau. He thought back to earlier, and how Beau described how to play, “Beau,” he whispered, “did you ever clarify that the hunter’s supposed to tag, and not actually kill?”

Beau sniffed, “What?”

“When you explained the rules; you never actually said tag, you only said kill or hunt.” Kenny stated, mind reeling.

Beau stilled with realization, “You don’t think-”

A yell from the distance cut him off, and Kenny and Beau both looked, “Connor.” Kenny breathed, surging forward.

“Kenny, NO!” Beau exclaimed, chasing after him, but Kenny couldn’t hear anything over the blood rushing in his ears. He refused to see another one of his friends die.

“Connor!” Kenny screamed, “I’m coming!” He ran as fast as he could, his feet slapping against the hard ground. Pain seared in his limbs from running all night, but he refused to stop.

He could hardly see, tripping over roots as he stormed through the brush. He could see the shape of two people in the distance. He stopped, unable to understand what he was seeing. Beau reared behind him, flashing his beam at the two people. Preston laid on the ground, his neck gushing blood. Connor stood above him, slowly turning to face them,

“He tried to kill me.” Connor whispered, his voice shaking, “I- I didn’t know what to do.”

Kenny stared wide eyed at the body on the ground, “Connor, it’s okay.” he cautiously moved towards him. Connor stood above him, trembling with fear, “I didn’t mean to kill him.”

Kenny heard Beau retching behind him, then the thump of Beau’s body collapsing from shock, and the flashlight crashing on the ground. Kenny could barely make out Connor’s alert facial expression as he reached out, wrapping his arms around Connor’s shoulders, “You did what you had to do.” Kenny whispered into his shoulder, rubbing a comforting hand along his friend’s back. Connor stiffened, and Kenny attempted to pull away, but Connor held him in place, “Connor?” Kenny asked hesitantly, at that moment, Kenny felt a sharp pain stab into his shoulder blade.

He doubled over, rearing in agony as he clutched on to Connor. The knife twisted, sending searing pain through Kenny’s body. Blood spilled out of his back as the knife slowly slid out and back in. Kenny screamed, his vision blacking out as Connor smiled against Kenny’s neck, “You’re right,” he whispered, plunging the knife in again, “I did what I had to do.”