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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nesbit, Jeffrey Asher.

Ryun's story / Jeff Nesbit.

p. cm. — (Degrees of betrayal)

Summary: Ryun is a self-centered soccer star, living it up his senior year in high school by cheating on his girlfriend with her best friend, smoking, drinking, stealing, and lying, until a serious car accident and its aftermath change everything.

ISBN 1-4143-0003-4 (sc)

[1. Soccer—Fiction. 2. Korean Americans—Fiction. 3. Conduct of life—Fiction.

4. Traffic accidents—Fiction. 5. Interpersonal relations—Fiction.] I. Title. II. Series.

PZ7.N4378Ry 2004

[Fic]—dc22

2004001501

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Printed in the United States of America

08 07 06 05 04

7 6 5 4 3 2 1



## **I am invincible.**

You don't believe me? Really? Well, watch this.

There used to be a straight road, about a quarter of a mile long, out near the airport. It was behind a couple of big warehouses. If the word got around, and you heard about it, you could watch two kids racing their cars just as it was getting dark.

They'd hit 120 mph or so, hope they didn't slide or fishtail at the end, and then get out of there before the cops could catch them. Every so often, a kid would roll, get mangled, and die or something.

Then the cops started hanging around, waiting. The city put up speed bumps. Finally they cut the road in half.

But beneath that road is a huge empty water pipe. I don't know what it was used for. Maybe

carrying sludge from one of the factories to a stagnant pond at the other end.

But now the factory's gone, and the pond is only dirt and trash. There's nothing at either end of this long straight pipe. It simply sits there. Waiting quietly, never complaining.

The pipe is just big enough for someone tall, like me, to walk through. I'm 6'2", taller than almost every other kid at Highview. I can walk through that pipe and my straight black hair doesn't even come close to touching the top. When I spread my arms wide, they barely touch either side. If you shout at one end, your voice disappears at the other.

I don't ever walk through that pipe, though. No, I leave an old Yamaha motorcycle out there, and I ride whenever I feel like it. I don't wear a helmet. I don't need to. I never wear a seat belt in a car either . . . I told you—nothing touches me. I always come out on top.

Anyway, the old Yamaha is one of those sport bikes where you have to ride low, your head down. I got it from one of my friends I play soccer with—a lawyer—who was bored with it. I picked up a little extra cash from my folks to pay for it.

They don't know I own it. My folks, I mean. There's a lot they don't know, actually. There's a lot *everyone* doesn't know . . . well, maybe except for my little sister, Joon, but she'd never give me up.

Here's how it works. You start at one end of the tunnel on the bike, get going, no lights. Then you kick into another gear. The bike jolts forward a lit-

tle. You put your head down lower. The light starts to dim. It gets darker.

Then you hit a time—maybe just a few seconds, maybe forever—when it’s pitch dark. There’s only the sound of the bike coming off the walls of the tunnel to guide you. You hope the bike is going straight, but you don’t really know. You aim at the tiny dot of light at the other end of the tunnel and hope you have it right. Maybe you do—maybe you don’t.

But I always have it right. I always hit that spot of light at the other end of the tunnel. The bike doesn’t wobble or pitch. I don’t ever have to adjust. I just aim and ride through the darkness. And I hit it perfectly every time.

It’s such a rush. Light to dark to light. Fast to faster. And then—you *rip* out the other end into the brilliant light, going at least 80 or 90 mph across the dirt toward a line of trees. Plenty of time to stop the bike.

I can do it 100 times, a million times. I never get tired of the feeling. There’s a point where you can’t be afraid, because you know that if you are, you’ll lose it. The bike will roll or tilt, and it will all end. Your life, I mean. But when you know you’re invincible, you’re not afraid. You just go, as fast as you can, until you blast out the other end.

It’s funny what happens when you live your life this way, as if you’re untouchable. When I’m on a soccer field, there are times when I *know* I cannot be stopped. There may be one or two—or even three—defenders in my way. But I simply go around them, through them. I carry the ball with me as I go, and

then I put the ball near post, upper 90, wherever it needs to be.

I've never told this to anyone. I'm not sure anyone would understand it or even believe it. I'm not sure anyone would even care. It isn't an easy thing to explain.

We all die some day. I know that. But not me right now, not this way. I am invincible. I can do what I want, when I want. It's just the way it is.





## **“Ryun!”**

“What?” I asked, irritated.

“The game? Here? Today?”

“Um,” I answered, glancing back at my coach blankly. *The game? What game? What’s he talking about? All I can see is this amazing girl with the longest, shiniest auburn hair, falling delicately over both shoulders. She’s sprawled sideways, every single possible curve of her body in profile just a few feet away from me. . . .*

“Do something!” my coach, Frank Jenkins, barked at the guy sitting next to me. My teammate responded by launching a soccer ball at my head. It bounced off, causing my head to whip back slightly. The ball rolled a few feet away from our team huddle.

“Hey!” I said, reluctantly pulling my gaze away from the girl with the deep, rich auburn hair. But not before she’d turned her head, catching my gaze for a moment. “You didn’t need to . . .”

Coach Jenkins sighed. He wasn’t the most patient man on the planet. He didn’t know a whole lot about soccer, but he knew plenty about boys—and girls. “Are you with us now?”

I didn’t blink or look away. It was something I’d learned a long time ago. It was the way you fooled your teachers, parents, or anybody else you felt like fooling. Just stare—as if you’re giving that person your total undivided attention. Even if you aren’t.

“Yeah, Coach, I’m with you.” I nodded once firmly.

“And you heard what I was saying?”

Of course I hadn’t heard what he was saying. It was 70 degrees, the first warm sunny day of spring, on a Saturday. A group of girls trying out new halter tops and brightly colored shorts had decided to come to our high school soccer match. They were sitting very close to our huddle at halftime. None of us had heard a word our coach was saying.

“Yeah, Coach, I heard,” I lied. I glanced around the huddle. One of my teammates held up a hand and flashed a 4, 5, and then a 1 at me. I nodded slightly back at him, a small smile at the corners of my mouth. I’d have to thank him later.

“And are you okay with that?”

“Sure, Coach, no problem. I can handle it. You do what you gotta do.”

We were getting killed in the middle. The team we were playing had two extraordinarily fast strikers, even by modest high school soccer standards. But worse yet, they had two big tough center mids, guys who were knocking our center mids off the ball over and over. Between those two central midfielders and the two strikers who kept running around our outside marking backs, we'd had a very long first half.

Surprisingly, though, the score was still 0-0. They'd hit a couple of posts with shots, and our goalkeeper had made a couple of really nice saves. But it was only a matter of time until they scored, unless our coach made a change.

Which he had. He was going to a 4-5-1 formation. That meant he was playing four defenders back and moving an extra midfielder into the middle of the park to help out against those two tough center mids. He was playing for a 0-0 tie, hoping he could hang on in the second half and not get run over by the team he was facing.

He was leaving me up top, all by myself. I was the "1" in that formation—the lone striker facing up to four defenders on their side at any given time. There was no way I should be able to score in this formation. No way. The coach was moving the defense back. If I was able to break through somehow and score, great. But mostly my job was to keep their defense honest.

I smiled. *Like there was anyone on this sorry field who could stop me.* High school soccer is bad. It isn't anything like my club team that played in



tournaments all over the country against the best soccer players in my age-group in the United States.

About half the players on my high school soccer team hardly even knew what they were doing. They ran around and kicked the ball but didn't really know why. Opposing teams were much the same. Which meant I could do what I wanted against opposing teams in high school, almost at will, no matter how many defenders they threw at me.

"So you'll stay at midfield, look for long balls over the top?" my coach asked.

"Got it," I answered.

Coach Jenkins turned to our midfielders. "Look for Ryun long. You can send it to either flag, let him run on it. That'll stretch the field and . . ."

I stopped paying attention. I knew what he wanted. He didn't expect me to score, only scare their defense every so often. So we'd see. I knew that I'd take whatever they gave me.

I looked back at the group of girls nearby, singling out the cute girl I couldn't take my eyes off. Sierra Reynolds had been unreachable earlier in the year. She'd been dating a senior, Michael something-or-other. But he was graduating, and she had no choice now but to turn back to her own class, to juniors like me.

In fact, I was pretty sure she'd broken up with the guy after he'd taken early acceptance to college and lost interest in Sierra and everything else over the holidays. Which meant I had to move. Now.

I couldn't stop staring at her. I mean, it was mind-blowing. Some *really* interesting things had

happened to her over the winter, when coats, sweaters, and long skirts hid every girl's shape. Nothing dramatic, but enough to grab my interest.

On a Saturday, in the warm spring sun, when there was no dress code and there were no teachers or parents around to say otherwise, I could see very clearly that Sierra had grown up a little over the past six months when no one was paying any attention. Or, at least, when *I* wasn't paying attention.

She was wearing cotton shorts and a bright yellow halter top. Now she was sitting with her head tilted back, her arms propped behind her back, her legs stretched out and crossed in front of her. *How had I not noticed her until now, until this very moment?*

Sierra glanced over. Even from where I was sitting, her big green eyes were riveting. I didn't look away. She didn't look away. We both smiled at the same time, as if on cue. I tapped my chest with one finger, pointed to the goal at the far end of the soccer field, held up one finger and then pointed back at Sierra. "For you," I mouthed.

Sierra nodded, laughing. She understood. I'd just promised to score a goal for her. No one else in the crowd, on the team, on the field, mattered. She looked away, then back to her group of friends.

As we meandered back onto the field to start the second half, I took one last look over at Sierra. She was doing her best to pretend she wasn't paying any attention to me. But I knew she was. And we'd see.

The first 30 minutes of the second half were brutal. The opposing team controlled 80 to 90 percent

of the possession. They were pounding the ball at our defensive end, slotting balls through, taking them around and into our defense every conceivable way. But with nine defenders behind the ball, they were having a much more difficult time getting shots off.

I hardly even touched the ball. Every so often one of our defenders would kick the ball long, in a panic, and I'd chase it. But by the time I got to it, there were four or five from the other team chasing it too. I couldn't do much with it, not with those odds.

But with 10 minutes to go, the chance came. All of their midfielders were pressed forward, attacking. Two of their defenders had drifted over the midfield line, attacking also. It left me one on two with their remaining defenders.

The ball kicked out wide, almost by accident, and our outside right midfielder got to it first. I started my run perfectly, right as he launched it to the far flag. I timed it so that I was just onside as the ball was kicked. I glanced over at the assistant referee as I made my run. His flag was down. I was onside.

The ball rolled toward the far flag. I raced past first one and then the second defender. I caught up with the ball the instant it started to bounce more slowly. Settling the ball at my feet, I cut back sharply to goal, as I'd been taught by Asher James, my club coach, and every Olympic development coach I'd ever had.

And I did what every great striker does. Don't fool around. When you have the ball at your feet

and a chance to score, take it to goal. Go right at it. Score.

The screams and shouts of the fans and my teammates dimmed. The air rushed past me as I pushed the ball out in front—not too far to lose control, yet far enough to allow me to run at nearly top speed toward the goal. Their goalkeeper tried to time it, rush at me to force me into a bad last touch. Yeah, right. Like I was going to miss this one.

At the last possible moment, I flicked the ball with the outside of my left foot to the keeper's right, eluding his outstretched hands, and then cut the ball back to my right. I took three gigantic steps toward the empty net. Just before striking the ball, I glanced off to the side, in Sierra's direction, then buried the ball in the back of the net.

As my teammates rushed to the end of the field to mob me, I looked over to the side of the field again, finding Sierra. Her auburn hair glistened in the sun, and her green eyes flashed. I'd delivered, as promised. She knew it. I knew it. It was now her move.