

Chapter One

After the flash of lightning, I waited for the peal of thunder, but instead, a long pitiful shriek echoed from outside the house. A shiver rippled through me, making my flesh prickle. I threw back the covers and crawled from the bed.

Thunder crashed overhead as I searched for the pullcord in the heavy folds of the curtains. I yanked them open, but only a black void stared back at me. Dark storm clouds blocked all illumination from the stars and moon.

I cracked open the window and pressed my ear against the mesh screen. No shrieking howl, no gusting wind, not even a drop of rain on the patio outside disrupted the silence.

A bolt of lightning streaked across the sky and the night turned bright as day. I squinted to shield my vision from the burst of light, but not before glimpsing a shadowy figure lingering at the edge of our yard near the alfalfa field. A mournful howl ripped through the air and mingled with the clap of thunder. The creature twisted lower to the ground and disappeared into a clump of oak trees.

A cold chill snaked up my back. I blinked my eyes. Was that an animal, or a man scurrying into the cover of the trees? Not certain what I'd witnessed, I scratched at the stubble on my neck while backing away from the window.

"Ow," I yelped when my foot scrapped against a sharp object. I hopped around on one foot while rubbing at the heel of my other.

"Brendon?" my little brother mumbled from the upper bunk.

"Yeah, Stevie. It's me. I think I just stepped on your dinosaur."

"Give it back," he said in a sleepy voice.

The digital clock on the desk gave off a dim, bluish glow, but the light only extended a few feet. I searched around on the floor until my fingers stumbled across the hard plastic toy. After picking it up, I swung my hand in the direction of the upper bunk. "Here you go."

A spark of lightning flashed outside. With the curtains opened wide, the brilliant light flooded the room. Tyrannosaurs Rex seemed to come to life. Sharp, white plastic teeth jutted out of its furious mouth a few inches from my brother's face. Stevie's scream filled the air as his hands flew over his eyes.

"It's just your toy dinosaur."

"Close the curtains," he shouted.

"Pipe down. You're going to wake Mom." I headed for the window. "Lightning can't hurt you."

"Yes, it can. It can kill you."

"Maybe, but it can't get you if you stay in bed with your head under the covers."

I grabbed the pullcord for the curtains, but before yanking them shut, I glanced around the yard. Nothing. Whatever lurked outside had disappeared. The creepy tingling up my spine had also vanished.

Thunder rumbled right after I shut the curtains. "The storm's moving farther away. Go back to sleep."

"Can I sleep with you?" he asked.

"No." I sat down on the edge of the mattress and rubbed my hand across the muscles in my

shoulders. “I’m still sore from Friday’s game. I’ve got football practice tomorrow and I need sleep. I can’t do it with you thrashing around all night.”

“But, Brendon—”

“No,” I said a little sharper than I intended.

Muffled sobs came from the bed above me.

“I’m sorry, Stevie.” I crawled from the lower bunk and searched for my little brother to pat his back.

“I’m scared.” He leapt at me with such force that the thrust of his body threw me backward.

I grabbed at the top bunk to steady myself, but all I caught was a handful of blanket. Off balance, I struggled to stay upright, but with his added weight, I lost the battle. We crashed to the carpet covered floor. My little brother, with his strangle hold on my neck, landed on top.

“Dang it, Stevie.” I batted at the sheet and blanket floating across my face. “Why did you jump at me like that?”

His arms tightened around my neck. “I hate lightning.”

I tried to pry him loose. “It’s not going to kill anyone.”

“It killed Daddy.”

My head flopped onto the floor. “No, it didn’t.”

“Then what did?”

Muscle spasms ripped through my body as a grotesque image flashed into my brain, but the figure receded into the dark corners of my mind before I recognized the form. “I don’t know.”

“Do you remember when he died?”

That much I knew. I swallowed hard, hoping my voice didn’t shake when I talked. “It was six years ago. I was about your age.”

His arms eased from around my neck. “You were ten like me when Daddy died?”

“No, I was eleven.” I slid him to one side. “Let’s get off the floor.”

The blanket and sheet tangled around me as I crawled from the rug. Stevie grabbed at my tee shirt and never let go while I gathered the covers and flung them on the top bed.

“Can I—”

“Yeah,” I said, cutting off his request since I already knew what he was going to ask. “Get in there.”

“Thanks, Brendon.” He let go of my shirt and scampered into the bottom bunk.

I waited for him to quit squirming around. His bony elbows and knees could be lethal weapons. When I didn’t hear anymore wrestling with the covers, I flopped down on the bed.

“Brendon, before you get in bed—”

“Too late.” I stretched out on the cool sheet and adjusted the pajama bottoms around my waist.

“But I want Rex.”

“No way. This bed isn’t big enough for three.”

“Your bed’s bigger than mine.”

“I said no. Besides, you’re too old to be sleeping with toys.”

His head lay on the other pillow, but the sniffing noise he made sounded like his nose pressed against my ear.

“I swear I’m going to throw you in bed with Mom if you start crying.”

“I just got him for my birthday last week. He won’t take up much room.”

I wanted sleep. My body hurt too much to climb out of bed and go looking for that stupid dinosaur. Instead, I searched for an excuse he would accept. “Rex already bit me on the foot. He

might bite off my nose next.” His laughter told me I was headed in the right direction. “If I roll over on him, he’s liable to gobble me up.”

“Rex can’t hurt you,” he said between chuckles. “He’s not real.”

“He felt real enough when I stepped on him.”

“I’ll keep him on the side next to the wall.” His chuckling subsided, and his tone turned serious. “Please.”

I sucked in a deep breath and let it out with a huff. “If you promise to shut up and go to sleep, I’ll get him.”

When the nodding of his head rustled the pillowcase, I rolled out of bed. “He could be anywhere. I’ll have to put on the light.” The words barely came out of my mouth when Rex latched onto my big toe. I stifled a curse, scooped him up from the floor, and stuck him on the other side of Stevie.

“Thank you, Brendon.”

“You’re welcome. Now, goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” Stevie had his back to me, but he turned over and slipped his arm around my bicep. “Brendon—”

“No talking.”

“But I want to know—”

“Shh.”

“—what Daddy was like.”

A clammy sweat broke out of my pores. I loved my father, but talking about him always brought back unsettling visions of his death. “How come you’re thinking about Dad all of a sudden?”

“Because I don’t have one.”

“Half your friends at school don’t have a dad.”

“That’s because their parents are divorced. But Taylor and even Josh see their dad once in a while. I never get to see mine, and Mom won’t talk about him. I don’t think she liked Daddy.”

“Don’t you *ever* say that.” My tone was harsh. I tried to mellow before I spoke. “Mom loved him. She still does. That’s why she won’t talk about him.”

“Then how will I ever learn anything about him?” he asked around a sob.

“I can tell you a little.” I swiped one hand across my face to remove the sweat. My little brother deserved to know about our father. If I stuck to his life and not his death, I might be able to give some details. “His name was John Alexander, and his hair was—I don’t need to describe him. You’ve seen pictures of him, haven’t you?”

“No.”

“Yes, you have. There’s one in Mom’s room of Dad holding you when you were a baby.”

“I thought that was you holding me.”

“No, goofy. That’s Dad. He was about thirty-three when you were born.”

“Then you and Daddy looked alike? Was he tall like you?”

“I think he was about six-three, so I’ve got another couple inches to go. And I guess I inherited his looks. You look a little like him too.”

“He had dark, curly hair?”

“Dark, but straight. We get the curly from Mom.” I thrust my fingers through my inch-short hair. “Wavy is more like it. Just be glad you didn’t get Mom’s red hair and freckles.”

Stevie snickered. “Krystal did.”

“It’s all right for her. She’s a girl. Besides, she looks cute with those blue eyes and red hair.”

Maybe too cute. In ten years from now, when she turns sixteen, I won't be around. It'll be your job to protect her."

"From what?"

My sarcasm cranked up a notch. "Your friends, probably."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind." I rolled over, putting my back to him. "Are you finished with your questions?"

He made a little humming noise. I knew his tactic. He planned to keep me talking until he fell asleep.

"Did Daddy have weird eyes like you?"

I glanced over my shoulder even though the darkness prevented me from seeing him.

"What do you mean, weird?"

"They're green and brown at the same time."

"That's not weird. It's called hazel."

"Josh said Daddy was part Indian like the ones who own the casino."

"Don't listen to Josh. He doesn't know anything. We didn't move to California to live with Grandma until after Dad died."

"Then we're not Indian?"

"No, we are, but I don't know which tribe since Mom won't talk about it. But we don't belong to the tribe that owns the casino. Otherwise, we'd be rich instead of poor. But I remember Grandfather. He was half Indian and used to tell me stories about the Ancient Ones. I was probably Krystal's age when he died."

"How did he die?"

"He got old."

"Is that how Daddy died?"

"Dad wasn't old."

"Then how did he die?"

We were back to that again. I took a deep breath, hoping a fresh shot of oxygen would keep the clammy sweat from returning. Memories of my father's death were just hazy recollections. The doctor said I'd suppressed the incident because my young mind couldn't deal with the horror of seeing him die. I was older now. Maybe if I remembered, I could put the past where it belonged. I rubbed at my forehead, hoping to clear my thoughts, but too many years had passed. "I'm not sure. I was with him that night, but I don't remember what happened."

"Can't you ask Mom?"

"No. She thinks it's better I don't." When my mind drew a blank, I dropped my hand to my belly. "Maybe it is better that I don't recall."

"Are you afraid to remember?"

Sure I was, but I wasn't going to admit it to my little brother. "It happened a long time ago. What's the use of remembering something bad from the past?"

"Aren't you afraid of anything?"

"Yeah." I had some real fears that affected my life now. "I'm afraid I won't get a football scholarship so I can go to college."

"More school?" He made a huffing noise. "Is that all?"

"Just one other thing." My gaze drifted to the closed curtains. "I'm afraid of things that slither around in the middle of the night."

Chapter Two

Sunlight seeped around the edges of the curtains. I crawled from the bed and stumbled down the hallway to the bathroom. After a quick shower, I jerked on a pair of jeans and a clean red tee. The eerie shadow I'd witnessed during the night had piqued my curiosity and I wanted to find out what had made that noise. As I headed down the hallway to the kitchen, the smell of warm maple syrup wafted through the air, delaying my investigation. I gobbled down a stack of buckwheat pancakes before hurrying outside.

The storm that passed during the night didn't dump much rain. Even with October less than a week away, the heavy stuff wouldn't come for a couple more months, but I hoped the damp ground would leave a print of anything lurking around. I walked across the backyard to where I'd seen the dark form weaving through the base of the oak trees and squatted down for a closer look. Dried grass speckled the area. I scanned the bare dirt near the roots and around the tree trunks. Nothing. Not a single paw mark or human boot print marred the earth.

Perhaps a swaying branch had caused the shadow, but that didn't explain the long, pitiful screech that echoed through the darkness. I thrust my fingers through my hair. Maybe I'd imagined the whole thing. Between school, homework, and football practice, I wasn't getting enough sleep.

On the way back to the house, I spotted a white pickup tearing down the gravel road. That was my ride to school. I dashed into the house and grabbed my backpack. Carson lived farther up the Capay Valley. His father had given him the old F150 when he bought a new one last year. The Ford was fifteen years old, but still in good condition. And the best part was I didn't have to ride the bus with a bunch of screaming kids all the way to Esparto High.

* * *

The hard slap on the brakes jolted the pickup and woke me from a sound sleep. "What the—" My head jerked up, and my body tensed, preparing for impact with another vehicle. A second later, I realized Carson had slammed on the brakes in the school parking lot, and we were at a dead stop.

"X-man, you should have seen the look on your face." Carson sucked in gulps of air as he laughed, making sounds like a braying donkey. "You looked like you thought you were about to die."

"I'm glad you think it's funny."

"Did I scare you, man?"

"Yes, you jackass." I grabbed my backpack from the floorboard and climbed from the pickup. "You scared the crap out of me."

Carson adjusted the Raiders' cap over his mess of red hair before grabbing the backpack. "Serves you right for sleeping the whole ride down the valley."

"Sorry, but the storm scared Stevie, and his crying kept me awake half the night." Thoughts of that eerie shadow I'd witnessed had also kept me awake, but I wasn't going to mention it to Carson.

"You should sleep in class like I do."

"Wish I could, but graduating with a D average won't get me into college."

"Hey, I got my grades up to a C minus so I wouldn't get kicked off the team. And I already told you, my dad will give you a job after we graduate."

“Bailing hay for the summer pays good money, but I don’t want to be stuck in the valley for the rest of my life. I need a job that’ll get me out of here. The only way to do that is with a college diploma.”

“Well, I don’t want to leave. I’m happy here.”

“Watch it.” I grabbed his tee shirt and yanked him back when he stepped into the street without looking. The driver laid on his horn and Carson flipped him off. I shook my head. Carson was my best friend, but sometimes he seemed oblivious to the world around him. His D average wasn’t due solely to sleeping in class.

He always joked he was a throwback to an ancient Viking warrior. Mostly brawn and little brain, but he had the perfect build—big and muscular—to play guard or tackle on the football team. He had about twenty pounds on me and was great at keeping linebackers off when I ran with the ball.

“There’s Paul.” Carson motioned with a flick of his hand to the front entrance of the school. “But I don’t see Sherry.”

“Maybe they broke up.” I glanced around to see if I could spot her. “Paul told me they’ve been fighting a lot.”

“Hey, Paul,” Carson said when we reached him. “Where’s the *wife*? Did she dump you?”

My eyes rolled to the top of my head at his blunt remark.

“She didn’t dump me.” Paul smacked him on the arm with his fist. “She just hit the snooze button too many times and now she’s running late.”

Carson punched back. Paul winched, but would never admit it hurt. Tall, slim, and cool under pressure, he made a great quarterback. He could spiral the football sixty yards down the field and make it land right in my hands, but he wasn’t a physical match for Carson’s solid build.

Paul’s gaze darted to me as he rubbed at his arm. His mouth twisted into a lopsided grin. “Hey, Alexander, how was your date the other night?”

I glanced away from his scrutinizing stare. He would bring up Saturday night. Now, I’d have to listen to the two of them give me crap for the next ten minutes before the bell rang. “It was all right.”

“Dang,” Carson said. “I forgot all about your date with Regina. So, what’d you think?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“X-man.” Carson shoved at my shoulder. “You went out with the skankiest girl in school. You’ve got to give us details.”

“No, I don’t.”

“What happened?” Paul asked. “Wouldn’t she put out?”

From the smirk on his face, Paul must’ve already heard the details, but Carson looked like he didn’t have a clue.

“Regina always puts out.” Carson’s mouth twisted into a knowing grin. “Even on a first date.”

“Especially on a first date.” Paul’s mouth showed the same grin. “So, how was it?”

“You already know nothing happened.”

“What?” Carson’s eyes opened wide. “You’ve got to be kidding. She turned you down?”

I shook my head. “I turned her down.”

“Yeah, right.” He let out a chuckle. “Like you’d turn down your first chance to get laid.”

“You’re wrong. We went to a movie, and then I took her home.” I didn’t think his eyes could get any wider, but they did.

“Why?” he asked.

I shrugged while thinking how I could explain it without sounding like a big wuss. I felt sorry for Regina. She wanted everyone to like her, but the way she chose to become popular only made the kids laugh at her behind her back. “All she talked about was the other guys she’d been out with.”

“So?” Carson looked dumbfounded.

“So, I didn’t want to be the guy she talks about on her next date with someone else. And I didn’t want to take advantage of her.”

“Take advantage?” Paul’s dark eyebrows lifted. “She’s broadcast it all over school that she’s going to sleep with every senior on the football team. That’s her choice.”

“Maybe, but I didn’t want to be the next guy on her list to end up with a stupid nickname.” I gave Paul a deliberate stare. “Did you know she calls you *Minute Man*?”

Paul shrugged as if unconcerned with his poor sexual rating. “I wasn’t trying to please her, only myself.”

“Yeah, but Regina can’t keep her mouth shut,” I reminded him. “What are you going to do when the gossip gets back to Sherry?”

His face scrunched into a grimace. “She’s already heard about my nickname, but I told her it was because Regina thinks I’m patriotic since I’m always wearing tee shirts with flags on them.”

I shook my head. “I can’t believe Sherry would fall for a lame excuse like that. She’s not stupid.”

“I know she’s not.” He glanced down. “But I’m tired of her always being suspicious of everything I do.”

“Don’t you think she has good reason? Besides, there are only about forty kids in our senior class. Everybody talks to everyone else. She’s bound to find out the truth.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Paul said, but from the expression on his face, it did. “I’m probably going to breakup with her anyway. Sherry wants to stay a virgin until she gets married. I need a girlfriend who will give me more.”

Carson snickered. “You mean like Regina?”

Paul’s head snapped up, and he glared at him. “No, you dumbass. A nice girl like Sherry, but one who wants to do more than just hold hands.”

“Good luck with that,” Carson said. “When word gets out that you were screwing around on Sherry, no nice girl is going to want you.”

“Here comes Sherry now,” Paul said in a hushed voice. “Everybody shut up about Regina.”

We all clammed up and waited for her to join us by the front steps of the school. When she reached Paul, he put his hands at her waist and pulled her to him. She turned her face and his kiss brushed across her short, brown hair. He released her without saying a word.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty,” Carson said. “You don’t need any extra sleep. You’re pretty enough already.”

Her lips curved into a smile. “Thanks. You just made my day.”

The conversation lulled, so I jumped in. “Hey, Sherry. Why’d you oversleep? Did you stay up all weekend studying for a big test?”

“No, Brendon.” Her smile slipped. “I had things on my mind.”

“You can’t call him *Brendon*, remember?” Paul made a weird sound, like a forced laugh. “He’s *Smoochy Lips* now.”

“What?” I looked at Paul, not certain I’d heard him right.

“From the look on your face,” Sherry said, “I’m guessing Paul hasn’t told you.”

“Told me what?”

“Let me tell him.” Paul stepped to the center of the group. “Regina gave you the nickname of Smoochy L—”

“Please,” Sherry uttered between gritted teeth. “I do not want to hear her name, especially from you.”

His shoulders slumped, and he glanced away.

Carson didn’t seem to catch the tension between Paul and Sherry. “Smoochy Lips?” He burst into his donkey laugh. “No wonder you didn’t want to sleep with her,” he said between gulps of laughter. “No telling what name Regina would’ve come up with if you weren’t any good in the sack.”

“Shut up, Carson.” Paul took a step closer. “Nobody wants to hear about Regina or her stupid nicknames.”

Carson continued to laugh. “I know you don’t want to hear it—Minute Man.”

Paul shuffled his feet around on the sidewalk, and his hands tightened into fists.

“Stop it.” Sherry grabbed his wrist. “You’ll both get kicked out of school.”

I wasn’t sure if Paul intended to throw a punch, so I stepped between them. I dug my elbows into each chest and shoved them apart. “Let’s forget about it. Who cares about any stupid nicknames?”

“She calls you *Hairless*,” Paul shouted around me to Carson.

“So?” Carson puffed out his chest, and his arms came up like he was going for a tackle. “That’s because I had to shave all my body hair to show my muscles for the junior body building championship at the county fair.”

“That was two months ago, but you still shave your body.” Paul’s tone changed to disgust. “That’s just weird.”

“Oh, yeah?” Carson said. “Well, I can always let my hair grow back, but you’re going to have to—” The ringing school bell drowned out the rest of his words.

“Let’s get to class.” I grabbed at Carson’s shoulder and pushed him toward the entrance, but he shrugged off my grip and turned back.

“Wow.” His tongue almost fell out of his mouth. “Get a load of that machine.”

We all glanced at the vehicle pulling up to the curb about thirty feet from where we stood.

“That’s a Hummer H3,” Carson said.

“It looks brand new.” Paul put his hand to his forehead to shade his eyes. “And check out that burnt orange color. That is so tight.”

“That’s called Solar Flare,” Carson corrected. “The car is last year’s Luxury model, but it looks cherry.”

I nodded in agreement. If the school gave grades for the knowledge of automobiles, Carson would get an A.

“Do any of you know who the driver is?” Sherry asked.

The glare of the sun on the tinted windows made it impossible to see inside. I glanced at the others, but they all shook their head.

“I don’t know who it belongs to,” Carson said, “but that is one sweet ride.”

The passenger door swung open. From my angle, all I made out was the sandal clad foot of a female stepping onto the curb. A well toned, bare calf appeared at the bottom edge of the door. As she stepped away from the car, my eyes scanned up the denim skirt that began at her knees and skimmed up her slim thighs and nicely shaped bottom. “Sweet is right,” I agreed.

“Damn,” Carson said. “I’d love to take that for a test drive.”

“Same here, but you’ll have to get in line behind me.”

“Brendon!” Sherry gave me a shocked look, but she quickly broke into giggles. “You’d better behave yourself.”

“What?” I raised my eyebrows and tried to press an innocent expression on my face. “I was talking about the car.”

“Sure you were.”

I glanced back at the girl. Her one hand gripped the open door. Her other held a backpack. She wore a blue tee shirt over a pink one. I never understood why girls wore two shirts. If they’re cold, why don’t they just put on a jacket?

“I’ll be fine, Mom,” the girl said to the driver. “I’ll wait right here for you to pick me up.”

She stepped back and shut the door. When she turned around, her head was down. Her long, blonde hair hung loose and I couldn’t see her face. Just as she reached the steps that led to the entrance of the school, she glanced at the four of us standing there. Her gaze darted to the sidewalk. She threaded her fingers through her hair, drawing it back across her face.

One glance was all I needed to catch the sparkle in her blue eyes. She didn’t wear any makeup—not that I noticed. Her eyelashes weren’t smeared with black goop, and her dark blonde eyebrows were undefined. Her clear skin glowed, and her lips glistened in a natural rosy shade. She seemed really shy. This might be the only time I’d be this close to her, so I made my move. “You must be new here.”

She shot me a quick look before glancing away, but her gaze returned, and she stared into my eyes.

I flashed my best smile. The corners of her mouth twitched, but she glanced down and her hair fell across her face. I couldn’t tell if she finished her smile, so I searched for something to say to make her look at me again, but my mind went blank.

Sherry came to the rescue. She thrust out her hand and introduced herself.

The new girl shook Sherry’s hand. “My name is Lisa Stratton.”

Lisa. I burned the name into my skull.

“These are my friends.” Sherry motioned with a flick of her hand as she introduced each of us.

When Sherry got to my name, Lisa looked directly at me and smiled. “You have really nice eyes.”

I stumbled for something clever to say, but her compliment threw me completely off guard and I blurted out the first thing that popped into my head. “My little brother thinks my eyes are weird.”

She shook her head as if disagreeing. Her gaze drifted, and she stared at the school entrance. Her body shifted like she intended to bolt for the front doors.

“Do you know where your first class is?” Sherry asked.

Lisa wrinkled her forehead, then thrust her hand into the backpack and pulled out a white sheet of paper.

Sherry craned her neck to look at the schedule. “Oh good, we have first period together. I’ll walk there with you and show you where it’s at. And you’re in my history class and gym.” Her finger slid to a spot halfway down the page. “You have Advanced Spanish right after lunch. Brendon’s in that class.” Sherry glanced at me, a sly smile on her lips. “I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to walk you to the last class so you don’t get lost.”

“Absolutely.” I fought the huge grin tugging at my lips. “It’ll be my pleasure.”