

The Best of Friends

AS USUAL, MOST of us pretended not to know each other at school that week. Sure, Cheryl and I hung around together, but as far as the rest of the club went, well, we just winked at each other in the halls. The secrecy of our friendships made the meetings at Stonehenge very special.

By next Friday's meeting, however, I was feeling awfully strange about things. Tyson hadn't spilled the beans to anyone, as far as I knew, and none of us had gotten caught for any of the practical jokes we had played, but still something didn't sit quite right. Maybe it was the feeling I'd got when I told Tyson I knew he was a bed wetter. Maybe it was the fact that I had to spy on him like a Peeping Tom. Or maybe it was the fact that Tyson had called us a gang. Whatever it was, I took the feeling to the meeting with me, and I couldn't shake it. I held my hands close to the fire. It seemed that for the past few meetings nothing I could do would keep my hands warm.

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"You know," said Darren, "I never thought this thing would work. I mean, I never thought we'd all actually . . . you know, *like* each other."

"I'll say," said Abbie. "Look at this group: we've got a jock, a brain, a nerd, a sōsh, a brat, a lawyer, and the Gopher! Who'd have thought we'd all get along!"

I smiled, but down inside I cringed. The kids in the Shadow Club were the only ones in school left who *didn't* call me the Gopher.

"I'm not a jock!" said Darren.

"And I'm not a nerd!" said Jason.

"Yeah, but you know what I mean," said Abbie.

I knew what she meant. Except for Randall, Cheryl, and me, none of us had really known each other before the club.

"I guess when you have something in common," said O.P., "it's easy to be friends." Oh, yeah, sure, we really had a lot in common, I thought.

"We all hate somebody," I said.

O.P. turned to me. "What?"

"We hate somebody. That's all we have in common. A little bit sick, huh?"

"Naah," said Darren. "It's like war. Common enemies bring people close, you know?"

"But we're not at war," I said.

"Yeah, we are," said Jason. "We're fighting for our right not to be humiliated by the unbeatables."

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"I say we nuke 'em!" said Randall.

"And I say that's not funny!" I yelled. I wondered which was worse, wanting to nuke somebody, or wishing someone was never born. There were seven of us, all wishing that seven other people in the world had never been brought into it. That's the kind of hatred you read about in war books; the kind of hate that kills millions of people.

Everyone around the circle looked at me as if I had cussed Randall out.

"I think you're taking this all too seriously, Jared," said Cheryl. "It's just for fun."

"I think he's feeling guilty," said Abbie.

"What for?" said Darren. "Our jokes didn't hurt anybody, did they? I mean, sure a spider got killed, but I kill spiders every day. Do you see me crying about it?"

He had a good point, but it didn't make me feel any better. I took my hands away from the fire. Almost immediately, they began to get cold again, but when I put my hands down, Cheryl grabbed one of them and held it gently, out of everyone's view. That's when I began to feel a bit better about everything.

"I think I know what it is," said O.P. "I think he's worried about Tyson talking."

"No! That's not it," I said, and took a deep breath.

"You want out of the club? Is that it?" asked Darren.

"No, of course not. I like the club—I love the club . . . but . . ."

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"But what?" said Darren. "Get to the point."

"Maybe we should stop the tricks," I said.

Cheryl turned to me. "Jared, our charter is based on revenge."

"Yeah," said Randall. "The tricks were your idea. Don't wimp out on us, Jared."

"Yeah, Jared," echoed Jason.

"Hasn't it been great fun so far?" asked Abbie. I thought about it. It *had* been great fun.

"And didn't everyone deserve what they got?" asked O.P. She was right. They all deserved what they got.

"And don't you enjoy being president of the club?" asked Cheryl. She hooked me with that one, and that's when any guilt or doubt I had inside switched off completely. Until that moment, I had never thought of myself as president, but as I looked around the fire, I saw that everyone was looking at me—not just looking at me, but looking up to me—*me*, the Generic Kid, who never stood out in a crowd, and whose face nobody could remember.

What an idiot I had been! Here I was, the leader of this club, and I was on the verge of throwing it all away. I wasn't about to do that.

"Maybe what we need is a slight change of club policy," said Cheryl. I knew what she meant; I picked right up on it. Keep my voice firm; no more wishy-washiness. If I was the president, then I was going to tell them how the club was going to work.

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"All right," I said in my power voice, "if we're going to keep this club from falling apart—or even worse, from getting caught—we have to stop the tricks for a while."

Randall and a few of the others whined.

"Quiet!" I said. "I'm not finished." I couldn't believe how quickly they stopped whining. I held back a smile. We were in charge, both Cheryl and I; we had power, and my voice didn't crack once! "We have to stop the tricks, and only pull them once in a while—when we really feel somebody deserves it. That way, we can give them exactly what they deserve, *when* they deserve it, and we'll never get caught! That's our new policy, right, Cheryl?"

"Right!" Cheryl smiled, and held my hand a bit tighter.

Everyone looked at each other for a few moments, then Abbie said, "That makes perfect sense to me," and everyone agreed; even Darren.

"What do we do in the meantime?" he asked.

"Eat more marshmallows." Cheryl tossed him the bag.

"OK," said Darren, and he did just that.

After that, everything lightened up. Cheryl and I were in charge. Everyone knew it, and everyone accepted it. For the rest of the afternoon, we talked about everything from the fires at school to whether or not anything Ralphy Sherman ever said in his whole life was true. It was great, for, as Cheryl said sometime during that afternoon, we were a

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bunch of kids—not a gang—having fun without doing anything wrong (or at least we weren't doing anything wrong at that moment). We were good kids, with good grades, from good homes. Everything about us was good, and there was nothing to feel bad about. Nothing at all. Was there?

When the meeting broke up, as usual I put out the fire. Strangely enough, putting out the fire and leaving Stonehenge had become my favorite part of the meetings. I didn't know why. No, actually I sort of *did* know why.

Today Randall had gone off with everyone else, leaving Cheryl and me alone. Cheryl always waited for me. I liked that.

"You had me scared for a while," she said as I doused the fire. "I thought you were gonna say something that would break up the club."

"I wouldn't do that," I said, smiling. "It's too much fun."

"Sure is!" said Cheryl. I took her hand as we left Stonehenge. "So what was bothering you before?"

"I guess I started to feel bad about things."

"Never feel sorry for the enemy!" she said. "Does Austin feel bad every time he calls you the Gopher?"

"No, but I'm not talking about Austin. I feel sorry for Tyson."

"The slimeball? Why? All he ever does is say nasty things to people and fight. I don't feel sorry for him, and I don't trust him. We'll be lucky if the creep doesn't snitch on us."

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"He won't snitch on us," I said.

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I am."

Then Cheryl stopped walking and a wide smile appeared on her face. "You did something, didn't you? You found a way to keep his mouth shut!"

"You could say that."

"What did you do?"

"I found out a secret. That's all."

Cheryl's ears seemed to pop up like a rabbit's. "Secret! You know a secret about Tyson McGaw? Tell me, tell me, I have to know!"

"No. I can't."

"Why not? I won't tell anyone."

"I have a deal with Tyson. I won't tell if he doesn't."

"I don't count, though," she begged.

"A deal's a deal."

"Who's gonna know?"

"I will."

"So Tyson's a better friend than I am?"

"No. Forget I said it. I don't want to talk about Tyson anymore."

Cheryl could see she was not going to get anywhere. She sighed. "Fine, be that way. I guess we'd better be getting back."

I didn't feel like going back though. It was warm for Oc-

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tober, and it was just getting toward my favorite time of day.

"Wait a second, the road's that way," said Cheryl, pointing.

"No, it's not," I said playfully. "It's this way." I knew I was walking in the wrong direction, but I wanted to see if Cheryl would follow. She did. I ran in front of her.

"Jared, I think there's a cliff that way, be careful."

"C'mon," I said.

I slowed down as I heard the crash of waves somewhere far below. I could see the horizon through the trees, and soon I came out onto a grassy cliff above the ocean. Cheryl found me a moment later.

"See, I was right, bozo," she said. "I have a good sense of direction. You should have listened to me."

"I know," I said, with a silly smile on my face.

"C'mon, we'll be late!"

"I know," I said, with that same smile.

She looked at me, not quite sure what to make of it. "You're nuts, you know that?"

"I know," I said, and she laughed. Although I had come to Stonehenge in the worst of moods, I was in a good mood now, and I wanted that good mood to last. I was with my best friend and was having a great time.

"If my parents scream at me for missing supper, I'm blaming you," she said.

I smiled at that, and she smiled back. We sat down to-

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gether close to the edge of the cliff, but not close enough to fall.

"We really *are* presidents of the club, aren't we?" I said.

"Yeah, we are."

"There's so much power in that, you know; being in charge of a club . . . I mean . . . five other kids letting us make decisions."

"Isn't it fun?" She squeezed my hand tightly.

"I think I like that the most—even more than I liked getting back at Austin. I like the power. It's like . . . it's like being king of a very small country. I think I'll run for class president this year."

Cheryl laughed.

"Why are you laughing at me?"

"I'm not laughing at you, I just think it'll be funny, because you'll be running against me."

"You're going to run for class president?"

"Sure, why not? Don't you think I'd be a good president?"

I smiled. "Yeah, I do."

"Hey, maybe we could run together—we're a team, right?" She looked at me, then we both looked out over the ocean, sort of afraid to look at each other for too long.

"The last time we got to talk alone like this was when we were up in the tree house," she said, "talking about how much we hate Austin and Rebecca."

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"I don't want to talk about them," I said.

"Good. Then let's talk about Tyson's secret."

"I don't want to talk about that, either."

"Then what do you want to talk about?"

"Nothing, I guess."

I smiled, she smiled, and then, for no particular reason, I leaned over and I kissed her on the cheek. She instantly looked away from me.

I felt so stupid. I mean, here she was, my best friend, and I kissed her. How stupid could I get? My face turned as red as the sunset. I was going to say, "I'm sorry," but didn't have the guts to say much of anything at all.

Then she turned to me again and kissed me on the lips. Let me tell you, I didn't know how to feel just then. I felt so good about it, but at the same time, it felt so strange, as if we were doing something wrong. As if I wasn't supposed to be enjoying this. As if we wouldn't be friends anymore when the kiss ended.

But when the kiss ended, we were still friends—only our friendship was a little bit different, and I knew it would probably never be the old way again.

"Oh, boy . . .," I said.

"Yeah . . .," she said.

"Hmmm . . .," I said.

"Well," I said. "What now?"

"I don't know."

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"Nobody's going to believe us," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"No one ever believed us when we told them we were just friends, and we weren't going out. Now they'll never believe us."

"Are we going out now?"

"I don't know, are we?"

"I don't know, do you want to?"

"I don't know, do you?"

"I don't know," said Cheryl. "I always thought of you sort of like a brother."

"You thought of me like Randall?"

"Yuk! No way!"

"Well, then I guess you didn't think of me like a brother."

I tempted fate and kissed her again. Now I didn't care what anybody thought. I didn't care if people thought we were always going out. I didn't care if people said things. I didn't care if some golden rule was written across the sky saying that you can't go out with your best friend. I didn't care. Those were tree-house rules for tree-house friends, and the tree house had grown much too small these past few years.