

1. MR BARCLAY IS A NUTTER

The legend of Robin Hood begins in Locksley High School, on a Wednesday afternoon. It was the middle of lunch break, and pepperoni pizza and buttered corn sat heavy in twelve-year-old Robin's nervous stomach.

'If we get caught, we're dead,' Robin's pal Alan Adale noted, as he shoulder-barged double doors.

The school was a dump and the boys set off down a corridor lined with vandalised lockers. Mildew on the windows gave the light a greenish tinge and a stink wafted from drains in the girls' bathroom at the far end.

The two lads were a contrast. Robin was small but muscly, with scruffy hair and ketchup down his purple school polo shirt. Alan was a neat freak. His gangly frame started with madly expensive basketball boots whiter than anything in a toothpaste ad and topped out with an extravagant afro that forced him to duck under doors.

'Mr Barclay is a nutter,' Alan continued. 'Craig got two weeks of detention for that burp in assembly.'

Robin smirked at the memory: Craig's vast rolling belch silencing a guest lecturing on water safety, and leaving half the school in hysterical laughter as Mr Barclay gripped Craig by his collar and dragged him out of the gym.

'Barclay's on lunch duty on the other side of the school,' Robin soothed. 'And you're just my lookout. All the benefit, none of the risk . . .'

Robin was trying to sound calm but shuddered when he stopped at a door. It had muddy kick-marks and peeling brown paint. The sign read *Mr Barclay – Head of Year Seven*, under which someone had graffitied: *Abandon hope ye who enter here*.

'Can you get me an A?' Alan begged, as Robin pulled a neon-yellow plastic key out of his pocket.

'Mate, you can barely add two numbers together.'

'Are you saying I'm thick?' Alan accused.

'Maths sure isn't one of your strengths,' Robin said diplomatically. 'Nobody's gonna believe you got an A.'

'How'd you get Barclay's key anyway?'

'He leaves his keys on the desk in his classroom,' Robin explained. 'I took a close-up photo, then made copies using the 3D printer at my dad's work.'

'My dad's got a 3D printer. He only used it once. So basically, he spent five hundred pounds to make a small plastic hedgehog.'

'Your family has *way* too much money,' Robin said irritably. 'Can we *please* concentrate . . .'

Keys are normally metal, so Robin worried as he slotted the yellow plastic inside the lock. Some girls ran out of the bathroom. There was a big shriek and one shouted, *Gimme my hat, moose brain!* But they paid the boys no attention.

Once they were out of sight, Robin twisted the key in the lock and felt it flex.

‘I’m bigger, shall I try?’ Alan asked.

‘I don’t want it to snap,’ Robin explained. ‘I’m being gentle . . .’

There was an alarming scraping sound, but just as Robin thought his efforts were doomed, the bolt made a satisfying *thunk*.

‘Am I a genius, or what?’ Robin said brightly. ‘We’re in!’

2. GOTTA KILL 'EM ALL

'You keep watch,' Robin told Alan, as he stepped into Mr Barclay's office. 'If anyone comes, bang on the door.'

'There's only one exit,' Alan said warily. 'The doors we came through.'

'It's only the second floor,' Robin explained. 'I can go out of the window.'

'What's my excuse for hanging out here, if someone asks?'

Robin sighed. 'Standing in a corridor isn't a crime. We talked this through already. Stop being a panic pants and let me work . . .'

Robin shook his head as he closed the office door. Recruiting Alan to be his lookout probably wasn't worth the earache, because if this went like the test run Robin did at home the night before, he'd get the job done in under eight minutes.

First Robin secured his emergency escape route, by grabbing two finger hooks and opening the rotting sash window. This let in fresh air, along with noise from older

kids playing soccer in the courtyard below.

Barclay's office was a landfill site. Stacks of fat folders, dust-caked family photos, a musical *No. 1 Uncle* cookie jar with a smashed lid, and a wall clock that told the wrong time. The smell was a mix of Gazelle for Men body spray, a dandruff-speckled tracksuit top and the brie-and-tomato baguette mouldering in the bin.

After jiggling the mouse to make sure the desktop computer wasn't already switched on, Robin reached underneath the table and pushed the main power switch. He twisted back and forth in the office chair as the ancient Dell booted up.

'How much longer?' Alan asked, leaning in anxiously.

'I just got here,' Robin growled. 'Buzz off.'

The screen asked Robin for a staff ID and password.

Staff IDs were super-easy to find: they were written on the message boxes outside the staffroom, where kids could drop stuff like late homework or permission slips.

Barclay's password had made a meatier challenge, but Robin had captured it by installing a keylogger program on a laptop in his classroom. This small piece of software ran in secret, recording every keystroke made on the computer and sending a text file to Robin in a daily email.

After typing **4071** and **K1LLa11Year7s**, Robin waited for the Windows desktop to appear, then opened Locksley High's pupil database.

Robin had Mr Barclay's system password, but didn't need it because it had been autosaved. He'd also

downloaded a demo version of the database software the school used, so the screen felt familiar as he hit the search tab and typed **ALAN ADALE**.

Alan's grin and mighty afro popped up on screen, with a line of file tabs down one side. Robin clicked *Reports* and selected the one that was due to be emailed to parents when term ended in a few days.

After clicking *yes* on a dialogue box that asked if he wanted to edit the report, Robin scrolled down to *Maths*. He changed Alan's grade from a D to a B- and the teacher's comment from *Awkward and disruptive*, to *Tries hard and makes a good contribution*.

Next, Robin opened his own report. Besides being a computer whizz, he liked climbing and archery and his dad had promised him a box of pricey-but-accurate carbon-core arrows if he got a B or better in every subject on his end-of-year report.

Robin was smart, so although he got bored and mucked around a lot, he wasn't surprised to see he'd gotten As for Maths, Computer Studies and Combined Science, and B or B- for everything else except Spanish.

Locksley High's Spanish teacher, Mrs Fabregas, always picked on him (at least in Robin's opinion). One time Robin even wound up in a screaming row, after she sent him to the behaviour unit when at least four other kids were behaving worse than he was.

As Robin changed Mrs Fabregas's C- to the B that would earn him arrows, Alan thumped hard on the door.

‘Barclay’s coming, with some girl!’ he yelled. ‘I’m outta here!’

‘Are you sure?’ Robin shouted back, but Alan had bolted.

Robin frantically changed Mrs Fabregas’s *Disrespectful and childish* to *A very enjoyable pupil to teach*, before hitting *save all changes*. Rather than go through a lengthy software shutdown, Robin leaned under the desk and yanked out the power cord.

As he grabbed his backpack off the peeling carpet tiles, Robin could hear a gobby girl outside the door. Mr Barclay was showing her zero sympathy.

‘You do not fight in my lunch room!’ he was shouting. ‘You will wait in my office until I am ready to deal with you.’

‘Axel threw potato at me first!’ the girl complained. ‘Why should I wait in your office? This is a total stitch-up!’

After a quick check to make sure he’d left nothing behind, Robin put one foot on top of the radiator beneath the open window and leaned way out onto the ledge.

As an experienced climber, Robin was confident about swinging his legs off the ledge and sliding down a drainpipe into the school courtyard. But he hadn’t expected the pair of wood pigeons perched on brickwork just below.

Startled by Robin’s head looming above them, the birds launched into the air. Robin instinctively rolled away

from the flapping wings, but lost his grip and slid forward at the same time. His pack caught on the underside of the raised window, but when he reached behind to grab the frame and steady himself the rotting wood crumbled in his hand.

Panic slowed everything down. Robin looked over the ledge at a six-metre head-first plunge into concrete. He grasped for the window again, as the weight of textbooks in his backpack pulled his shiny nylon shorts further over the ledge.

But then – mercifully – he stopped sliding, and felt his sneaker snag on something.

The good news was that the loop of Robin's double-knotted shoelace had caught on the control valve on top of the radiator.

The bad news was that his bodyweight was stretching his sneaker and his heel was slowly sliding out at the back . . .

3. THE BADDEST GIRL AT LOCKSLEY HIGH

I probably should have just worked a bit harder in Spanish class, Robin thought to himself as he dangled.

At worst, he was going to plunge head first into concrete.

At best, Mr Barclay would grab Robin's legs and drag him inside, and he'd *just* be in serious trouble for breaking into the office of the strictest teacher in his school . . .

But something else happened first.

There was a kickabout going on at ground level, and sixteen-year-old Clare Gisborne had just made a clattering tackle. She was the meanest girl in Locksley High and the daughter of Guy Gisborne, the gangster who ran every racket in town.

Clare's flying Nike crunched the other player's knee and an elbow made sure he stayed down. After straddling her crumpled opponent, Clare tapped the battered football into open space and eyed a set of goalposts.

The keeper was rubbish and the only defender between

Clare and the goal had no appetite to tackle after seeing her demolish his teammate.

But as Clare Gisborne teed up a shot in the top left corner, she noticed the stocky little Year Seven kid hanging over a window ledge two storeys up. And while this would have made any decent person freeze in shock, or yell for help, Clare decided it would be hilarious to boot the ball at him as hard as she could.

In his state of panic, Robin saw the leather ball spin in slow motion, making out every scuff and its owner's initials in Sharpie ink. If it hit, Robin would plunge down, but the ball whacked the end of the window ledge with a hollow ping, then spun upward, rattling the glass above Robin's legs.

Clare Gisborne smiled and squinted up into the sun. Tracking the ball as it came down and hoping she could take another shot. But before her foot could connect, Clare got flattened with a hefty two-handed shove.

'Leave my brother,' the lad shouted, breathless from a flat-out sprint across the courtyard.

Everyone called Robin's sixteen-year-old brother Little John. It was an ironic nickname for an absolute giant. But the soccer players gasped because nobody laid hands on Guy Gisborne's daughter.

'Do you know who I am?' Clare roared, as a graze on her cheek filled with blood. 'My dad will feed you to his pigs if he hears about this.'

Clare didn't just talk tough. She sprang up on powerful

legs and dropped into a boxer's stance. Little John worried about Robin and was relieved to see Mr Barclay grab his brother's shorts and yank him inside.

'Come on, you big lump,' Clare growled, swooping and giving John a left-right combo in the gut.

Little John backed up, winded, but holding his hands wide to show he wasn't going to fight back. 'I'm protecting Robin.'

The stinging graze made Clare angry and she launched a roundhouse kick. But John was fast for a big guy and he dodged, leaving Clare's leg whooshing through the air before she stumbled sideways, off balance.

Two floors up, Mr Barclay was overwhelmed, dealing with the angry girl he'd brought from the canteen and struggling to process the fact he'd found a kid dangling out of his office window.

He wished he'd trained as an accountant like his brother as he shouted down, 'Clare Gisborne, John Hood, pack in that nonsense and get out of my sight. Or I will make you both sorry.'

John kept backing away as Clare steadied herself. She shot a nasty glance up at Mr Barclay, then lowered her fists and growled to Little John, 'I won't forget this, John Hood.'