

What Happened to Randall

A S I HAD guessed, Cheryl had left Stonehenge to find her brother, but when she had arrived at home, she hadn't found Randall there. Instead, she had found a note that said to call her parents at a strange number, which turned out to be the hospital. Randall was in the hospital and Cheryl didn't know why. Her parents weren't entirely sure yet either, but whatever it was, they had been pretty stressed out about it, and so was Cheryl.

They told her to wait at home until she heard from them again, but Cheryl's not the type to sit at home waiting.

"Do you think your mom's home by now?" she asked me.

"Probably."

"Good. I need a ride to the hospital."

We ran all the way to my house. My mom had just gotten home from work, and when she heard about Randall, she hurried us off into the car and took us to the hospital.

The hospital was big and white, like all hospitals in

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the world seem to be, and it smelled like a hospital. I hated that smell; it reminded me of the time I had my tonsils out.

Paul, Cheryl's stepdad, met us in the lobby, surprised, but not upset, to see us.

"It's OK," he said. "It's not as bad as we first thought. He didn't hit his head or anything. They think he might have fractured his hip though."

"Oh no!" said my mother, "Poor Randall!"

"What happened?" I asked.

"Near as I can tell, he was playing basketball in some friend's backyard, went for a shot, took a bad fall, and came down hard on the cement. I don't know the whole story."

Cheryl and I looked at each other, but said nothing. Ten minutes later, Randall was wheeled out of X ray. He looked awful. He had been given painkillers and barely seemed to be able to move on that gurney. I had a bad feeling about this—even worse than the feeling I had when I realized Austin was about to plow into those rocks.

We all followed as Randall was wheeled into a room. The doctor examined him again and then left with his parents to examine the X rays. When my mother stepped out, we were left alone with Randall.

"Tell us what happened, Randy," Cheryl said.

"I broke my hip," he said groggily.

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"We know," said Cheryl. "Paul said you were playing basketball? Where was it?"

Randall closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Eric Kilfoil's," he said, "and I wasn't playing basketball."

Cheryl and I looked at each other in disbelief, and that's when I realized that the entire bottom had just dropped out of the Shadow Club.

"Tell us what happened, if you can," asked Cheryl. Slowly, quietly, Randall told us. He told us how he went over to Eric's house after he snuck out of school, instead of coming to Stonehenge. He told us that he had been planning it for days, and he knew no one was home. He told us how he climbed onto the roof of Eric's garage, carrying tools to take down Eric's backboard and hoop and steal it. Halfway through unscrewing the thing, however, the backboard fell without warning. Randall lost his balance, and plunged to the ground. "I would still be there if the neighbors hadn't heard me yelling," he said.

"Why did you do it?" asked Cheryl. Neither of us knew that Randall could do such a thing. Sure, he was a brat, but planning to steal something like that . . . Well, it made us both wonder what else he might have done.

"I did it for Darren," he said. "Because Darren's my friend, and he doesn't deserve to be treated the way Eric treats him. I just wanted to get Eric back for Darren, that's all."

"Does Darren know you did this?" I asked.

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"No."

I swallowed and asked the question that I was afraid to hear the answer to. "Randall . . . did you pull all those other pranks, too?"

"No!" he said, grimacing from the pain in his side. "I swear, I only pulled this one! Only this one! Tyson pulled the rest!"

Cheryl looked away from me when I turned to her, and finally the last piece of the puzzle snapped into place. It fit so well that I knew I was right. I had to be. I knew the truth, and it was so ugly that I was afraid to accept it. It was uglier and more horrible than anything we could have imagined.

"Cheryl, can I talk to you?"

"Sure." Cheryl gave Randall a kiss on his forehead, and even in his sedated state, he was able to lift his hand and wipe it off. We stepped out into the hall.

"Do you think Tyson pulled all the rest of the tricks, like Randall said?" I asked straight out.

"Of course," she said.

"What about Austin?" I asked. "Did Tyson do that?"

"I guess." Cheryl shrugged, and looked away from me—and that wasn't right; Cheryl doesn't look away like that. Not unless she knows something that she doesn't want to tell.

It was time for me to pull a bluff. It was a mean, nasty

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bluff to pull on Cheryl, but I had to do it. Things were way out of hand, and if what I suspected was true, we were all in more trouble than humanly possible. I had to trick Cheryl if I was going to find out the truth.

"You're lying!" I said right to her face.

"What?"

"I know he didn't do it!" I said. "You did it."

That lawyer look came over her face—the look she had whenever she was about to argue somebody down into the ground.

"How dare you accuse me of something like that, Jared Mercer! I thought we trusted each other!"

"We do, but you did it."

"You don't have proof of that!"

"Yes I do," I lied. "I saw you. I saw you planting the stones, I just didn't want to say anything until now. I saw you, Cheryl!"

My heart sort of locked up for a while; I would swear I was having a heart attack or something. If I was wrong, then this little lie may have just ripped apart my lifelong friendship with Cheryl. If I was right, then it would be even worse. Either way, we were going to lose.

Cheryl gave me the lawyer look for a while longer, but the anger faded from her face.

"You should have said something before," she said. "That wasn't fair." She looked away from me for a moment, then

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looked back. "All right, I did do it," she said. I bit my tongue and tried hard not to react. "I did it for you," she said. "I didn't mean for him to get so hurt. I just wanted to scratch him up a bit so that you'd get to run in the District Olympics like you wanted to."

For a split second I had the nauseous feeling that this wasn't Cheryl. This was some vile, sickening creature that had taken Cheryl's form, but was still dark and evil inside. Then the feeling passed and I realized that this was Cheryl through and through—and what I saw in her was just a reflection of myself. That was the worst thought of all. It was like a disease that took root in both of us—all of us—the moment we started the club, and was growing ever since.

"It's what you wanted!" she said. "Yesterday you said that you wished Austin was hurt! You told me so!"

She was right; I had told her that. It was my fault as much as hers. "What about the other tricks, Cheryl?"

"I didn't do them, honest, I swear. I only pulled that one. Only that one! Tyson pulled the rest!"

It was just as I thought—no doubt about it. At first I figured that Tyson framing us would be the worst thing that could happen. This was even worse. I began to back away.

"I'm sorry!" she said. "Don't look at me like that. I just wanted to help you! I'm sorry!"

I couldn't face her; not right then. I didn't know if I

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could ever face her again—much less hold her hand, or kiss her. I didn't want to be near her, so I turned and ran.

"Jared . . . !" she called after me, but I didn't stop. I could hear that she was already crying as she called my name. I had never seen her cry, and I guessed I wouldn't now, because I didn't look back.

I burst into the lobby, passing my confused mother on my way out of the hospital. As I raced through the front door into the cold evening, never slowing down, the full meaning of my discovery began to hit home.

Greene was right!

Greene was right all along, about everything. The truth was that the Shadow Club *did* pull all of the pranks—all of them, but we didn't even know it! Cheryl hit Austin for me, Randall hit Eric for Darren, Jason probably blew up the fish tank for Randall, and the amazing thing about it was that everyone did it secretly; no one knew what the others were up to, and we were all convinced that Tyson had done all the rest.

What had I done? Tyson was the most innocent of us all!

I raced down the road, never slowing my pace. My gopher shirt was drenched in sweat by the time I had run the three miles to the ocean. As I approached the cliff, it occurred to me that Greene and Tyson were right about one more thing: the Shadow Club wasn't a club at all; it was a gang. Sure, we didn't have guns or switchblades, but we

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caused plenty of damage just the same. Hate doesn't need a weapon.

We were a gang, and I was a bully. A gang leader.

The ocean was rough, and the storm clouds were almost overhead. It was 6:00 and the sun had set long ago. I searched the small strip of beach, but neither Tyson nor the Shadow Club was anywhere in sight. I headed for Stonehenge.

I burst through the trees and jumped down into the pit, half expecting nobody to be there, but, nearly hidden in the shadows, sat the four other members of the club, all shivering and soaking wet with seawater. They all had looks on their faces somewhere between terror and shock.

"Where's Tyson?" I asked, terrified myself of what they might tell me.

No one answered me for a while, then Darren looked up at me and spoke like a child.

"Jared . . . I think we did something real bad . . ."

I sat down with them. I didn't want to hear this, but I knew I had to. "We all did something real bad," I said, leaning against the stone wall, feeling the wind blow across my cold, sweaty shirt.

Darren looked down, and no one said anything. In that long silence a thought came to me. I suddenly realized that Hell wasn't a place filled with fire and smoke—Hell was

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cold, wet, and lonely. Hell was the dead stone foundation of an old building in the woods.

I pulled my knees to my chest, shivering as I felt the cold stone behind me, then laid my head in my hands, and said, "Tell me what happened to Tyson."