

Chapter 1
Tan Man and the Shifties
Earth
Twelve Years Later

–TANNER–

See that kid over there? Yeah, he's cool, smart, good looking, muscular, and the girls love him. Fourteen-years-old with a great life in front of him. Unfortunately, that's not me. The only thing we have in common is our age, although you wouldn't know it to look at me. Life is so not fair.

I grew up in a small town outside of Wethersfield, Connecticut. In fact, I've never even been farther from home than Wethersfield. Oh, yeah . . . my name is Tanner. Tanner Ascunse. I know. Weird name. My parents are kind of weird, though. Believe it or not, I'm fourteen years old. I look like I'm about ten or eleven, though. I don't even have any hair, if you know what I mean. It's so embarrassing. I do anything I can to avoid the locker room so the bigger guys won't make fun of me.

It was so much better when I was younger. I mean, at least then I looked my age. Back then I fit in. I wasn't bad at soccer or baseball. I wasn't the best, but I sure wasn't the worst. I wasn't always the last one chosen for teams.

Everything started changing a couple of years ago when my friends started noticing I wasn't keeping up with them .

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. . . you know . . . size wise. The first day in middle school the gym teacher told us to change. When I took off my shirt they all pointed and called me “Baby Boy Ascunse.”

Humiliating.

Also, I break everything. Well . . . not everything, mostly video games and iPods and stuff. I don’t know how, but when I start to really get into a game or a song, the stuff just kind of fries or something. It usually starts working again after I give it back, but now I’m known as Tanner, the Techno Spammer. They’re not very creative as far as nicknames go, but you’ve got to give them credit for trying.

I do have a couple of good friends though. They’re kind of outcasts like me, but they are still good friends. There they are now. The really skinny one is Chucky. His name is Charles, but everyone started calling him Lucky Chucky because the teachers always seem to pair him up with the hottest girls in class. He’s real smart, so the girls don’t seem to mind. The other guy is named Frederick. Not Freddy or Fred. Frederick. He doesn’t like sharing his name with a nightmare or a cartoon so . . . you get the point.

Just when we start talking, I notice it happening again. Both of their mouths sag open, their heads tilt slightly, and a stupid-looking smile spreads across both of their faces. This *always* happens. It isn’t only them. Idiot guys all around stop what they’re doing and try to look cool. My friends don’t look cool; they just look like dorks.

Ryland must be in view somewhere. Ryland’s my sister. My little sister. Did I mention that life isn’t fair? Well . . . Ryland is the proof of that. She’s twelve.

Twelve!

It’s no wonder she’s the most popular girl in school. She looks like she’s about fifteen or sixteen. As far as looks go . . . she’s about as perfect as a girl can get. Perfect blonde hair—like shampoo commercial perfect, perfect body—which I don’t want to describe because she’s my sister—and

bright green, yellow, blue eyes. Seriously, her eyes sparkle with all of those colors.

Did I mention I hate her? I'm pretty sure the feeling is mutual.

Ryland comes up behind me. As per usual her disciples Melinda and Alice are trailing along.

"Hi, Charles. Hi, Freddy," Ryland says.

I can't even describe the sounds they make in response. It's kind of a gurgle followed by a nervous laugh. Alice and Melinda chuckle to each other. They always enjoy seeing the boys so flustered.

"Tanner, Mom says we have to go straight home today. She wouldn't tell me what's up," Ryland says.

"Whatever," I say back.

"She sounded serious so just do it!" she demands.

"Okay, I will," I reply, totally annoyed.

We were going to go over to Frederick's house, but when Mom gets serious, we usually do what she says.

"Bye, guys," Ryland says as she wiggles her fingers, and the three girls head off to the bus stop.

Both of my dorky friends look like they're in a trance as they strain to capture every view they can of my sister as she walks away.

"Stop looking at my sister's butt!" I say sternly.

"I can't help it," Chucky says dreamily.

"So perfect . . . like an angel . . . like a totally hot angel," Frederick mutters in a daze, not taking his eyes off her.

She finally makes it around the corner, and the trance is broken. Conversations pick up all around us. Girls hit their boyfriends, and guys futilely try to apologize.

"You're so gross," I say. "Seriously, what's up with everybody? She's twelve!"

"She called you Freddy," Chucky says as he hits Frederick's bicep.

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“Hey . . . as long as she calls me, I don’t care,” Frederick says.

—RYLAND—

I don’t think it’s fair that Tanner gets to talk first, but as usual, he’s clinging to his “big” brother title. As if.

Like he said, my name is Ryland, but you can call me Ry. I’m twelve years old, and despite my ridiculous dork of a brother, I’m pretty freaking awesome.

I mean, it isn’t my fault my brother is a prepubescent weirdo at age fourteen. I didn’t make him a runt. I’m just not one.

Anyway, when school ends, I’m in a hurry to catch the bus. I stood giggling at Melinda’s gawky, awkward, almost inaudible attempts at flirting for way too long after the bell rang.

Unfortunately, we take public transportation at our school, so the bus I ride isn’t the same as Alice or Melinda. Tanner doesn’t ride with me either because one time he fritzed out and totally destroyed this junior’s iPod. He said if he ever saw Tanner on the bus again, he’d kick his butt.

I probably should’ve stepped in to protect him, but I was laughing way too hard. I swear, I almost wet myself. It was great.

So, I catch the bus just in time and notice this same kid sitting in the back, clinging to his backpack. He’s cute, but he’s been giving me the creeps for a few days. He doesn’t glance at me or check me out; he just watches me. Closely.

I tried telling Tanner and our older brother, Bryce, yesterday, but they shrugged it off. “So, you have another admirer? Who cares?” Tanner snapped.

If I get murdered, I hope he blames himself.

I think about going over and demanding to know what his problem is, but my stop’s coming up. I can’t miss it. Not today. Something’s up with Mom.

When I step off the bus, he's still watching me. He doesn't even glance away. He meets my eyes, unafraid.

I notice his eyes are strange, like mine. They flit between blue and green and gray. I almost feel myself getting lost in the sadness in his eyes, but the bus door closes as it pulls away.

I shake my head, promising myself that tomorrow I'll talk to him, find out why he's following me. For today, I have to get home.

We only live two blocks from the bus stop, so I'll beat Tanner home by about fifteen minutes. When I get home, I walk through the back door and into the kitchen. Peanut, my little sister, is sitting on the floor coloring.

Her real name isn't Peanut; it's Penelope. But really, who names their kid Penelope anymore? We all just call her Peanut. She's six, but she only goes to kindergarten in the morning, so she's home before me.

"Ry!" She screams as she jumps up to throw her little arms around my thighs, smearing what appears to be peanut butter all over my expensive jeans.

I must say, Tanner is an annoying brat, but I love Peanut. Not all siblings are awful.

I pick her up, and she wraps her little arms around my neck, clinging to me instantly. "Shhh . . ." she whispers in her little kid way. "They're having the study today. There's a 'mergency with the Shifties."

I laugh. "Mom's having Bible study today? But it's Tuesday."

Mom isn't religious. We never go to church or anything, but she's got this Bible study that meets at our house every other Wednesday, like it's the most important thing in the world.

Which would be why we had to come home. On Bible study nights, we're in charge of Peanut. And dinner.

Shifters

“I told you!” Peanut whispers loudly, “There’s a ‘mergency! The Shifties!”

Peanut’s little face scrunches all up, and I realize she’s actually scared. “Calm down. What are Shifties?”

Peanut’s brown eyes grow into huge round discs. “They’re bad guys, Ry. They’re looking for you.”

I would laugh, but Peanut looks terrified. Something is going on. I move to put her down, but she clings to me. “You can’t go in there, Ry! Mom doesn’t want to tell you and Tan Man.”

Mom’s keeping a secret from me and Tanner? Now I need to know. I sit and wait for Tanner to get home, keeping Peanut calm by coloring with her.

When he walks in, I jump up. “Tanner, I need you to watch Peanut for a minute. I need to . . . go outside!”

Tanner looks confused, but when Peanut tackles him yelling, “Tan Man,” I grab my bag and dart out the back door.

I sneak around to the front of the house then into the bushes under the front windows. Just my luck, Mom has left them cracked for a breeze. Inside, my mom’s Bible study is whispering in angry tones.

“I don’t want them to know! They’re safe now!” Mom pleads with David, the leader of the group.

David sighs heavily. “They need to know who they are, what they are. They are not safe.”

“They’re my children, my children!”

“They are not. They’re the future.”

My heart stops, and I stumble away from the window. Not her children? That can’t be true.

“I know that. I know. They’re special. Shifters. Will they really be safer if they know?”

David frowns. “I don’t know. We need to go; they’re home.”

Douglas and Angelia Pershing

I sneak around back and rejoin Tanner and Peanut.
“What was that all about?” Tanner snaps.
I just shake my head. “I don’t know,” I say softly.

Shifters

Chapter 2 *An Extremely Slow Stalker*

—TANNER—

Since I can't ride the bus anymore because of the infamous iPod incident—which was totally not my fault—it takes me longer to get home. Wouldn't you know it, as soon as I walk in the door, Ryland pawns Peanut off on me. Don't get me wrong . . . I love Peanut, but it's a long walk, and I'm tired.

“Okay, let's get you cleaned up,” I say as I wet down a paper towel.

She scrunches her cute little face as I wipe the smeared peanut butter off. I join her on the floor and start coloring with her. She loves it when we get on the floor with her.

“So, what's with Ry?” I ask casually.

“She's spyin' on the study and the Shifties.”

“A study? On a Tuesday? Okay then.”

We color until Ryland quietly comes back in. I ask her what's going on. She won't say, but I can tell it's something big.

She motions her head toward Peanut.

“Secret meeting?” I ask.

Ryland nods absentmindedly.

Whenever something is bothering either one of us, we call a secret meeting, meaning we meet in Ryland's room when everybody is asleep. We've been doing it since

we were little. Because I share a room with Bryce and his annoying, non-stop nightmares and Peanut has the nursery, Ryland's room is the only private place we have. We talk about everything there. Don't get me wrong, I do hate my sister, but she's the only one I can really talk to.

Mom and Dad come into the kitchen. Dad scoops up Peanut and says, "How's about you and I go and watch some cartoons while your mom makes us some dinner?"

Mom's making dinner on a study night? That's weird. Must have been a short meeting.

"Dora?" Peanut asks excitedly.

"Whatever you like," Dad says with an easy smile.

"Yay!" Peanut cheers, squirming as she hugs his neck.

Mom kind of smiles and gives me a hug.

Creepy.

Ryland looks like she might be sick.

Dinner is strange. Mom forces a smile all night even as she and Dad exchange nervous glances. Ryland looks like she wants to say something, but she never does.

When everybody's in bed, I sneak into Ryland's room. At first, I can't see her. She's usually sitting on her bed reading, doing her nails or other weird girl stuff. Then I see her. She's on her knees, peeking out her window.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

"Get down. Come over here," she whispers, waving her hand at me.

I get down on the floor and crawl over to her. "What is it?" I hiss.

"Remember that guy I told you about? From the bus?"

"The new admirer? Sure, why?" I ask incredulously, unsure what this has to do with our bizarre family dinner.

"I think he's out there."

"Like a real stalker?" This is not a joke anymore. Nobody scares my sister. "Where?" I ask.

"Across the street. By the tree."

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I focus on the tree and stare. Then, I see a movement. I quickly duck my head.

“Holy crap! There is somebody there!” I whisper. “How do you know it’s him?”

“Look at his eyes. They’re like mine. I’ve never seen eyes like that before.”

“You can see his eyes from here?” I ask, kind of puzzled. “He must be fifty yards away, and it’s dark.”

“You can’t?” she mutters. She really seems surprised I can’t see them. “Just look!”

I stare through the darkness, and he steps away from the tree. I can see his eyes . . . kind of. Well . . . I think I can.

“Are they blue or green?”

“Yeah, both. I knew you could,” she says with a kind of understanding. “I’m going out there.”

“What? No you’re not!” I whisper as sternly as I can.

“Then you go out there!” she whispers. “I need to know what he wants.”

To tell you the truth, venturing out in the dark to confront a stranger with creepy eyes has never been on the top of my list of things I plan on doing. But if my sister is in danger, I’ll do it. Well . . . I guess I will.

Ryland must have read the fear on my face. “We’ll both go then,” she says resolutely.

I nod in agreement.

—RYLAND—

I’m taking over now because, honestly, you’d rather listen to me anyway. Tanner does not know how to tell a story. Because this part is scary.

So, Tanner and I aren’t allowed to go out this late. Therefore, sneaky is the key. To, you know, sneak out of the house to sneak up on my sneaky stalker. I know, that’s a lot of sneakiness. Keep up.

Of course, Tanner is the clumsiest brother on the planet. I swear, it's like he's trying to undermine me whenever possible. He trips on the squeaky stair, jams his toe on the coffee table, and hits the back door against the counter. Come on! That counter doesn't even move!

So, we finally get outside and begin to sneak toward the front of the house. I give Tanner the harshest glare I possibly can. He'd better be quieter.

I am glad he's with me though; I admit that grudgingly. I know he's a dork and will be totally useless protecting me, but at least I'm not alone.

We split up at the edge of the house. I cross the street as stealthily as a cat. If he sees anyone, it won't be me. I crouch just on the far side of the street behind a parked car. I peek my head out just far enough to catch a glimpse of him.

For the second time, I find myself distracted by him. He looks about fifteen with silver-gold hair glinting in the moonlight. He's tall and fit. Despite the chill in the air, he wears the same t-shirt from this afternoon, backpack still attached to him like a fifth appendage.

Of course, as I'm studying him (trying to convince myself that creepy stalkers are not cute!), Tanner trips the car alarm half a block down. Stalker boy freaks. He takes off sprinting in my direction.

So what does the twelve-year-old girl do? Jumps out and tackles him, of course! 'Cause that's the smart thing to do.

We crash to the ground at the base of our neighbor's maple tree. He scrambles up and dives for his bag. I see a flash and realize that's a knife in his hand. He grabbed a knife.

I feel my heart scream in my chest, and then . . . everything stops. Or not exactly.

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Tanner is still running toward me, but he's moving slowly. Like through molasses. And the stranger is looking at me, knife in hand, terror on his face.

I move toward him, wave my hand in front of his eyes. They're still staring where I was, but his expression is slowly changing, very slowly.

He expected someone more frightening than me, I suppose. The girl you're stalking doesn't usually tackle you. Not that I would know. I'm not a stalker.

I take the knife from him, but he doesn't react. I feel my heart slow down now that the danger's gone.

Suddenly, the world catches up with me. Tanner reaches me in seconds, and the stranger looks at his empty hand then at me, brilliant eyes wide.

"Ry?" Tanner asks. "Ry, how'd you do that? Why do you have his knife?"

Tanner is panicking. I'm panicking. What is going on?

"Who are you?" I snap.

He smirks, just a little. A twitch at the corner of his mouth. "Ry, you just Shifted."