

The Next Victim

MORNING CAME AFTER a lousy night of nightmares—dreams about my parents turning into go-phers, dreams about being stepped on by a sixty-foot-tall Austin Pace in huge white Aeropedes, dreams about being trapped in a fish tank that was about to explode. Nasty stuff. I woke up with a headache.

My parents could tell that something was bugging me, but when they asked what it was, I didn't tell them about the pranks and about Tyson. I simply told them, as I always did, that Austin Pace was the problem.

"Him again?" said my father, before he left for work. "Don't worry about him. Austin Paces are a dime a dozen, but there's only one Jared Mercer." He smiled and mussed up my hair with his hand, which I used to like, before I discovered the importance of the hairbrush.

"Don't let him get to you," said my mom, which was easy to say, but hard to live by.

"Dad . . .," I said, as he was about to leave. For a split

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second I felt like telling both of them everything about the Shadow Club, what we did, how we were being framed—everything—but no. What kind of club president would I be if I told my parents?

"Forget it," I said. "See you tonight."

My father left, and I went off to school. If I could have told them, it could have ended right there, but I guess I just didn't have sense enough to do that. I had to get sense knocked into me the hard way.

As I crossed the field on my way to school that Friday morning, I saw Austin running his morning laps in his Aeropedes, as he did every stupid little morning of his stupid little life. I wouldn't look at him. I looked up, I looked down, I looked at the grass, the sky, the bleachers—anything but Austin. And because I was so intent on not looking at him, I ended up tripping over some sharp, jagged rocks sticking out of the ground in the middle of the field.

Wonderful, I thought. *Now* Austin will laugh at me for tripping over my own feet. He didn't, though. He kept on running and ignored me. I got off the field as fast as I could without making it look like I was hurrying.

As I entered the school, it began to hit me that there were only two unbeatables left to be hit by Tyson: Austin and Rebecca. That's when Cheryl came up to me.

"There you are," she said. "I've been looking all over for

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you." She looked at my hands. "What happened to you?" she asked.

I looked at them. They were scratched up a bit from when I had fallen in the field. "I tripped. That's all."

"I've been on Tyson patrol," she said. "I think the whole club should take shifts watching him."

"Where is he?"

"I haven't seen him yet," she said.

That's when something clicked inside my head. Something dark and scary began to come into clear focus. It began slowly. First I looked at my hands again, at the scratches. Those rocks I had tripped over weren't there the day before; they couldn't have been. What were such sharp rocks doing buried in the middle of the field anyway? The middle of the field! Oh no! Oh no! No!

Cheryl must have seen it in my eyes. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Austin!" I yelled. "We have to stop Austin!" I turned and ran, sprinting down the hall, knocking down kids and teachers, running at my top speed to the exit. Far behind me I could hear Cheryl calling my name, but I didn't have time to stop. I may have already been too late.

I burst through the double doors, knocking down two kids. "Austin!" I screamed as I ran, for as well as I knew that those rocks hadn't been there the day before, I also knew that Austin sprinted across the center of the oval field once

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every single day—BAREFOOT! Everyone knew he did it, but I was the only one who knew about the rocks; only I could stop him!

I ran out from between the bleachers in time to see Austin race across the grass, barefoot, leaving his Aeropeds far behind as he headed toward the rocks. Of all of the mixed-up feelings inside of me, one thing was certain; I wanted with all my heart to stop Austin from running through that minefield of razor-sharp stones!

"Austin!" I screamed. "Austin, stop!" but he wouldn't; he would never stop in the middle of a race. I ran through the grass to try to catch him, but I wasn't fast enough, I just wasn't fast enough! All I could do was watch as he hit the rocks.

First his left foot fell onto them, and it broke his perfect stride. He tried to keep his balance, and that's when his right foot came down on them. He slid, and then an instant later he was flying through the air, forced head over heels by the tremendous speed of his own body.

I went to him and almost had to turn away from what I saw. It was horrible. Austin had hit the worst of the rocks in the worst of ways. The soles of both his feet had been gashed open, and his left foot seemed twisted in a nasty position.

Austin saw them and began to scream. "No! No! My feet!" He yelled, "My feet, my feet, my feet!" over and over again. I could see the pain was just beginning to set in. I

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knelt before him. There was blood everywhere, and I didn't know what to do.

"My feet, my feet! No! Not my feet! Anything but my feet!"

I took off my shirt and pressed it against one foot, to hold back the bleeding, and he yelled, "Ow! My ankle! It's broken! My ankle's broken! My ankle! My ankle!"

I didn't know much about broken ankles, but something definitely did look wrong. His foot was twisted real funny, and whenever I tried to move it he shrieked. It was beginning to puff up and turn blue.

"No! Not my feet!" he cried.

My shirt began to turn red.

"It's all right," I said, even though I knew it wasn't all right. "You'll be fine."

Then he looked at me, and I'm pretty sure that was the first time he realized it was me helping him.

"Gopher!" he said. "My feet . . . My feet!"

By now other kids began to gather around, and teachers were running out from the school.

"Give me a shirt," I demanded, and three kids tossed me their shirts. I pressed one of them to Austin's other foot.

"My feet," he mumbled, through his tears.

"You'll be all right."

"No! No, you don't understand!" he cried. "My father wants me to go to the Olympics. I have to go. He's counting on me. I have to. I have to run." Austin's face was getting

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redder and redder from his tears. "I've been training for years. Years! Next year I'm getting a private coach. My feet! I can't run if my feet are . . ." He looked down at them. "No! What will I do? What will I do? What will I tell my father? He'll kill me! My ankle! It hurts! He'll kill me! What will I do?" Austin broke down and just cried like a baby, until it almost made me cry.

In a moment, Mr. Diller, our principal, came and carried Austin to the nurse's office. I was about to follow, but first I ran to the tip of the oval, picked up Austin's Aeropeds, and brought them along.

Whatever Austin had done to me in the past, whatever humiliation he had ever rubbed my nose in, he didn't deserve this. He was Olympics-bound; running was his life. It wasn't my life. For me running was something I could do that I liked doing, but for Austin, it was even more important. His feet would need stitches, but worse than that, his ankle would take months to heal. Who knew how long it would be till he could run again, if ever.

Sure, now I was fastest on the team, but all at once I didn't care anymore. Believe it or not, I cared more about Austin's feet.

I followed Austin and Mr. Diller to the nurse's office and watched as they tended to Austin's feet, until they shut the door. Still, I could hear his sobs. I stood there for at least five minutes, without realizing I had no shirt on. My shirt was ruined now, but there was another shirt in my backpack; my

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track team gopher shirt. I put it on, and sat outside the door. Soon Cheryl showed up, and the nurse suggested that I go to class, but I refused. I let Cheryl go, and I waited.

Finally the nurse let me in the office to keep Austin company while she called his parents. Inside, it smelled like alcohol and blood. Austin's feet were all wrapped up now; the white gauze was the same color as his Aeropedes. They had splinted the broken one. I still held his Aeropedes, and I placed them on the chair next to him.

"Thanks for helping me, Jared," he said, his eyes still a bit wet. I smiled. It was the first time he'd called me Jared all year.

"It's OK," I said. "I'm sorry about what happened."

He swallowed. "I guess I've been a real snot to you," he said.

"Yeah," I admitted. "It's OK, though."

"I guess it's because I'm real competitive, you know. My father says it's good to be competitive. I don't know. I guess all these years you were the only one who came close to being as fast as me. It scared me. It was like if one person could come close to beating me, then I wasn't good enough for the Olympics."

He looked at me, and I just listened.

"I guess . . . I guess we could have been real great friends," he said, "if I gave you the chance." I nodded, and Austin looked at his bandaged feet. His eyes began to tear again, and his face turned red.

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"I'm never going to the Olympics now, am I?" His tears rolled right off his face and onto the gauze. I sat with him until his mother arrived to take him to the hospital.

News had spread through the school at lightspeed, and by the time I got to class, everyone was buzzing about what had happened to Austin. It didn't take long for people to figure out that it wasn't just an accident. I was so blown away by the whole thing that I didn't even think about looking for Tyson. I was so spaced out by it that I didn't even realize until lunch that I was the prime suspect.

"I DIDN'T DO IT!" I screamed into Mr. Greene's face. I'd never screamed into a teacher's face before, but now I couldn't control myself. It was sixth period, just after lunch, and Greene had me called out of class to go to his office so he could accuse me of planting those rocks for Austin to fall on.

"I don't believe you!" he said, standing in front of his desk.

"I swear I didn't!"

"Oh, then it was just a coincidence that you were there when it happened?"

"Right!"

"And it was just a coincidence that you had a big fight with Austin yesterday?"

"It wasn't big!"

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"And I suppose you're going to tell me you and your club had nothing to do with Vera's bike, or David's trumpet, or Drew's fish tank?"

"Right!"

"Come off it, Jared!" He pounded his desk. He was so sure he was right, it scared me. "It took me a while, but I found out exactly who's in your club. And you know what? Everyone in your club has a grudge against the very people who have been victims of this . . . this terrorism!"

"That's right," I said, "we're being framed!"

"Framed? By whom?"

"By Tyson McGaw!"

Greene wasn't ready for that. It took a few seconds for it to sink in, then he said, "If you think you're going to foist the blame on Tyson . . ."

"But it's true!"

"Tyson wouldn't do that, I know he wouldn't."

"But we have a witness," I said.

"Who?"

"Ralphy Sherman. He saw Tyson blow up the fish tank!"

"Yeah?" said Greene. "Ralphy Sherman also says that his mother had puppies. Do you expect me to believe a thing Ralphy Sherman says?"

"It's the truth! Why don't you bring Tyson in here, and accuse him like you're accusing me?"

"Because," said Greene, with nasty sarcasm in his voice,

"Tyson didn't come to school today, Jared. Last I heard, he was

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being terrorized by a kid who beat him up and chased him out of school yesterday, screaming 'bed wetter' at the top of his lungs. Any idea who *that* was, Jared?" He looked at me as if I were a criminal. "You know, lots of people have spent years helping Tyson overcome a miserable childhood, and what you've done may have destroyed everything we've done to help him."

Greene gave me the evil eye for just a moment longer, then he sat down, pulled a gold pen out of his shirt, and began to write.

"I want you to take this note to your seventh-period teacher. It will excuse you from class. I'm also giving you a list of the classrooms in which each member of the Shadow Club can be found during seventh period. I want you to get them all out of class and bring them to my office so we can settle this once and for all." He handed me the note, just as the bell for seventh period rang. "And I think a talk with all of your parents tomorrow is in order as well."

I turned to leave.

"You have ten minutes. I'll be waiting for all of you. If you don't show, you'll be in even deeper trouble."

"Don't worry," I said. "You can trust me."

"Can I?"

"Of course."

Ten minutes later the Shadow Club was nowhere to be found. Greene must have scoured the school for us, but he didn't find us and wouldn't find us that day.

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This was war now, and if we were going to prove our innocence, we had to treat it like a war. As soon as I had gotten everyone out of class, we split up and snuck out of school, all to meet in twenty minutes at Stonehenge.

Greene seemed to know an awful lot, and if he knew where Stonehenge was, then we'd all be in for it, so we just had to hope he didn't know.

Although it was cold and windy, with thick clouds blowing across the sky, for once my hands weren't cold; they were hot with anger. Anger at Tyson McGaw. If I never did anything else as president of the Shadow Club, I was going to make Tyson pay for what he had done.