

## Chapter One



Jolene felt the colour flush her cheeks, spread around the contours of her chin and creep down her neck. Her teacher's words swirled around her ears. She stole a glance across the classroom at Michael, her twin brother. He was digging his thumbnail into the nicked edge of the desk as if he hadn't seen what Mrs. Perkins was holding.

"This summer," said Mrs. Perkins holding up a pile of turquoise coupons, "Jolene and Michael's father will be opening his new Museum of Disasters. Most of you will recall his visit to our class a few weeks ago." A snicker escaped from the back of the room.

Jolene closed her eyes, trying *not* to recall that exact same visit. Dad had been so excited about showing them the height of the flames that had burned some local grain ele-

vator decades ago that he had fallen off Mrs. Perkins' chair and landed spread-eagled on her desk.

"Mr. Fortini has kindly donated coupons good for one free visit to his museum for each student in this class." Mrs. Perkins' voice was on the move, coming in her direction. It stopped directly beside her. Jolene opened one eye and saw turquoise. "Would you like to pass them out please, Jolene?"

Painfully aware of her crimson face, Jolene rose slowly to her feet. Taking the coupons from her teacher's hand, she began placing them on the corner of each desk. She held her breath as she set one on Gerard's desk, then moved quickly to the next row.

Rachel picked up her coupon and read the printed message aloud. "Relive the disasters that many did not live through."

Curtis curled his between his fingertips. "Watch the flames leap into the sky like a dragon's breath," he proclaimed, mimicking her father.

"See the waters surge at the speed of light," quipped Cory.

Jolene tried not to listen, tried not to hear. Michael gave her a sympathetic smile as she returned to her desk, her hands empty.

"And now, before you leave for holidays — report cards!" exclaimed Mrs. Perkins, dropping a creamy envelope on Jolene's desk. Jolene slid the long sheet imprinted with the school logo out of the envelope. She scanned it quickly, then slipped it back inside as the bell rang. "Have a won-

derful summer. And good luck in grade seven,” their teacher called after them.

Outside, Jolene said her summertime goodbyes and headed for home. In past years, when school let out, she and Michael had raced the whole way, anticipating the freedom of late mornings, campouts in their fort, and best of all, beachcombing with their cousins on the west coast. But today she didn't feel like running. She didn't feel like celebrating.

She heard the thumping of Michael's feet as he ran to catch up with her. “Hey JoJo,” he called, using the childhood name that he still used when they were alone, “wait up.” Jolene slowed. Michael fell into step beside her, his dark wavy hair bouncing into place. He stared at her with the deep green eyes they had both inherited from their grandfather. “What's wrong?” he asked, catching sight of her long face. “Bad report card?”

It was a dumb thought, but then Michael was given to dumb thoughts on occasion. “Straight A's. How about you?”

“Well,” he said brightly, “I got a B in language arts, and a B in social studies.”

That was pretty good for Michael. He always had difficulty with the subjects that required a lot of writing.

“And I got an A in math,” he announced proudly, a long grin joining his dimples.

Jolene's eyes widened in surprise. Normally Michael got B's in math. Once, last year, he'd even had a C. “But I thought you . . . how'd you pull off an A?”

Michael's grin threatened to overrun his dimples. "Mr. Saunders gave me extra marks for going in that math competition — the one he wanted you to enter. Remember?"

Jolene remembered. Mr. Saunders had wanted her to represent the school in an interschool math competition. She'd declined, but Michael had entered it. And Mr. Saunders had given him extra marks for competing, extra marks for an extracurricular activity. That was hardly fair.

"You should have done it, Jo. I bet you'd have won the math award if you had."

Jolene felt her shoulders tighten. The math award had gone to Jeannette Stevens and now Jolene knew why. She'd been positive that she would win it. After all, she'd beat Jeannette on every test but one and she'd had near-perfect marks on all her assignments.

She remembered sitting in the gymnasium on awards night, feeling her heart speed up as Mr. Saunders took the microphone. She'd taken care to smooth the wrinkles out of her skirt and ensure that her sandals were buckled so that she wouldn't trip going up the steps to the stage. Mr. Saunders had given the usual prologue. "This year, the math award goes to an outstanding student, a girl who is always ready to take on a new mathematical challenge. I am delighted to call on this year's award recipient . . . Jeannette Stevens." Jeannette Stevens? Jolene had actually been in the process of pushing herself up out of her chair. Jeannette Stevens? How had it happened?

Now she knew. Jeannette had participated in the math

competition. Jolene kicked at a bottle cap and sent it clattering onto the road. She hated those contests — you never knew what they were going to ask you or if you were going to make a fool of yourself in front of all those people. Things like that didn't bother Michael so much. He was more like Dad.

“Dad shouldn't have handed out those coupons,” said Jolene, her speech following her thoughts.

“Why? Don't you think anybody will go?”

“They might, but I'm not sure that they should.” Michael looked up at her, confusion in his eyes. “We went to the museum last weekend while you were away at your swim meet,” said Jolene.

“And what's wrong with it?”

Jolene scraped her shoe along a crack in the sidewalk, remembering the displays. Huge, brilliant photographs lined the walls as backdrops. Artifacts, carefully dated and explained, were everywhere. And yet there was something missing. “It's so, so . . . dead,” she said finally. “It reminds me of social studies class.”

“Then he'll never make a go of it.”

“I know,” said Jolene. “That's the whole point.” Two years ago, Dad had given up his job as an engineer to work on his museum so that he could help preserve history. At first, she and Michael had loved the idea of putting fires, massacres, floods and mudslides on exhibit. But that was turning out to be much harder than any of them had thought. “He should have never started it.”

Michael's eyes registered his surprise. "But it's always been his dream. He loves history. I guess he inherited that from Gramps."

Jolene wasn't so sure. It was true that her grandfather loved to read about history and that he told stories about the past, but he wasn't like Dad at all. Grandpa's stories were funny and interesting and captivating. She and Michael had been listening to them for as long as Jolene could remember. Stories for bedtime, stories for special occasions, stories for no reason at all. "It's different with Dad," she said, a hint of irritation in her voice. "He gets all caught up in the details. You know — the way he marks Louis Riel's birthday in his day timer or plants a bean seed for every one of the victims of the Cypress Hills Massacre every year. It's strange."

Michael did not reply.

His silence bugged her. "He's going to end up looking like a fool when this Museum of Disaster opens." Jolene kicked at a loose pebble. "I wouldn't do it if I were him," she said. "It's going to be so embarrassing."

"Maybe," Michael said thoughtfully as they reached the driveway of their house, "but I guess when something's really important to you, you have to take that risk."

Jolene's response was drowned out by the sound of Dad's rusty pick-up truck. "Hey!" he called out the open window. "Look what I found today." He reached across the front seat and held up an old, sooty lantern.

“Good one,” called Michael.

Dad started towards the house, clutching the lantern close to his chest like a child having rediscovered a broken toy at the bottom of his toy box. Black streaks stained Dad’s shirt and hands, but he didn’t notice. “This lantern is very interesting,” he said aloud to nobody in particular. “It was first used in . . .” He disappeared inside the house.

“See what I mean,” Jolene told Michael.

“Yeah,” he agreed following his father with his eyes, but his face was lost in a boyish grin.

“Here’s to two great report cards,” said Grandpa, raising his water glass after Mom had served up supper.

Mom smiled. “It’s nice to see that math mark come up, son.” Mom was a professor in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at the university. Glasses clinked all around. Jolene waited for Mom to say something about her marks, but there was only silence. Had Mom forgotten that she’d got an A in math and every other subject as a final grade? That she’d brought home straight A’s in math all year? She took a sip of water. Or maybe Mom had just come to expect it.

“And here’s to successful seasons of swimming and gymnastics,” said Dad, proposing another toast.

“Yes,” agreed Mom. “You both did very well, but I’m certainly glad it’s over for a while. All that driving about.”

Again they clinked glasses. Jolene raised her glass, but did