

CHAPTER ONE

It was only the ceaseless *thump-thump-thump* of his brother's drumsticks against the back of his seat that kept Cody Cooper awake as his mother drove their minivan West along Interstate 80 out of Nebraska.

The dull drone of tires against asphalt would have knocked Cody out long ago, but his brother had been at it ever since they left Grand Island early that morning. He'd stopped only once when he had to help their dad change a flat tire on the moving van.

"I can help," Cody had offered, ducking as his brother squeezed out from behind him and slapped him on the back of the head.

"That's okay," his father had said. "Help your mother out with Kylee."

That was his dad's favorite expression. *Help your mother out with Kylee.*

Why couldn't Kevin be the one sitting next to the little drool monkey so he get toys thrown at *him*?

Cody looked at his little sister (who was asleep thankfully) then stared out the window - watching telephone poles come and go, come and go. Each one was a little bit further from everything and everybody he used to know...and a

little closer to some dumb little town he'd never even seen.

"You'll like it," his mother told him. "It's cozy."

He wasn't stupid. Cozy meant small, and small meant nothing to do, and no one to do it with.

Cody's hand went to the small plastic box that lay on his lap. Taped to the lid of the box was the DuelMonsters logo that he had drawn himself, it was just like the one on the TV show.

He retrieved a card from the box and turned it this way and that. Sunlight bounced across the foil-embossed, holographic surface. It was a Tenth Level Vampire Mage card, one of the rarest.

Every Saturday since at least the third grade, he and Ben had biked all over town scrounging up aluminum cans to get money to buy DuelMonsters decks.

Usually, they only had enough money for one deck and maybe a couple of candy bars. They would open the pack and play Rock-Paper-Scissors to see who got first pick. After they split the pack they would battle.

They both had pretty even card decks and they both won about half the time - until Ben got the Vampire Mage card a couple weeks ago, and then Cody hardly won against him at all. Ben gave him the card as a going away present.

The drumming on the back of Cody's seat stopped and he turned to see his brother whispering into his cellphone.

"Aww, is that your widdle honey-bunny?" Cody said quietly, making kissy faces and rolling his eyes.

His brother wacked him on the head with one of his drumsticks.

"Ow!"

Kylee woke up and began crying. Cody almost fell backwards as his mother let her foot off the gas. He quickly turned and saw her yank down the rearview mirror and fix them both with a look that could kill.

"Kevin hit me with a drumstick!"

"I was trying to make him sit back in his seat before he woke up the baby!"

"No you weren't," said Cody. "You were talking to your girlfriend!"

"Give me the cellphone, Kevin."

"But--"

"Remember our conversation about the cellphone bill, Kevin? Emergencies only. Give me the phone, now."

His brother slapped the cellphone into Cody's hand and he passed it up to his mother.

"It was an emergency, Mom," Cody couldn't help himself. "Kevin told her his heart had stopped beating."

Whack!

"Ow!"

"And the drumstick."

Cody flinched as his brother slapped the stick into his hand and dropped it into the baby's seat. Quick as lightning, Kylee grabbed it and began gnawing on it.

"Hey, that's one of my best sticks!" Kevin began.

"Now it's one of Kylee's."

Whack, the drumstick hit Cody on the head.

"Good," said Cody's mom, readjusting the mirror. "Keep your brothers in line. Now, I don't want to hear another word out of either one of you until we get to Colorado. Got it?"

They both nodded.

A minute later, Cody felt the other drumstick pressed against the side of his neck as his brother whispered into his ear.

"You better find a good hiding place when we get to the new house."

It was going to be a long ride.