

The Burning of the Charter

THE SUN ROSE the next morning.

All night long, even after they had released me from the hospital, I kind of had the funny feeling like it wouldn't—or if it did, the clouds would be so dark, the day would still seem like night.

But the sun rose, and the sky was clear. I ducked under the covers to block out the light, and coughed—I was still coughing from the smoke.

My father came into the room and pulled the covers off my head. "Get yourself dressed," he said coldly. I had never heard him use that tone of voice with me. It was as if he were talking to a stranger. Maybe he was.

The night before had been filled with such confusion, neither of my parents was sure what was going on. But now my watch read 11:15 A.M. I knew that by now they would have found out about the club, and about what we had done.

"I'm in lots of trouble, aren't I?" I mumbled, knowing full well that no matter how much deep water I was in, I deserved every ounce of it.

THE SHADOW CLUB

■ 194 ■

"Trouble, Jared?" said my father, with a bitter smile that wasn't really a smile at all. "Trouble's not the word for it. Get up. We're taking a trip to Vice Principal Greene's house." My dad didn't say much else about it; neither did my mom. They're not the lecturing type. Still, I'll never forget that icy tone of disappointment in my dad's voice when he said, "I never thought I'd see my son in a gang."

So we all confessed. You must have seen it in the papers:

LOCAL KIDS TERRORIZE SCHOOL AND BURN HOUSE

Oh, it was a big deal. Everyone knows about it. Everyone knows that I was the leader. But nobody knows the whole story. Not yet anyway. Sure, we all confessed to Mr. Greene, and we all got suspended, and now we have to pay for what we did. But when he asked us why we did it, no one could tell him. We all just looked down. It was the way he treated us—like criminals—lying, cheating, stealing criminals. It was as if, in his eyes, we weren't kids anymore. We weren't people. And so we just couldn't talk to him about it, you know?

He still doesn't know that there was one more meeting of the Shadow Club—if you can call it a meeting. It was on Monday, the first day of a two-week suspension, which could have been an all-out expulsion if our parents hadn't all been such pillars of the community.

The Burning of the Charter

■ 195 ■

I didn't want to go. To me the Shadow Club had died a much-deserved death in the fire. Cheryl called the meeting. I couldn't say as I wanted to see her just yet either, but she begged, and so I went. I didn't go alone, though. I brought Tyson with me.

Tyson was living in a hotel with his aunt and uncle, who, as we all had guessed, were really foster parents. No one was sure whether Tyson burned down the house or the Shadow Club did. Tyson confessed, but I said it was the club. I wasn't about to let Tyson take the rap alone.

The two of us snuck away and walked together through the woods to Stonehenge. He didn't talk much. Neither did I. I guess it must have been awfully confusing to be Tyson McGaw just then. First I terrorize him, and then I ask him to come back to the scene of the crime. I don't know why he came when I asked him. Maybe it was because I *did* ask him. But whatever the reason, I was glad that he came.

As we neared Stonehenge, I could already see the smoke from the fire, but when I got closer I could see only one person down in the pit. Cheryl. She looked up at me for a few moments. I didn't step down just yet.

"Where's everyone else?" I asked.

"Not here yet. Hi, Tyson. Why don't you both come down?"

Reluctantly, I stepped down into the pit, and Tyson followed. I sat across the fire from Cheryl. "So, what is it you want?" I asked.

THE SHADOW CLUB

□ 196 □

"Let's wait till they all get here," she said.

"Fine."

And so we waited, and waited, and waited. We waited for almost an hour.

No one else showed.

When the fire started to go out, I said, "Did you really expect anyone to come?"

She shook her head. "Too much to hope for, huh?" She looked at Tyson, and Tyson looked away, so she turned back to me. "I have a list here. I've figured out how much money each of us has to pay in damages, except for Tyson's house, of course."

I stood up. "Money?" I yelled. "How about Austin? What do we use to pay him back? Do we buy him new feet?"

Cheryl looked down. "I'm just as sorry about everything as you are," she said. Then she added, "You know, you didn't have to take the blame for what I did to Austin."

"I wanted to!" I said. "It was my fault as much as it was yours."

"Greene wants to give you a youth-delinquent card, doesn't he?" she asked.

"Of course he does. He's been storing them up, just waiting for the chance to use them."

"He won't," said Tyson. We both turned to him. "You gotta be a repeat offender to get one. I don't even have one." He shrugged and smiled. To see a smile from Tyson in this

The Burning of the Charter

□ 197 □

whole situation was a strange thing. I couldn't figure him out. I didn't know how he could like me after what I had caused, but the fact that he did like me made me want to be his friend. It made me want to trust him.

"I called the meeting so we could take care of *this* once and for all." Cheryl reached into her folder and took out the Shadow Club Charter, with everyone's signature on it. We had signed it less than two months ago, but it seemed like another lifetime. Cheryl looked at the charter for a moment, then handed it to Tyson. "You may have the honors."

Tyson looked at it, then at me. I nodded. Tyson shrugged and folded the paper into a plane, then sent it sailing into the fire. The dying flames leapt up and pulled the plane down. Its wings blackened and shriveled, until a breeze caught the fragile ashes that remained, and tore them apart.

"I hereby declare the Shadow Club dissolved, and the charter to be null and void throughout eternity," said Cheryl.

"Amen," I said, and doused the fire. When I was done, I saw Cheryl looking around Stonehenge. There were candy wrappers, Coke cans, and potato chip bags to mark the fact that we had been there all these weeks.

"Maybe this place is haunted," she said. "Maybe we were all possessed by some evil spirit or something."

"Naah," I said. "I think we just got possessed by ourselves."

THE SHADOW CLUB

■ 198 ■

Tyson was already climbing out of the pit. I was about to follow, when Cheryl stopped me.

"Jared?"

I turned to her. "Yeah?"

It took a while for her to ask her question, and because it took so long, I knew what the question was going to be.

"Jared . . . are we still . . . together?"

I thought about that for a second. "I don't know."

The answer didn't make her very happy. She looked down. "I know the real question," she said. "Are we still friends? That's the real question," she said in a voice that was almost a whisper.

I didn't answer for a long time. "I don't know," I said softly. "Ask me again next week."

"I see," she said quietly, and backed away. She had always been so tough, but now I could almost see her falling apart inside.

"No," I said, moving closer to her. "I mean *really* ask me again next week. Right now I'm not even my own friend." I kissed her. Whatever the kiss meant, we'd have to wait to find out. We both seemed to feel a little better, though.

At the lip of Stonehenge, Tyson was kneeling down, trying to piece together his mutilated marionettes. He turned to me as we came out of the pit and said, "Couldn't you have left a single one? It'll take years to make more!"

"What do you need them for? Now you've got the real

The Burning of the Charter

■ 199 ■

thing!" I helped him up, and for the first time since the day I knocked him out of the phone booth, I looked in his eyes. They were dark and deep, just as always. There was a lot of heavy stuff going on down there; deep, dark memories that no kid should have. Maybe I'd find out about them someday, maybe not, but one thing was certain; whatever was in those eyes, I wasn't afraid of it anymore. He kept staring at me, probably because I was staring at him. I wondered what it was he saw in *my* eyes.

"Things are gonna be rough for a while, Tyson," I said, "for all of us."

"It's OK," he said, "I'm used to that." And he smiled, a real, full smile, and it made both Cheryl and me feel much better about things. It sort of made us realize that it was all gonna pass, and things were gonna be OK—that is, if we all worked hard enough to make it OK.

Cheryl and I turned and took one last look down into the shadowy pit of Stonehenge. We both knew we wouldn't come back here again. It was a place from our past. Like the tree house.

Tyson was waiting for us, and so we left, turning our backs on Stonehenge forever.