

CHAPTER 1

August 1975

“Tyler residence.”

“Tyler residence,” Joey Gardner’s mocking voice repeated, followed by a staccato burst of high-pitched laughter. “Hey, dork. How come Caroline didn’t pick up?”

“She’s at Grace’s ‘playing canasta’ or whatever they supposedly do while they get hammered,” Danny Tyler replied. It had become a private thing between them that summer, referring to their parents and their parents’ friends by first names. “You just get back from your grandparents?”

“Like an hour ago.”

“How was it?”

“Lame. What are you doing?”

“Nothing.” Danny absently tried to unkink the phone cord. “Just hanging out, listening to music.”

“What?”

“*Dark Side of the Moon.*”

“Dude, give it a rest. That album is like two years old. *Captain Fantastic* is ten times better.”

“Elton John is for fags,” Danny replied.

“Then Jerry must love him,” Joey cracked.

Danny laughed despite the mild sting. “Yeah, probably,” he said. He’d stopped feeling an obligation to defend his father around the time Jerry had stopped feeling an obligation to be a husband and father and had followed his boyfriend, “Karl...with a K,” to Manhattan. Danny picked up the phone and flopped onto the black bean bag next to his desk.

“So you alone?” Joey asked.

Danny smiled at the flutter of excitement in his voice. "Yeah, but not for much longer."

"Does that mean I can come over?"

"No, it means Caroline's going to be home in like twenty minutes."

There was a brief pause, then, "So? We've done it faster than that before." There was a hint of pleading in Joey's voice now. "I'm wicked horny."

"Try using your hand."

"But you feel so much better."

Danny felt his penis suddenly twitch to life. "No way," he said quickly, trying to ignore it. "The last time she almost caught us."

"Well, what about after she goes to bed?" Joey pressed.

"Too risky. She hasn't been sleeping well lately. She keeps getting up and walking around the house."

"But you said she never comes into your room because she's afraid she'll catch you jerking off."

"That was before those kids got killed. Now she checks up on me like every hour." It was half of the truth. He decided to leave out her drunken tears and that it had been going on since long before the first murder.

"Come on," Joey whined. "It's been almost a week." He paused, then added, "We can do *whatever* you want."

Danny unconsciously adjusted the crotch of his tan corduroys as he checked the glowing dial of the clock on his dresser. It was almost 9:30 PM. He did a quick mental calculation. "Okay, but let's meet up instead."

"Isn't she going to notice you're gone?"

"Probably, but not until after she has her night cap. I figure I have at least an hour before she calls the cops."

And if I'm lucky, she'll pass out in front of the TV as soon as she gets home.

"You sure?" Joey asked with uncharacteristic worry.

"Yeah. I'll meet you behind your house."

"Why don't we just meet at Lovers' Rock? It'll be faster."

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“I don’t want you in the woods by yourself,” Danny replied, surprising himself with the urgency of his tone.

“Why not?”

“Duh. Because four kids have been killed, including one who lived three houses from you.”

Joey laughed. “Right. Like the killer’s just happens to be in the woods behind my house right now. Don’t be such a pussy.”

“I’m serious,” Danny replied more insistently.

“What about you?” Joey argued. “You could get killed on the way here.”

“No, because I’m much less of a pussy than you are, and I’m a much faster runner.”

“Whatever.”

“So are you going to wait?” Danny asked, but all he heard was loud chewing. “Promise, or I’m not coming.”

Joey sighed resignation. “Fine.”

The tension in Danny’s shoulders loosened slightly. “Cool. I’m on my way. Meet me behind your garage in ten minutes.”

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Joey collapsed against Danny’s back. Usually one of them would have made a joke about the farting sound, but now Joey just kissed the back of Danny’s damp neck.

“Thanks. I so needed that,” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

“Me, too,” Danny sighed.

Joey’s arms slipped under his chest and hugged him tightly.

“I wish we could stay here like this all night,” Joey said.

Danny had fooled around with a few other guys from school in the past, but it had always been awkward and fumbling, followed by guilty silence and weeks of avoidance. With Joey it was different. Though Joey could be aggressive, bordering on violent, as he worked toward orgasm, after he was always gentle and affectionate, and seemed almost desperate to remain together, as if he needed assurance that their connection was more than

just sexual. Danny was always surprised by how soft and yielding Joey's body became in those moments.

"Yeah, that would be awesome," he deadpanned. "Especially when the cops found us in the morning."

For a moment Joey didn't respond, then he yanked his hands from under Danny and rolled onto his back. "Don't be a dick."

"Sorry," Danny said. He'd always understood the physical and friendship parts of their relationship, but was still learning to navigate the new terrain that seemed beyond both of those.

He rolled to face Joey and draped his left arm across Joey's chest. Joey didn't react, just stared hard at the sky.

"I really am sorry," Danny tried again, kissing Joey on the cheek. "I wish we could stay here, too."

"Like that's ever going to happen," Joey said.

Danny sensed he was talking about something more than just spending the night together, but didn't know how to articulate the thought. He settled for, "Why not?" then felt stupid.

"Because 'love was meant for beauty queens,'" Joey said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Danny asked. He studied Joey's profile. Even in the dim light of the half moon he could see Joey's eyes start to shine.

Joey sighed, wiped the back of his right hand across his face, and tried a smile. "Nothing," he said. "It's just a stupid song." He sat up and grabbed his shirt from the blanket. "We should get going before Caroline loses her shit."

Danny frowned, but nodded. "Yeah, you're probably right."

CHAPTER 2

February 1987

He was falling, his heart banging. He could see his arms flailing and his hands clawing at the air, but beyond them was just blackness. He closed his eyes, waiting for the impact.

Suddenly he felt warm gentle pressure moving in a slow circle across his chest.

“Enough with Jane Fonda already,” a flat nasal voice said. “Yes, she’s talented, but do they have to give her an Oscar every year? And I like that Sissy Spacek, but she’s already won, too.”

Danny knew the voice, but couldn’t remember how.

“Time to give someone else a chance, I say, though I’m not so sure about Sigourney Weaver. I mean, all she had to do the whole movie was look determined but hot. I could do that. Well, I could look determined, anyway.” The woman paused for a moment, then continued thoughtfully, “Actually I might just look constipated.” She chuckled. “Personally, I’d vote for Kathleen Turner. I thought she was adorable in those little sweaters. But you know me, I’ll probably change my mind a hundred times before the ceremony.”

Abby, Danny thought.

The hand stopped and the voice came back, much closer, urgently. “Danny, honey, did you say something? Danny? Stay with me, honey. Stay with me!”

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Danny opened his eyes. The lights were off but the sunlight filtering through the curtains told him it was long past morning. He wondered if he’d been asleep for hours or days this time.

It had taken him the better part of two days to break through the haze for a few minutes. He'd been conscious of the buzz of activity around him, of people coming and going, but hadn't been able to react. Finally he'd managed to open his right eye for a short while. It wouldn't have caused more excitement if he'd shit a gold brick.

He'd drifted off again quickly, but it had been a different level of unconsciousness. He'd still felt connected to his surroundings, and had awoken remembering fragments of dreams. At one point he thought he heard Jerry and Caroline arguing, though after he wasn't sure if it had been real or just a memory.

On Monday afternoon he'd finally been able to respond to questions, though his throat began to hurt almost immediately and he had trouble finding and forming words. Hearing his own voice for the first time had been a shock. It wasn't just the raspiness or lack of clarity and modulation, but that it was the voice of a man.

He'd been told he was at Shady Meadows, a long-term nursing facility, but not why or for how long. He knew it had been a very long time. He was unable to sit up or lift his head on his own, and he'd seen the wasting of his muscles and the hair on his body that hadn't been there before.

He stared hard at his twisted left arm and willed it to move.

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"Ten more seconds, Danny! You're almost there!"

The muscles in Danny's legs, butt, and lower back quivered. Sweat stung his eyes. His t-shirt was plastered to his torso.

"Five, four, three, two...one!"

Danny sagged down into the safety harness and let out a gasping breath. A cramp threatened his left calf for a moment, then the muscle released.

"Good job," the physical therapist said, wheeling the chair in behind Danny. "Next time we'll go for two minutes."

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Danny gulped air and shook his head. "One more time."

"Sorry, man. Can't do it. I've got another session."

"Then just let me stay here for another couple of minutes. I'll be fine. Abby can come get me."

"No, that's enough for one day," the therapist said. "You can't expect to undo twelve years of atrophy in a month. You have to pace yourself. Remember, recovery is a marathon, not a sprint."

The sports metaphor set Danny's teeth on edge. He twisted sideways and gave the man a scornful look. "You can either let me stay here where I have this nice harness to keep me from cracking my head open, or I can practice in my room with all the sharp edges. Your choice."