

## CHAPTER ONE: Beginnings

“NO! Leave me alone!”

A young boy crashed to his back, sliding on the grass. He looked up scornfully at three boys, each larger than him. He tried to get up, but one of the trio shoved him back down. The boy scrambled backward, trying to put some distance between him and the three brutes.

“Stay down, *Fenton*,” the bully said. He wasn’t the biggest of the three but was clearly the leader. “*Fenton*,” he mocked again. “It even *sounds* stupid.”

He stepped toward the boy, kicking aside a butterfly net as he did. “Did your parents not have the brains to come up with a normal name?” He lashed out with his foot, kicking Fenton in the stomach. “Oh, that’s right. You don’t have real parents. You’re *adopted*.” He glanced at the other two bullies and they laughed approvingly at his taunting.

Fenton lifted his chin, a smirk visible through the pain, “Seriously? That’s how you’re going to make fun of me? That I’m adopted, and my name sounds funny? You’re an idiot,” he laughed. “You don’t have parents either. And your name is *Darius*.”

Unprepared for this brave response, the bullies froze. The other two, Flat-top and Rings as Fenton thought of them, due to one’s haircut and the other’s numerous rings in his left ear, looked to Darius for a reaction. Fenton used this distraction to get to his feet. Darius stopped laughing, grabbed Fenton by the front of his shirt and shoved him against a tree. Fenton’s head made a hollow *thunk* when it connected.

Darius’ face twisted into a snarl and the shadows made his eyes appear completely black. “That’s right. I get to do whatever I want. No stupid parents telling me what to do.”

Holding Fenton against the tree, he pulled back his other fist to hit him in the face. But as he started his swing, a hand grabbed his wrist and stopped him

“Wha..?” Darius spun around and found himself face to face with another boy his age. A girl stood beside him.

“Stay out of this, Sam” he growled.

“Ok. Then stop picking on my friend,” replied Sam. He released Darius’ wrist and looked him in the eye. “Leave him alone and go pick on someone else.” Sam’s arms hung loosely at his sides, but each hand balled into a fist, ready if needed. Sam walked around Darius, never breaking eye contact, to stand next to Fenton. “Better yet,” he said, “don’t pick on anybody.”

Darius blew out his breath in disgust and jerked his head toward the street.

“Come on guys, let’s get out of here. It just turned into Dorksville.” He walked around his two followers and headed across the grass.

Flat-top shouldered Fenton, knocking backward into the tree again, and followed Darius. Rings, who was walking past the girl, laughed as Fenton yelped.

With a gentle tap of her left foot, the girl bumped Rings’ right foot as it came off the ground. His foot swung behind his left leg, colliding with his ankle as he took his next step. Tripping himself, he lost his balance and tumbled forward, grabbing the back of Flat-top as he went down. The two of them landed in a heap on the grass.

Darius looked back and glared at them. “Get up you morons.”

Flat-top pushed Rings off him and jumped to his feet, his hands clenched. Rings looked back at the girl as he picked himself up. She cocked her head and smiled sweetly at him.

Fenton knew the kid was stuck. He couldn’t say or do anything. He had just been bested by a girl but couldn’t admit it in front of Darius. Rings turned away quickly and pushed Flat-top toward Darius.

With one final dig, Darius looked at the girl, “Hey, Alexis. Too bad *you* weren’t the one who grabbed my hand. I would have liked that.” He winked at her and turned away.

“You wish!” she said.

Darius just laughed. “Someday,” he called over his shoulder. “Just wait. You’ll realize how awesome I am.” His two buddies slapped Darius on the back in agreement.

“Grrr,” Alexis growled. “He drives me so nuts!” She went over to Fenton and checked his head, “You’re bleeding.” Her eyes blazed with fire as her gaze shifted to where the bullies walked through the park. “This has happened too many times.” She bent down and picked up a golf ball-sized rock. She straightened and took aim.

“Don’t,” said Sam.

She ignored him and let the rock fly. It whistled through the air, crashing through tree branches fifteen feet to the left of Darius and his crew.

Darius turned at the sound. He kept walking as he watched the rock bounce off branches and tumble to the ground. Without breaking stride, he glanced back at Fenton and laughed.

“You throw like a girl” he snorted.

“That’s it!” she said. Her arms came up into a boxer’s pose and she started walking toward him.

Sam’s hand grabbed her arm. “It’s not worth it.” He smiled at her and laughed. “Plus, we already know you could take him.”

Fenton nodded in agreement.

Alexis sighed in resignation and looked at Fenton, “So what happened *this* time?”

“Nothing.”

Alexis pursed her lips and cocked her head to the side.

Fenton waved her off. "Honest! It was nothing. Darius was just being a jerk again." He turned to his rescuer, "Thanks, Sam. I owe you another one."

"No problem," said Sam. "Just glad we got here when we did."

Fenton straightened his shirt, "I could have stalled a little longer."

Alexis reached up and tapped the tree. "Is that what you call this? Stalling?" She put her hands on her hips.

"Stupid sister," Fenton muttered. "Let's just go home," he said. The other two nodded in agreement and, led by Sam, the three of them walked away, talking and laughing as they went.

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Sam and Alexis walked together as they made their way up the road that lead away from their town, into the hills. They crested a rise and stopped where the road branched to the right and left. The two of them waited patiently for Fenton who had fallen a few yards behind.

"Why...do...you guys...always want...to walk...so fast," he huffed between breaths.

"If you went outside more often, maybe walking home wouldn't be so hard," teased Alexis.

"Well...maybe...if you...didn't..." Fenton shook his head. "Never...mind."

Sam chuckled and said, "Meet you guys at the barn tomorrow?"

"Won't you want to hang out with your dad?" asked Fenton.

"No. We'll catch up tonight. Plus, he'll probably want to rest most of the day. He's usually wiped when he gets back. It'll be fine."

"OK," said Alexis.

Fenton nodded in agreement.

“Great. See you in the morning,” said Sam.

“Later, Sam,” said Fenton. He grabbed his sister’s arm and pulled her toward the road on the left. “Let’s go, Alex.”

Alexis smiled at Sam again, “See you at the barn.”

Sam watched them for a moment, then turned toward his home. For the moment, their two houses were the only ones on this hill above Cape Solid. They sat halfway to the top, at opposite ends of two dead-end roads. The distance was enough to provide privacy, but close enough to be within sight of one another.

Cape Solid sat nestled in a valley between this hill and a small mountain littered with shallow caves. A large grocery store sat on one side of the town, a department store on the other. In the middle of the town, surrounded by a few hundred homes, a couple dozen stores, and two large parks stood a quaint church. The crowd at the baseball field roared as the crack of a bat echoed up the hill. At the sound, Sam glanced back toward the town. He thought he saw an odd glow at the other park, but it disappeared as he peered toward it. Other than the baseball field, the rest of the town was quiet.

But in contrast to the small-town feel were the outskirts of the town. On both ends of the town sat construction sites. Dozens of homes and other assorted buildings were in different stages of completion.

Sam knew their town was growing. Buildings were being constructed as quickly as plans could be approved. And with this growth, he and his friends knew sooner, rather than later, they would have to share their hill with other homes and other families. But until then it belonged to them, including the barn situated over the next rise.

From Sam's house you could just see the peak of the barn. It belonged to Sam's dad, somehow connected to the property they owned. But his dad never went there. He had it periodically inspected for safety and had told the kids as long as it remained safe, they could have it to themselves. That suited them just fine. When they played there, it was their own world. Their sanctuary. It was secluded enough to feel as if they were in a far-off land.

Thinking about the barn and looking forward to tomorrow, Sam smiled as his friends walked away.