

Epilogue

THAT WAS YESTERDAY. I think Cheryl needs to think things over, just like me. I guess you might call this a trial separation for us, and those don't always end in divorce, you know.

Anyway, tomorrow Cheryl's going to see a psychologist, too. Just to talk. I guess it works, because after this, I realize how much I want to talk about it, and tell everyone how it happened.

And I know who has to hear it next:

Austin.

Austin's parents might not let me in the house, and maybe he'll hate me for all eternity. But maybe after a long time he'll see how sorry I really am, and he'll forgive me. I mean, if Tyson can forgive me, anything's possible.

And Tyson won't be sorry he did, either. I might be the second-best runner, but from now on I'm gonna be the best friend either of them ever had. And when it comes right down to it, as long as I'm the best friend I can be, who cares what I'm second-best at?

Want to know what happens next?

Turn the page for the first chapter of

The Shadow Club Rising

The Iron Maiden

I **HAVE A BIKE**, but I don't ride it much. In our town there are too many hills, and the roads aren't paved as well as they should be. The shoulders are littered with rocks broken loose by the rains and the roots of tall pines. I've always relied on my feet to get me places. In the mornings I run to school, even in the winter, when my nose and ears grow so cold that they feel numb all through first period.

Now that I was officially off the track team, all that running I did to get from place to place meant a whole lot more to me. But on this particular day I didn't run, I walked, because I wasn't in a hurry to get to this destination.

It was the middle of January. Cold to me, but then nowhere near the deep freeze that other parts of the country got. While other places were getting blizzards, we'd just get rain, and when snow did fall it never lasted. The only white Christmas we ever see is from the fog that rolls in from the ocean.

THE SHADOW CLUB RISING

■ 8 ■

It was getting dark as I walked along the winding, tree-lined road that led to the homes on the hill. My social studies teacher said that in Third World countries the higher up you are on the hill, the poorer you are, because it means that you don't have any water or electricity. But not so in the world I live in. The homes up the hill have pools and big yards and picture windows with million-dollar views. Austin Pace lived about two-thirds up. Not high enough to be in a mansion, but high enough to be able to look down his nose at two-thirds of the rest of us, which he had always done quite well.

Three months ago I had been indirectly responsible for breaking his ankle—and now I was going to his house for dinner. I had to admit I couldn't have come up with a worse punishment myself. I kept reminding myself that I wasn't *actually* the one who spread those sharp rocks on the field—rocks that cut up his bare feet and mangled his right ankle. That had been Cheryl Gannett—my life-long friend and now ex-girlfriend. She had done it for me without my knowledge or consent to get Austin back for all the nasty things he had done to me. She did it because I was the second-best runner—all the members of the Shadow Club were second best at something. I had to admit that none of the indignities he had made me suffer came close to the vicious games the Shadow Club had played. Austin had once apologized for treating me the way he had. That was in the nurse's

The Iron Maiden

■ 9 ■

office, after I carried him off the field. He reneged on his apology later, though, when he found out I was partially to blame for his injury. "Pain makes people delirious," he said, and claimed he hadn't meant a word of it.

So then why was I being invited to dinner? I asked myself. Had Austin finally accepted my apology? Or was it because my parents paid his uncovered medical expenses with the money they had set aside for buying me a car in a couple of years? Maybe he felt bad because I had resigned from the track team as part of my penance for the Shadow Club's deeds. Or maybe, I thought, he invited me over to dinner just to poison me.

And so I walked instead of ran.

"Oh, it's you," said Allison, Austin's younger sister, as she opened the door. She said it with such contempt, it was clear she had been practicing saying that for most of the day.

"Come in, Jared," said Mrs. Pace, with a smile that was way too inviting. Her husband sat in the background, reading in an armchair—but the moment I stepped over the threshold, he quickly folded his newspaper and went into the other room. Austin was nowhere to be seen.

"Please, make yourself at home," Mrs. Pace said. There was enough brightness in her voice to light up the Astro-dome.

This is all too weird, I wanted to say. Can I go now? But

THE SHADOW CLUB RISING

■ 10 ■

instead I just said, "Sure." And I sat down, trying to look comfortable, even though I felt as if I were sitting on a bed of nails.

"We're having pot roast," Mrs. Pace said cheerfully. "You eat meat, don't you?"

"He probably eats it raw," said Allison.

Austin came downstairs then, slowly hobbling. The truth was, he had been walking just fine for the past few weeks, but whenever he saw me, his limp mysteriously returned. That was okay. After what the Shadow Club had done to him, if he wanted to rub salt in my guilt, he had every right to do it, so I played along.

"Still hurts?" I asked.

"Only when I move."

I offered a slim smile, but I couldn't hide just how uneasy I was about this whole dinner. He seemed to take some comfort in my discomfort. I stood up, putting out my hand to shake, knowing that he wouldn't take it. Seeing me put down my hand unshaken seemed another moment of satisfaction for him.

"I want you to know," he said, "that this wasn't my idea. It was my mother's."

The dining table was set for five, but only four sat down when dinner was served. Mr. Pace did not join us—although I could hear newspaper pages turning in another room.

As Mrs. Pace brought out the serving dishes, I found my-

The Iron Maiden

■ 11 ■

self grabbing the food far too quickly—not because I was hungry, but because I wanted to occupy my mouth with chewing, so I wouldn't be forced to talk. Austin seemed to have the same idea, but his sister had different plans.

"So," Allison asked, "what was it like being suspended?"

I looked down at my plate, wishing the meat was a little tougher so I could continue to chew for a few minutes without having to speak. "It gave me a lot of time to think," I answered.

"I thought you had to have a brain for that," Austin said.

"Now, Austin," his mother said, "Jared's our guest tonight."

"So you keep telling me."

The newspaper turned in the other room.

Finally I broke down and asked the question that had been plaguing me since I had received this invitation. "I hope you don't mind me asking, Mrs. Pace, but . . . why am I here?"

"For dinner, of course," she said.

It was Austin who explained. "The self-help book my mom's been reading says we have to make peace with all the people we hate."

"And," added Allison, "there's nobody we hate more than you."

"More string beans, Jared?" asked Mrs. Pace.

Back in seventh grade I did a report on medieval torture

THE SHADOW CLUB RISING

■ 12 ■

techniques; people stretched on the rack, or made to stand in the dagger-lined shell of the Iron Maiden. I should have included "Dinner With the Paces" in my report.

I continued to stare into my food, moving my fork around and around until the potatoes became a brown sludge lagoon beside my island of meat.

"Listen," I said, unable to meet their eyes, "the Shadow Club was a mistake. What we did was wrong. And I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" said a man's voice behind me. I turned around to see Mr. Pace standing at the threshold of the dining room. "You think that ruined ankle and the scars on Austin's feet will go away just because you say you're sorry?"

"No," I said, forcing myself to look him in the face, no matter how small it made me feel. "But I'm sorry anyway."

After he left the room I could still feel his eyes on me.

"I've lost my appetite," said Austin, dropping his fork on the plate with a clatter. Then he stormed away, remembering his limp halfway out of the room, leaving me to be killed by his mother's kindness.

I ate quickly, said a polite thank-you, and headed for the door—but even as I did, I knew that I couldn't leave like that. I knew I had to say something to Austin, though I didn't know what it would be. I found him in his garage, which had been converted into a game room, playing pool by himself.

The Iron Maiden

■ 13 ■

"You're still here?" he said, shooting at the nine ball and missing completely. Either he wasn't very good, or my presence was throwing his game off. "What is it you want?"

I took a deep breath and spoke, not sure what I would say until the words came tripping out of my mouth. "I stepped down from the track team, I've apologized a thousand times, but it doesn't seem to make a difference. What is it going to take to even up the score between me and you? I want to know what I can do to make you happy, because whatever it is, I want to do it. I owe that to you."

Austin put his cue stick down. "You can't stand the fact that I hate your guts, can you?"

"I guess you have every reason to hate me," I admitted. "Me, Cheryl, Randall, and the others."

Then Austin took a step closer, and said, "Then let me hate you . . . because that's what makes me happy."

"How was dinner with the Paces?" my dad asked when I got home.

"Fine," I said. It was a one-word response that said nothing. Things were like that between me and my parents these days. Although I had always been able to talk to them before, ever since the disaster at the lighthouse, there was like this no-fly zone between us, and we really couldn't talk the way we used to. It was as if they didn't quite see me when they looked at me now. I don't know what they saw. It's very

THE SHADOW CLUB RISING

■ 14 ■

unsettling not to be able to see yourself reflected in your own parents' eyes, if you know what I mean.

"Just fine?" my dad said, pressing me for info.

"Yeah. Fine."

He opened the refrigerator like he wanted something to eat, but he was just pretending so that he didn't have to look at me. I knew that trick, because I often did it myself.

"Everything okay at school?"

"You mean aside from the casualties from the elephant stampede?"

Now he stared at me with one hand on the open refrigerator door.

"I'm kidding, Dad."

He shut the door. "You have your mother's sense of humor."

Funny, because Mom always accused me of having his sense of humor. Lately neither of them would take credit for me.

As I went to my room, I began to think about the ex-members of the Shadow Club. Cheryl, who had taken my offhand comment about forming a club for second-best kids and turned it into reality; her younger brother, Randall, who had always been hundredths of a second away from first place on every swim team he'd ever been on; Darren Collins, who never saw the glory he deserved in basketball; Jason Perez, whose dreams revolved around a trumpet solo he'd

The Iron Maiden

■ 15 ■

never been asked to perform; Karin "O. P." Han, who was always One Point away from having the highest grades in school. Abbie Singer, who was almost, but not quite, the most popular girl around. And then, of course, me—the king of the silver medal in the hundred-yard dash.

It all seemed so important just a few months ago, but when you terrorize your enemies the way we did, you lose your taste for blood—and although I still had the urge to be better at what I did, I no longer had the need to be better than.

It all came down to this: I could deal with myself now. I had come to terms with the things we had done but that look of hatred on Austin's face—that was something I still couldn't deal with.

"Do you hate me, Tyson?" I asked from the threshold of his room that night. It used to be our guest room, but now Tyson was a permanent guest.

He didn't answer my question. Instead he held up the drawing he was working on. "How do you like this one?" he asked. It was an intricate pencil sketch of a city skyline.

"I like it," I said with a sly smile. "It's not on fire."

"Ha-ha," he said. I think I was the only person who could joke with him about that—perhaps because I had been there during the last blaze he had set, when he burned down his house and nearly took both of us with it. I don't take blame for everything in the world, but a good part of that

THE SHADOW CLUB RISING

■ 16 ■

was my fault, too, because I was really the one who had pushed Tyson to do it.

I took a look at the drawing. It was good—all his artwork was good—and, like I said, the fact that he didn't draw anything burning was a good sign. So many of his sketches and paintings had everything from airplanes to buildings to people being consumed by flames. His psychiatrist said it was good for him to air his demons through his artwork, but it still didn't make it any less creepy.

How Tyson ended up with my family is something I can take a little bit of pride in. After his lighthouse burned and I rescued him from drowning in the ocean, he had been taken away from his foster parents. They were the third ones he had lived with since his real parents died when he was just a little kid. With no one else willing to take him, he would have been stuck in Pleasant Haven Children's Home, which was neither pleasant nor much of a haven—it was just a last-stop orphanage with a deceptive name. I was the one who insisted that we take him in—that *we* become his new foster family. Although my parents were definitely not too keen on the idea of an angry pyromaniac kid in the house, they knew I owed him even more than I owed Austin. In spite of the history between Tyson and me, even Social Services agreed that placing him with us was better than sending him to Pleasant Haven. When I was younger I always kind of wanted a brother. Of course Tyson wasn't what I'd had in mind, but I sort of liked it.

The Iron Maiden

■ 17 ■

Tyson turned a page in his sketch pad and started a new drawing, forgetting, or pretending to forget the question I had asked when I first stepped in.

"So, Tyson," I said once more, refusing to let him off the hook, "do you hate me?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah, sure," he said. "Maybe a little."

"Maybe a lot?" I pushed.

"I don't know," Tyson answered. "Somewhere between a little and a lot—but closer to a little—and anyway, I wouldn't have come to live here if I didn't like you more than I hated you."

I smiled. "You can't stand me when I drag you out of your room in the middle of the night." Tyson grunted like a bull. Part of my penance, as far as Tyson was concerned, was setting my alarm for 1:00 and 4:00 A.M., then hauling Tyson out of bed to take a leak, with the hope of breaking that nasty little bed-wetting habit of his, which I had so thoroughly announced to the entire school.

"How do you deal with it when people totally hate your guts?" I asked.

"Very badly," he answered, and I realized what a stupid question that was to ask him—a kid who always went ballistic at the drop of a hat. "Is this about Austin?" he asked, knowing where I had gone to dinner that night.

I nodded. "I thought he might give me time off for good behavior, you know?"

THE SHADOW CLUB RISING

■ 18 ■

"More like life with no chance of parole?"

"No," I said, "more like death row."

And then Tyson said something that I'll never forget.

"Sometimes people see you the way they want to see you," he told me, "no matter how hard you try to change it. It's like they'd rather twist the whole world just so they can keep seeing you the same lousy way."

It wasn't long until I knew how true that really was.