

## Walden Lane

Where the mountains meet the sea ... Where the city blends into the wilderness ... This is Walden Lane. Hike in the sage-green hills, or surf in the cool Pacific—all in the same day. Is Walden Lane perfect? No. But it is home.

### Meet the Characters



**Marlon Moore** loves gaming. When he's not in school or riding his bike, he's online. But 14-year-old Marlon is also a loyal friend and a great little brother. He would tell you his best friend is Steve McCain. But his dad is his true BFF.

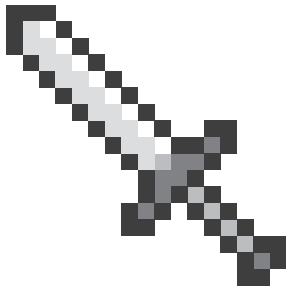


**Ashley Moore** is an overachiever. She's good at almost everything she tries. Is she a perfectionist? Maybe. But Ashley is 16 and likes to have fun too. And her family doesn't let her accomplishments go to her head.

# Walden Lane Gamers



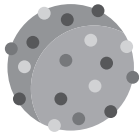
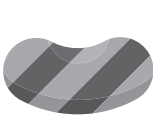
Number of times Marlon has been in trouble for playing video games instead of doing his homework: 66



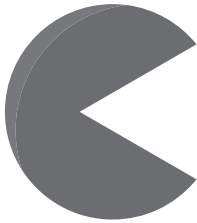
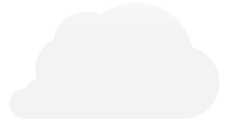
Doug says he's over *Minecraft* because that's so fifth grade.



# Fun Facts



Ashley's fave video game is ... never mind! She only plays *Candy Crush* in secret. Shhh!



Mr. Lerner still plays *Pac-Man* at Lamppost Pizza.  
He doesn't even like pizza.





# **Chapter 1**

## The Game

“That’s as far as you’ve gotten?” Marlon Moore smiled.

Marlon walked with Steve McCain. The two were at Walden Lane Middle School. It was time for eighth-grade science class. Science was their second class that day.

The school was for seventh and eighth graders. All of the classrooms faced an open square. Trees and flowers were in the middle of the campus. The school also had a large field and a blacktop.

Steve was playing *Clan Castles*. The video game was on his phone. There were many kings in the game. The goal was to steal each king's castle. But there were a lot of hurdles. *Clan Castles* also had 99 levels. Steve was on level 16.

The two boys were best friends. They loved to play video games. But that's not all they did together. After school they rode their bikes. Marlon and Steve liked to have fun. They would pedal around town. Finding new things to do was a big deal. And on the weekends they would go to the movies.

“What level did you get to?” Steve asked. He shook his shaggy blond hair out of his face.

“35,” Marlon said proudly.

“35!” Steve repeated. “No way!”

*Clan Castles* got harder with each level. The game was really popular. It had started as an app. Then it went to the Wii. After that it went to the Xbox. Now you could play it on everything.

“Yeah, it was easy.” Marlon grinned.

“I’ll get there,” Steve said.

“Yeah, when you’re 80!” Marlon joked.

They laughed.

The boys continued talking. Then they went into science class. They saw something different. Their teacher was not there. Instead, they had a sub. Mr. Lerner. He was cool.

Mr. Lerner had been their sub before. They met him last year. That was back in seventh grade. He taught while another teacher was on leave.

Fun fact. Mr. Lerner loved gaming. He

had been a *Pac-Man* pro back in the day.

*Pac-Man* was an old-school video game. Pac-Man ate dots in a maze. Then he avoided the ghosts. They could trap him. Marlon and Steve played it sometimes.

Mr. Lerner let students goof off. But kids had to get their work done first. After, everyone just had to be quiet.

Marlon took his time with his work. But he got distracted. A Marvel cartoon came to him. He had watched it the night before. It was about Dr. Strange. He was a scientist. Dr. Strange developed cool powers.

He went back to his work. Then Marlon noticed Steve. He was working quickly. In no time he was done. Steve got out his phone. He was playing *Clan Castles* again.

*He'll never beat my score,* Marlon thought.

Marlon was a really good gamer. It was okay to brag. He was the best in Walden Lane. Period!

Being the best wasn't too hard. Walden Lane was a small city. It was surrounded by nature. There were hills and trails. Most people liked to be outside. Marlon's parents wanted him outside too. They said too much gaming rotted your brain.



“No way!” Marlon said.

It was lunch. Students walked around. Some were talking. Others were reading. A few were texting. Phones were allowed during school breaks. Or if you had a cool sub like Mr. Lerner.

Steve and Marlon went to the cafeteria. They bought pasta. In elementary school they thought the cafeteria was gross.



Somehow the food was better in middle school.

“Yeah way,” Steve said. He showed Marlon his phone. A castle was in ruins. Steve was on level 42.

“Maybe we should play on my Xbox,” Marlon said. “Let’s make a bet. Whoever gets the highest wins. We do it in one game.”

One game gave each player three lives. If you lost all three, the game was over.

“Okay,” Steve said. “But we need rules.”

“Why?” Marlon didn’t like rules. He liked to do things his own way.

“So this can be legit,” Steve said. He drank some milk. “The loser will buy. It’s winner’s choice at 7-Eleven.”

“Hope you saved your cash,” Marlon said.

“The first rule is no using boosts,” Steve said.

A *boost* was a special move. It helped if a player got stuck. A boost came in handy.

“That’s fine.” Marlon ate some pasta.  
“I’m not going to need any.”