

What
Ralph
Said

WHEN THINGS GET bad, boy, do they get bad. I thought that maybe—*maybe*—if the Shadow Club laid low for a while and didn't play any tricks, then Greene might leave us alone; maybe everything would be all right. But things weren't all right.

I had hoped that David Berger's flattened trumpet would be the last of the mysterious pranks, but it was not. Someone was terrorizing the unbeatables; someone who didn't care how much the unbeatables got hurt, or how much property was destroyed, and this person, whoever it was, thought they could get away with it by blaming the Shadow Club. There was only one person who knew enough about the Shadow Club to do that: Tyson McGaw.

"I say we give him what he deserves," said Randall, as we sat around Stonehenge at our next meeting.

"Yeah," said Darren. "We should beat the daylights out of him, and force him to confess!"

"And then get him expelled from school for it," added Jason. Everyone else agreed.

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"No!" I said. "We have no proof—we can't do anything like that yet."

"What other proof do we need?" asked Abbie. "He's the only other one who knows about the club. It has to be him!"

"We can't do anything yet, though," I said. "Not until we can prove he's doing the pranks."

"He's innocent until proven guilty," added Cheryl, "even though we know he's guilty."

"So what do we do?" asked O.P. "Sit around and wait to be blamed for everything? What if something *really* bad happens?"

"Don't worry," I said. "Tyson's crazy, but not *that* crazy. Nothing really bad is going to happen."

Boy, was I wrong.

That next week, the entire club vowed to look out for the unbeatables; watching them as well as watching Tyson, to make sure that no more pranks were pulled. We must have done a lousy job of it though, because on Thursday, during lunch, Drew Landers became the next victim.

Drew, as I've told you, is a swimmer, and very much into it; in fact, he had this obsession with anything that had to do with swimming. It only made sense, then, that Drew had a thing for fish. For as long as I knew Drew, he had always had a fish tank—it was the one thing in his room that he kept clean—and he had a second tank in school, in Mr. Milburn's

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room. I guess because he considered himself a human fish, he had a weird sort of affection for his "cousins" in the tank.

Anyway, that sixty-gallon tank had sat in Mr. Milburn's classroom since Drew started seventh grade, and now, a year later, it was still there, filled with starfish, sea anemones, and brightly colored saltwater fish. They were pretty, they were expensive, and Drew loved those fish like most normal people might love a pet dog.

Every once in a while, some bozo would drop something stupid into the tank: a bar of soap or maybe the shavings from the classroom pencil sharpener. Once, someone put red food coloring in the tank. After Mr. Milburn changed the water, the fish seemed fine, although they were sort of pink for a while. No matter what dumb things kids did to that tank, those fish always seemed to come out of their ordeals all right. But not this time.

During lunch Mr. Milburn always locked his room and went down to the teachers' lounge to fall asleep while listening to the rest of the teachers gossip. Well, as everyone knows, school classroom locks are the easiest in the world to pick; all you have to do is slide a hanger into the doorjamb and bingo!

Well, that's what someone did, and then that same someone dropped a firecracker into Drew's fish tank.

Now, there are firecrackers and there are *firecrackers*. There are the kind they call "safe and sane," and there are

the kind that are more like hand grenades. There are cherry bombs and M-80's that, when put in a strategic location, can do an awful lot of damage, but the worst by far are blockbuster. Packed into the cylinder of a blockbuster is a quarter stick of dynamite, and when one goes off, it can be heard for miles.

I don't know how they did it, but someone rigged up a blockbuster to go off in that fish tank, and when it blew, nothing in the room was safe. The tank turned into one huge bomb, sending glass and water flying in all directions, shredding plants and tearing paper on the walls. The room became a war zone.

I was out on the field with Cheryl and Randall, consoling Randall from his recent humiliation. It seemed that the day before, after swim practice, Drew threw Randall out of the locker room with no clothes on. Almost the second I had convinced Randall it was better to forget about it for a while, we heard the explosion. BOOM! It was so loud you'd swear the whole school had blown up. The blast echoed from the high school, across the large field, and a strange silence followed. Everyone turned toward the school.

"Not again," said Cheryl. At first we all thought this was yet another school fire, but in a moment I began to suspect it was another evil prank. I turned to look for Tyson but couldn't find him, and that sick feeling returned to my stomach, along with the cold feeling to my hands. Meanwhile, several

teachers ran into the school to evacuate the remaining students; for all they knew, a gas line could have blown up. Someone pulled the fire alarm, and in minutes the fire trucks arrived. It didn't take long for the firemen to find out what had happened.

From what I heard, there was nothing left of the fish tank, and that collection of fish that Drew Landers had spent years putting together was gone in a fiery fraction of a second.

"Tell me the truth, Randall," said a kid after school. Cheryl and I were talking before I went off to track practice, and, as usual, Randall was hanging around with us, making obnoxious comments about the fact that we spent so much time together, when this kid—someone on the swim team, I guess—came up to us and asked Randall a question.

"Tell me the truth," he asked. "Did you blow up Drew's fish tank? Tell me the truth, I won't tell anyone."

Randall was speechless. He turned to Cheryl. "See? See, what did I tell you? Just because of what he did to me yesterday, everyone's gonna think that I blew up his tank! I'm being framed!" he yelled, then he turned to the kid. "No! I didn't do it, so just get out of here, all right?"

"Yeah, I'll bet you didn't do it!" said the kid, and ran off.

"You better keep your mouth shut, because I didn't!" yelled Randall, as the kid ran away. He turned to me and

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Cheryl. "You know I didn't, right? I was there with you all during lunch, you know I was."

"I know, and you know, but who's going to believe us?" I said.

"I see a pattern emerging," said Cheryl. "Have you noticed that these pranks have been pulled soon after the victim has done something really mean to a member of the Shadow Club?"

"Huh?" said Randall.

"Think about it, blimp brain," said Cheryl to her brother. "Eric Kilfoil's locker was filled with paint the day after Darren nearly got into a fight with him—Darren told me about that. David Berger's trumpet got run over the day after David was chosen to play for the high school band again, and he'd made Jason feel miserable about it. Tommy Nickols had just beat out O.P. for a place in the district science fair before the camera incident, and now Drew's fish tank explodes the day after he threw you out of the locker room naked!"

"Then someone is definitely trying to frame us!"

"Exactly," said Cheryl. "And if anyone finds out about the club, then we're going to be the prime suspects—we're the only ones with motives!"

"We're already suspects," I said, "because someone already knows about the club." Cheryl and Randall turned to me with that end-of-the-world look in their eyes. "Greene knows. I don't think he knows what we've done, but he

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knows about the club, and I'm sure he suspects us." Until then, I hadn't told anyone.

"How?" asked Cheryl.

"Tyson told him. I'm sure of it."

"Tyson!" said Randall, with a hiss in his voice that made him sound like a snake. "I told you he was behind all this."

"It has to be!" said Cheryl.

"I'll bet we could prove Tyson blew up the fish tank!" said Randall. "Fingerprints or something."

And then another voice entered the conversation. "I saw him do it," said the voice. We all turned around, and standing there, braces, freckles, curly hair, and all, was Ralphy Sherman.

"You're talking about the fish tank, right?" said Ralphy. "Well, I saw Tyson McGaw blow it up."

We were all quiet. Ralphy blew a big fat bubble-gum bubble, and it popped in his face, sticking to his eyebrows. He peeled it off and popped it back into his mouth.

"It's true," he said. "I was in the classroom. I saw."

"How could you have been in the classroom? You would have been killed by the exploding tank," Cheryl said.

"Well, not in the classroom, but looking in through the window. I saw Tyson do it. Honest."

"But I saw you in the field when it went off, Ralphy," said Randall.

"Darn right," said Ralphy. "I wasn't going to hang around if a blockbuster's about to go off. I left as quickly as I could."

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We all looked at Ralphy—Ralphy Sherman who couldn't pass a true-or-false exam because he didn't know the difference. Should we believe this? Ralphy blew another bubble, this one bigger than his whole head, and when it popped it stuck to his hair. He peeled it away and shoved the gum back into his mouth.

"You know what?" I said. "I believe him!"

"Me, too," said Cheryl.

"So do I," said Randall.

Ralphy's eyes lit up. "You do? Really, honestly, truly, you believe me?"

"Yeah," I said.

Ralphy smiled, and skipped off toward his bus, the happiest boy in the world.

We didn't get a moment's rest that day, for only thirty seconds after Ralphy went skipping away, we turned to see a commotion at the school's front gate.

"Hey," yelled Martin Bricker, to anyone who would listen. "Vera can't stop her bike, and she's headed toward Sellar Boulevard!"

Cheryl, Randall, and I raced toward the front gate, but it was too late. As we looked down the street, we could see Vera flying down the hill, screaming at the top of her lungs.

Of course, I thought to myself. What an idiot I was! Didn't Abbie have a big argument with Vera today? Didn't Vera call her a slob in front of half the grade, or something

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like that? Of course Vera would be the next victim, if Tyson were trying to frame the club.

We watched in horror as she crossed through the first intersection on the way to Sellar Boulevard, which was down at the bottom of the hill. Luckily it was a small intersection, and no cars were there at the time. But Sellar Boulevard would be a different story; it was one of the busiest streets in town and I could see cars and buses racing across it.

"She's gonna get herself killed!" yelled someone from the crowd, as we all watched Vera fly down the street. "Can't somebody stop her?" If she had half a brain she would have turned and smashed into a fence rather than race across Sellar Boulevard, but as anyone could tell you, Vera Donaldson did not have half a brain.

In seconds she came up on Sellar Boulevard and went flying out into the middle of traffic. Car horns blared, a van swerved, a car screeched to a halt and was rear-ended.

Vera sailed across the street, hit the curb, and went bouncing off of her bike, hitting her head on a fire hydrant, while the bike went crashing through Muggleson's Bakery window, laying the window to waste and demolishing a five-layer wedding cake on display.

Everyone, including Cheryl and Randall, ran down the street to find out how Vera was, but I didn't. There was someone who I had to find, and I had to find him now.

It didn't take long. He was standing by his locker in the main hallway.

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"Tyson . . .," I snarled, "you're gonna pay for this!"

"Get out of my face," he grunted and tried to leave, but I grabbed him by his shirt, and as he struggled, I dragged him through the hall.

"Leave me alone, you moron! You idiot! You butt head!"

I didn't say anything. Not yet. Not until I had him in a place where no one would hear us.

I dragged him down the hall, and shoved him in the school phone booth, closing the door behind us. He struggled, and I shook him so hard that he began to look like one of those marionettes he had up on his wall.

"Listen up, and listen good," I said. "I know what you've been doing, and you're not going to get away with it."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" he screamed. I put my hand over his mouth so he couldn't scream. He bit it, and I pushed him back so hard that the telephone receiver went flying off the hook. I could hear the dial tone.

"If you scream one more time, slimeball, I'm gonna hit you so hard your next of kin will feel it, too!" That shut him up. "I said, I know what you've been doing. I know you're trying to frame us, and I think it really stinks. I think *you* stink, slimeball, and I'm telling you right now that if there's one more prank, if another 'unbeatable' gets hurt, you're gonna have all seven of us in the club coming down on you so hard you won't know what hit you!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" he screamed.

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"Shut up! You know exactly what I'm talking about. You told Greene about our club, and now you're trying to get us all in trouble. Why did you tell Greene, anyway? Couldn't you have left well enough alone?"

"All right!" he said. "I admit I told Greene, but I didn't do anything else!"

"Liar!" I said.

"And I didn't do it to be mean! Now leave me alone!"

"Then why did you tell him?"

He didn't answer me.

"WHY DID YOU TELL HIM?" I pushed him. The door to the phone booth flew open, and Tyson flew out, falling to the ground. "Why did you tell him?" I screamed. He didn't answer. He got up and ran down the hall as quickly as he could. I watched him run, brimming with anger. I couldn't remember having ever hated anyone as much; not even Austin.

Then I began to yell, hoping everyone left in school heard me.

"Bed wetter!" I yelled. "Bed wetter! Tyson pees in his bed!" It echoed through the halls and the sound lingered long after Tyson had burst through the school's front doors.

I shouldn't have gone to track practice that day. I should have just run home and buried myself in my homework—or better yet, buried myself in my pillow and hidden like an os-

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trich until this whole thing passed over. That's what I should have done, but I didn't. Instead, I ran out to the field to be with the track team, and that was a mistake, because, as everyone knows, bad luck comes in threes. First on that fateful day came the fish tank, then Vera's bike, and then came the nastiest run-in I ever had with Austin Pace.

By the time I arrived at practice, Austin was leading the stretching exercises, and Coach Shuler was nowhere to be seen. I was about ten minutes late, and it was never good to be late for practice.

"Well, lookie here," said Austin. "The Gopher finally decided to show up!"

"Hi, Gopher," said Martin Bricker. Kids didn't even say it to be mean anymore. They just said it like it was my name.

"Give me twenty push-ups for being late, Gopher." I dropped and gave him twenty. When I was done, Austin had the whole team sit down, as he opened a large carton that was on the ground.

"Here are our team uniforms," he said. Everyone was pleased to hear that, and for a few minutes I was glad I had decided to go to practice that day. "Coach Shuler will be out in a minute with the team sweats."

Austin opened the box, and began to hand them out. "Miller," he said, tossing Greg Miller his top and matching shorts. This was the first year that the team actually got new

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sweats and uniforms that had each kid's name on them. Some said it was because the track team deserved it, but most knew it was because Austin's father had made a big donation to the team.

"Bricker!" yelled Austin, as he tossed Martin's shirt and shorts to him. I waited patiently, and he finally got around to mine.

"Mercer," he said, throwing me my uniform. It felt good to hold the brand-new uniform of the team; that smooth feel of the light, colorful material, and that new smell it had. It reminded me that our first meet was coming up soon, and I could hardly wait! My times were getting better, and although they weren't quite as fast as Austin's, they were pretty good. Now, to make it complete, I had a uniform with my name on it. I felt like a real runner, and for a minute it made me forget about my other troubles.

I couldn't wait to try on the shirt, so although it was a bit chilly, I took off my shirt and was about to try the new one on, when I caught a glimpse of the bright red name written across the back.

It said GOPHER.

I sat there for a few moments, letting it sink in. Gopher. My team shirt said Gopher.

"Austin," I said. "This better not be mine." I threw it back at his face, waiting to see what he would say. He caught it, and looked at it.

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"Nope. Gopher. That's you." He threw it back at me. I clenched my hands into fists, and gritted my teeth.

"It says Gopher?" asked one of the seventh graders. "Let me see, let me see!" He grabbed it, and I grabbed it back.

"My name is Mercer, not Gopher!" I threw the shirt at Austin's face again. He caught it.

"Didn't you want Gopher on your shirt? That's how everyone knows you." He threw it back in my face.

"No!" I said. I would never wear it. Never.

"Well, it's too late," said Austin. "The shirts and sweats have already been made up."

"That's written on my sweats, too?"

"Of course."

That did it. I dropped the shirt, and lunged at him. How could he do that? Not only did he humiliate me, but he was trying to force me to humiliate myself by wearing that word on my shirt. I swung my fist, missing his face by less than an inch. I swung again, but by then a dozen hands were on me, holding me back. "Let go of me!" I screamed, but the team just held me and wouldn't let me get a clear shot at Austin. I struggled and kicked but they wouldn't let me go.

"Look at him," somebody yelled. "He's fighting like Tyson fights!" That only made me struggle harder. Then, out of nowhere, Coach Shuler appeared and pulled me out of the hands of the others, shaking me so hard that my brain rattled.

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"What do you think you're doing, Jared? Stop it! Stop it now!" My head hurt from the shake-up, and my arms went limp. "This is a team, Jared," he said, "and you had better remember that. You don't start fights with your team captain. I don't care what your differences are, you don't fight with him."

"But . . ."

"Did you hear me? I said that you don't fight with Austin. Is that clear?"

I stood there, catching my breath. I wouldn't give him as much as a nod. "He put 'Gopher' on my uniform!"

The coach turned to Austin, and Austin shrugged.

"Honest mistake," Austin said.

"We'll settle this after practice," said the coach. That's when Austin came up to me.

"Now, c'mon," said Austin, holding out his hand to shake. "Let's forget about this whole thing, all right?"

I looked at his hand. I have to admit, I almost did it. I thought about shaking Austin's hand and eating my pride for the sake of the team, but then he said, "C'mon, be a good gopher, and forget about it."

My hands clenched into fists again. I wouldn't shake his hand after that—I wouldn't even stand in the same field with him. I picked up my backpack, shoved my disgusting gopher shirt into it, and I walked. The coach tried to follow, so I ran. I ran to the edge of the field, and kept running, put-

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ting as much distance between me and Austin Pace as I could. A moment later I realized that someone was running with me.

"I saw the whole thing." It was Cheryl. "I think it was awful. Austin's a real creep."

Great! The last thing I wanted was for Cheryl to see Austin humiliate me.

"Jared," called the coach, "let's talk about this." But I ignored him.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" I asked her.

"I came to tell you that Vera is all right. She bumped her head, but she'll be all right."

It was good to hear, but it didn't make me feel any better. I ducked through a hole in the fence and into the woods. Cheryl followed. I kept running through the trees, getting scratches on my arms from branches, but still that anger wouldn't leave.

"Jared, slow down," said Cheryl. "I can't keep up with you!"

I stopped. We were far from the field now.

"You know what?" I said. "I hope Tyson was watching and gets Austin next. I hope Tyson pulls a terrible trick so mean that Austin never gets over it, that's what I hope!"

Cheryl looked at me kind of strange. "You really want that?" she asked.

I thought for a moment, catching my breath. "I don't

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know what I want." It was true. I didn't know how I felt, or what I wanted. I didn't even know who to hate anymore: Austin, Tyson, the Shadow Club, or maybe just myself for allowing all this to happen.

"Hey," said Cheryl, taking my hand, "whadaya say you come over to my house and we make chocolate shakes like we used to?"

I put my normal shirt back on and reluctantly said, "OK."

She put her arms around my neck and kissed me. "Things'll be OK," she said. I wanted to believe it, so I kissed her again. Then, with my arm around her shoulder, we went off to her house.

Used to be, drinking a chocolate shake would make any problem disappear, but even as I sat there in Cheryl's living room, watching TV and filling up on chocolate shakes, I knew that it would take a whole lot more to solve these problems.