

FlashFire and
The Blades of Duality

Chapter One

By Dallas Stiles

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“It all started with this nightmare I’ve been having,” said Ryker Aiden, lying on the floor of the school counselor’s office. He’d never been sent to the office before— in high school that is, which started one month ago.

“Ryker,” sighed the school counselor, Ms. Perry, “your nightmare is why you punched Greg Tinson in the face?”

“No, of course not,” he replied, sitting up. He straightened his back before combing his shaggy auburn hair out of his face. “But you asked if something was going on with me. And that’s what’s going on.”

“Ryker, please get up and explain to me why you punched Greg Tinson.”

The fourteen year-old stood up from the floor, dusting off his jeans. His steel blue eyes glimmered in the light of the window. Outside he could see the American flag flapping in the wind. Below it, the central common space of Kettlebell High, Boxborough, Colorado’s finest educational establishment (that is, if you weren’t counting the Catholic or charter schools). “Shouldn’t there be a chase or something in here?”

“Do you mean a *chaise*?”

“Yeah, something for me to lie down on and narrate my tale.”

Ms. Perry, a larger woman in her mid-30s, took off her wide-rimmed glasses before pressing her thumb and index finger across the bridge of her nose. “The dean will be here any minute and she won’t be as patient as me.” She typed a quick search on her laptop. “Now I see you have a few stray detentions from middle-school, but nothing like this. Help me understand why you’d punch a model student like Greg?”

Ryker laughed. He flashed his cheek, a small red line curved beneath his left eye.

“What’s that?” Ms. Perry asked.

“A flesh wound from battle with Greg.” He turned to the window staring outside, ominously.

“Ryker I can’t take you seriously. What happened?”

The boy deflated. “Alright, Greg came over and started talking shh— er, crap about Kyle’s

mom and so I stopped him, and he flicked the cut, which I already got in my *nightmare*—”

“Go back. Which Kyle?”

“Kyle Cato.”

Click-clack-click. “Oh my. *That* Kyle?” she gasped. “Why was Greg doing that?”

“You see it in his file, huh? So you know,” Ryker replied, beginning to pace. “Kyle’s a genius... And a nerd.”

“So Greg made a ‘your mom’ joke? I know they were a big deal when I was in high school, but it hardly warrants violence.”

“And I’m sure they’re as cool as they were back in the 80s, Ms. Perry, but it wasn’t a ‘your mom’ joke, it wasn’t even really a joke, it was just Greg being... cruel.”

“How old do you think I— nevermind. What did he say that was so cruel about Kyle’s mother? Does she have something wrong with her or was it just crass?”

“Well, if by something wrong with her, you mean she’s dead.”

Ms. Perry’s eyes widened. “*Dead?*” she gasped, typing out another search.

Ryker stopped pacing and, with his left hand, rubbed his neck. “You didn’t hear she died from me. She’s technically ‘*missing*.’ Has been for a few years now— which gets me back to this nightmare I’ve been having!”

“Let me confirm,” she said, cutting him short, “Greg Tinson made a cruel comment about Kyle’s deceased mother—”

“*Missing* mother. Maybe dead. Let’s not say deceased,” Ryker paused. “Kyle still thinks she’s okay.”

“Okay. Greg Tinson made a cruel comment about Kyle’s missing mother. So why did *you* punch him?”

Ryker tilted his head, surprised. “Because Kyle’s my best friend.”

Ms. Perry’s eyebrows furled, a half-smile spread across her face. She shook it off, jotting down another note when the door shot open.

“Another fight? I swear!” It was Mrs. Applegate, the school dean. Her tone was sharp and threatening. She was dressed in complete darkness: dark sweater, dark skirt, and an even darker disposition. The only thing light about her was her hair, some bright synthetic blonde that a woman her age (which was difficult and *dangerous* to approximate) wouldn’t naturally have. Her nose was crooked like a witch, and her eyes were catlike and eerie. She pointed to Ryker. “You! Sit down!”

Ryker did as he was told.

Mrs. Applegate whipped her head towards Ms. Perry, “I just got off the phone with Greg Tinson’s parents. They’re furious!”

“Now now, Mrs. Applegate, I’m just talking to Ryker about what happened. It sounds like there was a bit of a scuffle that was a result of—”

“A bit of a scuffle? He doesn’t have anything wrong with him!” Mrs. Applegate grabbed Ryker’s face and pulled it close. “This scratch under his eye? Ha! Greg’s parents said their boy may need facial reconstruction surgery! And worse— they’re threatening to pull their donation from the PTA!”

Ryker shook his head, at a loss for words for the first time today.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Ryker Aiden—”

“Aiden? As in related to *Christopher* Aiden?” Mrs. Applegate said, her tone shifting.

Ryker suppressed a groan. “He’s my brother.”

“To think that a good egg like him, could have such a *rascal* of a sibling.”

A rascal? *Who even says stuff like that?* “Yeah, he’s *real* great, *just* like Greg—”

“Why did you hit him?” Mrs. Applegate interjected. “Why did you hit poor Greg Tinson?”

“I hit him because—”

“So you admit you hit him! You heard him, Ms. Perry, this will merit an immediate suspension. Maybe expulsion!”

“What!?” Ryker yelled, bouncing out of his seat.

“Mrs. Applegate!” Ms. Perry exclaimed, trying to regain control of her office, “Ryker was explaining what happened at lunch. I don’t think this warrants a suspension. Not yet, at least.”

Ryker sat back down with a sigh, only to make eyes with Mrs. Applegate, her face burning in anger.

“That is not your decision, Ms. Perry—”

“But I have to give my report before the principal *makes* a decision.”

Mrs. Applegate fumed and turned towards the door. Squeezing the knob tight, she whipped her head back. “If I see one problem out of you: tardiness to a single class, miss a single assignment, travel without a hall pass, so help me, I *will* have you expelled *Ryker Aiden*.” Her vendetta sworn, she exited, slamming the door behind her.

Ms. Applegate and Ryker both let out a sigh.

“A-hem,” Ms. Perry coughed, regaining her composure. “I think we will need to schedule a time to talk, you, me, and Greg. I’ll contact the Tinsons and we’ll aim to do it tomorrow before homeroom.”

Ryker agreed and got up to leave.

“Oh and Ryker,” Ms. Perry said, “your nightmare... What did that have to do with this?”

He smiled, wagging his finger, “I knew you’d be curious, it’s been eating at me too! Okay,” he cleared his throat, putting on his best narrative voice. “*The boy’s room was dark. Outside, an ominous gale blew, shaking the windowpanes and jolting him from sleep.*”

“Ryker,” Mrs. Perry groaned. “Just what are you doing?”

“Oh, um, I’m setting the scene. For narrative intrigue and all that? I’m thinking about you when I tell this.”

“Please, less dramatic.”

“Fine,” he sighed. “There’s this monster and it has this one, terrifying eye and all it wants... Is to take me. Destroy me, and I wake up with these cuts and marks—”

BEEP. BEEP. The bell rang, signaling next period.

“Ope! Looks like we’ll have to talk about this some other time.” She smiled a dismissive smile.

“But—” Ryker tried.

“See you tomorrow morning. Go, get to class!”



The door to the school counselor’s office closed with a slam. As a newly minted high schooler, Ryker looked from left to right thinking about which direction to go. Kettlebell High was shaped like a cube— a Rubik’s cube was what it felt like — with a courtyard nestled tight in-between the four walls where students could eat lunch or have their fist-fights. Though the administration frowned upon fights, rarely did they do much else to prevent them. It was the impulsive fights like Ryker had today, if it could even be called that, which they frowned upon.

It isn’t good sport if spectators don’t know when a fight begins.

And Kettlebell had its fair share of spectators, as a good fight was enjoyed by students and faculty alike, what with the building rising around the courtyard like a modern-day coliseum. Sadly, the faculty’s gambling on victors came across poorly in a recent exposé by Senior Student Reporter Cindy Clarke.

Thus a crackdown on fights began and the unprecedented threat of expulsion fell solely on Ryker.

Since coming to Kettlebell, he’d felt like a small minnow in a very large pond. Today seemed... different. Like people were looking *at* him, not through him. He straightened up, making eye-contact and giving a half-smile to some of the onlookers.

Right? They had to be looking at him.

Two junior ladies who he didn’t know (but were rather pretty) were whispering in his direction. “Hi Ryker,” one smiled.

“H-heh, how are ya?” he replied, continuing forward. *Calm, calm, don’t look back.*

He looked back.

They were still looking.

A smile broke across his face. Did that just—

CLAP.

Two hands slapped Ryker's shoulders, bringing him to a stop. He reeled around. "Oh. What's up, Davie?"

"Sup, Ryker," Davie Blotter said, grabbing for Ryker's hand and bumping shoulders. "Heard about earlier. One punch! Crazy, man." They let go and Davie kept walking.

Well it was certain now. Davie used to be a friend in elementary school who, popularity-wise, was now a tier or seven above Ryker. They hadn't talked much since Ryker's asthma got in the way of him being picked for the sixth-grade basketball team. To get the shoulder bump though? That meant Ryker was a person worth knowing.

Greg of course was well known throughout the school. While he had charm (something Ryker often lacked), he abused it, forcing students and faculty alike to do his bidding.

"Hey, Shieva," Ryker said, puffing out his chest.

Shieva was leaning against her locker, a real mysterious type who many revered. "Ryker," she smirked.

He kept pushing his luck. "How we doin' today folks?" Ryker said to a group of passing seniors.

Most ignored him, but some smiled, nodded, acknowledging his existence.

"Afternoon, Mr. Trumbea," Ryker waved.

"Oh, hey Ryker, way to punch that kid today," Mr. Trumbea replied.

"Thanks!" he laughed, "Hey Cin—"

"Mr. Aiden," announced Cindy Clarke, Senior Student Reporter. "Cindy Clarke, Senior Student Reporter for *The Jangle*. I have a few questions for you."

"Cindy, what are you doing, I know you, we did swim team together? And aren't you just a sophomore?"

She looked up from her notepad. "It's called professionalism, Mr. Aiden. Any comment on the rumors of your anger-management issues?"

"Well I... What?"

"You punched Greg Tinson, a model student, seemingly unprovoked."

"I don't have anger-management issues!" he yelled, realizing his sharp tone too late.

"And the rumor about your actions being class-motivated?"

"We don't have any classes together?"

Cindy shared a flat look. "Class being your family's financial status. Your father, he works for Greg's father, correct?"

"Yes... but no— I'm not a class, whatever, I hit him because he was being a dingus and— and a jerk to my friend!"

"Is that the quote you'd like me to use?"

"I mean, maybe take out the dingus part, but you've got the gist of my side."

"Thanks," she said, walking away, eyes locked on her notepad. "And you don't have to be a senior to be a Senior Reporter. F.Y.I."

Ryker's head followed her, but he didn't hear what she said. "Who told you those rumors?"

She turned. With a glare, "Why? Would you like to hit them too?" There was a moment of pause. Gracefully, Cindy spun back around and walked away.

Ryker stood in the middle of the hall, students flowing around him on both sides. "I mean... no." He sighed. Was he in the wrong for standing up for his friend? How could she possibly know what the right thing to do was?

Ryker watched her as she turned the corner out of sight. He slumped back around to what felt like a swarm of eyes. The stares and whispers now took on a very different connotation. People kept looking, smiling, snickering. What were they saying? Good things? Bad things? Was he right to punch Greg? Of course he was. Wasn't he?

His eyes locked onto the ground. He had to block it all out. But he felt it, all of it, gnawing at

him. He hurried down the stairs to his locker, 1021, grabbed a history textbook, and made his way to class.



The day trudged on without much more excitement. A few kids asked him about Greg and he told them what he'd told Cindy: he was standing up for his friend. A few seemed to respect him for that, most just nodded, and a few rolled their eyes in apathy.

In regards to his status, well, he was certain of one thing: it had changed. Just with whom, and in which direction of the popularity spectrum, he wasn't sure. Except for Mr. Trumbea, who, whenever Ryker walked by, took up a kung-fu pose and hollered, "*Hiya!*" while punching the air. Ryker sheepishly returned the gesture with a thumbs up, a fresh shade of pink flushing his cheeks every time.

The final bell rang, sending students into the expected daily frenzy. Even in the mad dash, the looks and whispers still circled around him. And how was he going to get to his locker? If Trumbea saw him now that classes were over he'd surely invite him to his martial arts workshop at the local YMCA.

Ryker moved opposite his normal path, mentally mapping how he could hit his locker and make it to the bus on time. Last thing he needed was to miss the bus on a lousy day like today.

But once he reached the adjacent stairwell, he froze. As the swarm of students flooded downstairs, Greg's two cronies, Donna Cutler and Vince Pyle, trudged upwards. Both looked like members of the 80s Goon Squad. Vince had greasy dark hair and wore a patchy trench coat that smelled like B.O. and urinal cakes. Donna had wild, mascara-covered eyes, and always tied her hair in a messy bun, dyed half pink, half baby-blue. She wore fingerless gloves to satiate her nail-biting habit, leaving the tips bloody and raw.

Ryker didn't linger long enough to make eye contact with them. Surely he could run around the whole school and avoid them and Trumbea entirely? It'd be a good time-trial for himself, too. After all, who knows when he might need an escape plan in the coming weeks. He set off for uncharted territory: *the seniors' hall*.

Huffing and puffing, he checked his watch. The additional distance had eaten up half of the five minutes he normally would have between classes. He was going to be late for the bus if he didn't hurry. Fighting the knot of stress in his gut, he began to jog, his books bouncing

uncomfortably under one arm.

Pressure mounted in his lungs. There was no way he'd have an asthma attack just running a single lap around the building. Right? But when he looked and saw that four minutes had passed and he was exactly halfway to his locker, it was apparent that a light jog wasn't going to cut it.

As the halls started to empty out, he broke into longer strides. Picking up speed, he could feel his lungs tightening, mucus mounting in his throat. Of course he'd left his inhaler in his locker. Why would he *possibly* need it during the school day?

Tick. Tick. Tick. His five minutes had expired and he was almost certain he was going to miss the bus. His lungs felt fiery, his breath getting raspier with each step. He tore down the stairwell on the third length to avoid Mr. Trumbea, pushing through the pain, knowing his locker was just steps away.

Rounding the final corner— *smack!* Ryker jerked backwards, catching himself, gasping for air. He must've been quite a sight. On the ground, Mickey Mengie had toppled onto his rear, his papers scattering everywhere. Ryker's heart was racing as he tried to stammer an apology, grabbing his own books out of the pile. Then he heard the whispers.

He looked to the lockers and saw students eyeing him, smirking, some laughing, some with phones out, taking pictures. "Woah, Ryke, first Tinson, now the Mangel!" It sounded like Davie Blotter, or some other jock type, but Ryker's vision was fuzzing. He couldn't believe how exhausted he was. Doubling over, he reached out a hand to help Mickey but he caught himself with it, nearly tipping over.

"M-m-ick," he wheezed, "S-s-sor..." But he couldn't get the words out, losing a loud, wheezy cough.

Mickey was no Greg Tinson. In fact, he was usually at the receiving end of Greg's dubious actions. He'd let his dark, unkempt hair grow out over the summer, thinking it would be cool, only to come to high school and get the new title, "The Mange." His dandruff-covered shoulders didn't help the matter.

As Mickey scrambled to his feet, Ryker bent over, trying to help pick up Mickey's papers, but realized he was getting to the point of no return— he needed the inhaler. Grabbing a book, he shoved it into Mickey's arms before sprinting the final length to his locker.

As he got to 1021 he passed Kyle, 1027, who'd been waiting. "Where've you been?"

But Ryker didn't reply, he hastily input his locker combo, threw open the door, rummaged through his backpack and jacket pockets when—

Huuuuuuuh! He took a deep breath of the medicine, slowly returning to himself. "It's been a day."

He looked back down the hall to see Mickey picking up the remnants of his things, the kids by the lockers still laughing. "I'm sorry, Mickey!" Ryker yelled, pointing to his inhaler. "I was having an—" but Mickey wasn't listening. He'd grabbed his belongings and bolted around the corner and away from the snickering jocks.

"—asthma attack." Ryker deflated.

"I see," Kyle said, "so you didn't attack Mickey to defend my honor, hm?"

Ryker shot him a look. "Everybody gets one honor-defending a day."

"Ah, there are limitations, good to know. Hopefully you running isn't a once per-day occasion as we're going to miss the bus."

"Well, I guess there've got to be exceptions to the rules," Ryker pulled out his backpack and crammed everything he could into it.

"You know, we could just hijack a truck?" Kyle smiled.

"See, I think you're joking, but you've brought that up so much in the past two weeks that I'm wondering if I should be concerned."

"I watched some tutorials! It's surprisingly easy—the hard part is actually driving the truck."

Ryker closed his locker and shoved his backpack on while they walked. "Why is driving a truck hard— wait, you're talking about a *semi*-truck?"

"*Anyone* can hijack a regular truck, Ryke. hijacking a semi has an air of... of..."

"Insanity to it?"

"Hm. I was thinking *adventure*. Or maybe romance." They laughed, turning the corner. "Really though, we're going to have to sprint if we want to make it. Our bus has left between 2:54 and 2:55 every day this week. Considering that consistency is an outlier, we *might* be okay, however—"

“Yeah, yeah,” Ryker said, pulling ahead. “Let’s go!”

The two bolted down the hallway to the main entrance, Ryker leading the two, his hands tight around his bag’s straps. He shoved the exit open with his shoulder. Even under the awning, the bright Colorado sun was a sharp contrast from the school’s dim fluorescent lights. As Ryker’s eyes adjusted, he saw Kyle break ahead of him, swinging his arms up and down with ferocity.

“What are you doing?” Ryker yelled, trying not to wheeze.

“Pumping your arms provides maximum sprinting output!” Kyle replied, turning a corner towards the bus parking lot.

“Well you look like an idiot!”

Kyle either ignored him or didn’t hear, “She’s still there, Ryke!”

Ryker turned the corner to see that the bus was indeed still there, but it was next in line to leave and the doors were shut. Kyle sped ahead, putting an incredible distance between them.

The bus driver, Mrs. Klein, a surly woman of considerable age, legitimately might not have seen them as she began pulling away.

Ryker suspected otherwise.

Kyle started pounding on the glass door. “Hello! We’re here! Please let us in!”

Mrs. Klein stopped the bus with a jolt. Ryker caught up just as the doors began to slide open, his lungs stinging again. He took a hit of his inhaler. *Huuuuuuuh!*

“No vaping on the bus,” Mrs. Klein said, sternly. Her pupils were milky, like she had cataracts.

“It’s— it’s—” Ryker started.

“It’s an inhaler, Mrs. Klein, he needs it or his fragile throat will swell with mucus and he’ll die,” Kyle interjected. “Thank you for stopping the bus for us.”

She waved them away, uninterested.



As the boys found a seat, the bus roared to life. Tradition dictated that high schoolers took seats further back in the bus. However, being freshman, and not particularly popular freshman at that, Ryker and Kyle often found themselves sitting wherever there was room.

“So, what’s the plan for today?” Ryker muttered, his breath coming back to him. “Zombies? Rocket cars? Smash?”

“Actually,” Kyle said, “I’ve been working on something. It’s not totally finished, but you might like it.”

“A project?” Ryker smiled, “Hopefully one that doesn’t have to do with illegally acquiring a semi-truck?”

“Unfortunately for the both of us, that’s a no.” They shared a laugh. **“Imagine a machine that spits gum-balls and mad free-style poetry—”**

Above the seat in front of them, a small head appeared. “Hey Ryker, you punch Greg Tinson?” It was a middle-schooler, Barry Pratchet.

A second head popped up next to it. “Yeah, you get suspended?” It was Barry’s twin, Larry.

“This the last we’ll ever see of you?” Barry added. The twins bounced between each other without missing a beat.

“How’d you know about that?” Ryker asked.

“Everyone knows,” said Barry.

“There’s a video of you doing it,” Larry added, pulling out his phone. He pressed a button and a video popped up, showing Ryker facing someone a whole head taller than him. The lunch room was raucous, making it impossible to hear Greg’s taunts.

Greg continues to pester Kyle, when Ryker stands to intervene. Greg looses a dramatic cackle then, feigning to grab Ryker’s shoulder, he presses into the cut on Ryker’s face. Instinct sets in and Ryker shoves Greg back, hard. He crashes into a neighboring table with a *clang*, grabbing the room’s attention. Kyle’s in the background, ignoring the fight, spooning a glob of mashed potatoes.

Ryker wipes off his face; Greg stands, shaking the gravy from his arms. He gives Ryker a

deadly glare and approaches, hands drawn—

THWACK! Ryker's left hand connects smashing Greg square in the face.

The lunchroom explodes into cheers.

"What the—" Ryker muttered, watching the footage.

In the video, Greg crashes to the floor, out cold. The lunch monitors enter frame, one holding up a hand, blocking the camera "He knocked him out! Holy—"

The video cuts off.

"Lemme see that," Ryker said, grabbing the phone. He skipped back right before he hit Greg. He advanced the video frame by frame with his finger.

"You seein' this, Kyle?"

"Oh, I saw," his friend replied, uninterested.

"No, look," Ryker tapped carefully. One second, Greg is towering over him, the next, as Ryker's punch winds up, it looks like Greg's knee buckles and he starts to fall forward, just soon enough for Ryker to clobber his face, knocking him to the ground.

"Hey, whatcha seein'?" Barry asked.

"Yeah, show us!" cried Larry.

Ryker handed the twins their phone back. "I didn't get suspended, twerps. We're talking it out tomorrow."

"Aw, that's it?"

"Lame."

"Get out of here," Ryker said, shooing them away.

The two sat down, each giving a small groan.

Ryker turned to Kyle and whispered, "You saw that right?"

"I saw you take down a rhino, yes."

Ryker frowned. "You *did* see it. Someone must've hit Greg's leg right before I punched him. Who would've done that?"

"You don't think it was one of the Dipstick-duo, do you?"

"Why're you playing dumb?" Ryker said, "Donna and Vince weren't in the video— they weren't even at lunch today. Besides why would they betray their fearless leader like that?" Donna and Vince often stuck to Greg like a pair of wet socks. Thinking about it... Why weren't they at lunch? And how *did* he knock Greg out in one punch? He wasn't exactly a fighter. The only other person he'd clocked was his brother. That had a very different ending.

Still, how would no one else have seen if someone had helped him?

"Look," Kyle groaned, "Next time, use your head, not your fists and we won't need to worry about expulsion. Let's just move on."

While Ryker didn't *want* to let it go, he figured Kyle must've been sensitive about the whole situation revolving around his mom.

Buzz.

It was Ryker's phone. "Well," he said, "doesn't look like I'll get to see your gum-ball rapper."

"What's up?" Kyle asked.

Ryker showed him the phone. It was a text from his dad:

U punched MrTinsons SON?/? COME HOME IMMEDIATELY1!!

"Shoot. Sorry, Ryke."

"Wanna predict how many months I'll be grounded?"

"All of the months. But hey, at least you'll have time to finish that thing you were working on?"

“Did I tell you about that?”

“Your comic?”

“Yeah, I didn’t think I told anyone about it.”

“You can’t keep secrets from me,” Kyle laughed. “Did you figure out who he’s versing yet?”

“Nope. *FlashFire Vs.* is currently a battle-comic without an enemy to battle.”

“Maybe it could be Tin-boy.”

“Tin-boy?” Ryker asked.

“You know, Tin’s *son*.”

Ryker’s eyes widened. “Love it. *FlashFire Vs. Tin’s Son*. That’s pretty clever, Kyle.”

“Some have called me a genius.”