

Chapter 1

Monday, January 14, 1980

He still ached, but it had only been three days. The researcher massaged his left shoulder as he guided his new assistant, Harold Lee, through a maze of laboratory stations in the huge lab.

"Be sure not to touch anything," he said. And he himself sure as hell wasn't going to touch anything either. Not anything inside one of the cocoons anyway.

Each research station consisted of several worktables, two computer terminals connected to the mainframe, and a cocoon. They weren't really cocoons, but someone had called them that over a year ago, and it had stuck. At one station the cocoon was a cage holding a cat. Another cocoon had a cage with a few mice. But the cocoons didn't always consist of metal cages. The alligator cocoon took up a whole corner of the room and held a nearly complete ecosystem, like you might see in a zoo. The largest cocoon took up the whole north wall, a six-inch sheet of reinforced, double-skin Plexiglas containing the dolphin cocoon, just like the whale tanks at Sea World.

But here the dolphin wasn't really a dolphin, and the cat wasn't really a cat. His team had changed them. They had fourteen stations so far, and they'd have more by the end of the year.

"Are all these animals part of the program? Were they created here?" The assistant, twenty-something and green as hell, showed the same curiosity they'd all shown in the beginning. Few people ever saw this, fewer still knew the details.

"Yeah. We're mostly tinkering with these, but we've struck gold in a few cases. Come over here." He guided the young man toward the mice.

Three mice sat inside a four-foot-cubed metal cage. One of the mice ran on a wheel, the metal rungs whirling around in a blur. The other two mice slept. The assistant bent down to inspect the one closest to the edge, its body resting against the cage's metal bars.

"It looks gross. What the hell is it?" he asked.

"It's just a mouse."

The assistant looked up with disbelief, and the researcher smiled. It obviously wasn't a mouse. The furry, webbed wings made it something else entirely.

"Okay, it's not just a mouse. We found a gene in the long-eared bat that is responsible for the development of wings, and we successfully transferred that gene to common field mouse embryos. These mice are the result."

The mice looked ordinary except for the thin, nearly transparent wings that curled around their bodies. They moved differently than other mice, using their hind legs rather than running on all fours, but they moved so quickly that it was difficult to tell. The mouse on the wheel seemed to move more efficiently than

regular mice. It stood on its hind legs and leaned into its run, spinning the wheel in a noisy, rhythmic cycle, never relying on front paws.

The assistant leaned closer to the sleeping mouse.

"It looks weird. The wings have the same color fur as the rest of its body, but I can still see the digits of the wings, just like a bat. Can it fly?"

"Not so far. They can move their wings and flap them, but their bodies are too heavy for flight."

The assistant, mindful of the instruction not to touch, moved his fingers near the cage, an inch from the mouse resting on the other side of the bars. He wiggled his fingers back and forth, trying to get the mouse's attention. One eye opened and stared at the waving fingers, but otherwise the mouse showed no reaction.

"Be careful. These things aren't dumb, and they aren't very nice either." The researcher looked at the chimp cocoon and massaged his shoulder again, as though displaying proof.

The mouse kept its one eye open, watching the assistant's fingers. Then in a flash it launched, turning its body and forcing its teeth through the bars, reaching toward the fingers with its sharp incisors, too quick for the assistant to register the attack. For a fraction of a second its tiny face strained against the bars, reaching half an inch beyond the confines of the cocoon but missing its target.

But where teeth failed, claws would succeed, and an instant later-before the assistant could pull his hand away-its right paw stretched through the bars, scratching the assistant's index finger with one tiny claw. The other sleeping mouse no longer slept. It leapt from the center of the cage and onto the bars, midway between the cage's floor and ceiling and inches from the assistant's face.

It also reached out with teeth and claws, but fell far short of inflicting any harm. As he pulled back, the assistant noticed the third mouse had left its wheel, and a split second later it also leapt-no, it flew-it must have used its wings-onto the bars, joining in the attack.

As the mice struggled with the cage bars, the researcher handed his new assistant a tissue as the young man stepped back and grasped his finger, squeezing a bead of blood from the tip.

"That's your first lesson. Always mind the cocoons."

Chapter 2

Wednesday, June 29, 1988

Five years had passed since Tommy had started a fire and made a new best friend all in the same week. His mom had always said when one door closes, another opens up, and he'd found this to be true. Since becoming best friends

with David the two boys rarely spent a single day apart. Tom Becket had learned much from David Horn. They'd learned from each other.

Last May, when Tom had turned sixteen, he'd convinced his mom to let him spend most of the summer at a youth camp sponsored by the school, a six-week program at a North Florida ranch with over a hundred other boys and girls attending. Tom's sister Sara had wanted to go along. The thought of spending a whole summer around David excited her, but her mother had convinced her she wouldn't be allowed to go since it was only for kids who were Tom's age.

So Sara had contented herself with her paintings.

At Christmas when Sara was seven years old Aunt Maggie had given her a paint set. Within a month Sara had asked her mom to buy replacement paints. Sara had instantly fallen in love with painting and had improved her skills with every new work of art. Although not in Tom's vocabulary, the word prodigy described Sara since she'd always had a talent well beyond her years.

Alice had encouraged her daughter to continue her hobby and occasionally spent a portion of their limited income on new paints and brushes. She could see Sara might one day become an exceptional artist and never threw away any drawing, painting, or spontaneous doodle Sara created, whether they were created on canvas or on scrap pieces of paper.

Sara had never drawn anyone she personally knew, and her mom had always thought she'd gotten her ideas from television. In every image Sara created, Tommy and his mom had never once recognized the subject, be it a person or place.

Years had passed since then, and as a teenager Sara still amazed people with her artistic ability. She still derived immense satisfaction and fulfillment from her creations. Painting had always been her release, her escape, so she felt a slight disappointment after hearing she'd have to stay home while Tom went off to summer camp with David, yet at the same time she also looked forward to having time alone to paint without her big brother getting in the way all summer long. Maybe it wouldn't be a summer of excitement, but it would be a terrific summer nonetheless.

Tom on the other hand felt nothing but excitement.

This trip thrilled Tom in a way he would never duplicate for the rest of his life. He was experiencing independence for the first time. He felt grownup: living in the real world and making his own decisions. For the first time he interacted with girls his age outside of school, and one in particular had caught his eye.

In truth, this girl went out of her way to capture Tom's attention, so he'd never had much choice in the matter. Girls had never found Tom attractive in the past. His scrawny build and average face didn't repulse them, but he was a rather average looking brown-haired, brown-eyed kid. David, with his sleek, muscular body and dark ebony skin, had always been the one to attract the girls. David had the brawn, the brains, and was the life of the party. He had that certain charisma and charm that Tom lacked. Tom's charm mostly consisted of fumbling and stammering, so when Monica Sheppard started flirting with him, he'd had no chance. He'd developed an instant crush on the girl, falling helplessly under her spell.

The ranch contained two-dozen large cabins on the property, with each cabin holding five teens. While the camp provided a learning experience for both males and females, they separated the kids by gender after curfew to avoid potential improprieties. Assigned chaperones watched each cabin, with the girls occupying cabins on the far side of the ranch, away from the boys.

It had taken merely a week and a half for a few teenagers to figure out a way around these barriers. One night, after their chaperone had fallen asleep, Monica and two girlfriends snuck out, leaving pillows and blankets in their beds as a disguise in case the chaperone woke during the night. They simply explored the ranch the first few times they'd gone out. They wanted to see if they could get away with it. They visited the same spring-fed lake they enjoyed with the rest of the camp during hot afternoons, daring to skinny-dip alone under the nearly full moon that first night.

Over the next couple of nights, their excursions gave them more confidence, and they considered taking some horses from the stables to go on a moonlight ride. But they abandoned their attempt after a light went on in the head counselor's farmhouse and instead hauled butt back to the cabin at lightning speed. The next day they expected an investigation, or at least a few questions, but it appeared their nighttime adventures had gone undiscovered.

By the end of the second week Monica talked to Tom and David about their adventures and invited the boys along. While Tom worried about getting caught, David wanted to sneak out. Tom reluctantly agreed to go along, and the five teenagers met on the lakeshore that same night at midnight. Tom hated breaking the rules, and with only David goading him into it, he would have stood firm and

said no. But he had no defense for Monica's enticing voice and agreed within seconds of hearing her sweet whispers in his ear talking about the good times they'd have.

And they did have a good time. They easily made their stealthy exit from the cabin after their chaperone fell asleep, and the boys went straight to the lake to find the girls talking and laughing. At first Tom felt timid. He had almost no experience with girls other than his sister, and while he wanted to display David's easy charm, the three girls they'd met just two weeks earlier scared him silly. The five of them all lived in the same area and knew the same movie theaters and malls, but they'd never met prior to camp because they went to different schools in Orange County, Florida. Coming to camp opened up a greater field of potential friends, and that meant a better chance of Tom meeting his first girlfriend. This idea petrified him and excited him at the same time.

So with the chance directly at hand, no charming ideas came to him. He felt awkward.

David saw his friend's discomfort and took the lead by making jokes, putting the girls on-edge and deflecting attention away from Tom. This gave him time to get comfortable with the situation. By the time Monica took his hand to go for a short walk, he could talk with her without feeling like an idiot. He had already talked to Monica a few times during camp activities, but he'd never spent time alone with her. The close proximity to someone so pretty excited him, and when they sat against a cypress tree away from the others, he found himself feeling better.

She had never made him feel like an outcast, as some did, and she talked to him as an equal, without pity. Monica saw Tom's sensitive, caring side. The macho display of most boys repulsed her. She liked caring boys, dismissing the ones who only wanted to get into her pants.

While Tom felt the normal urges of a teenage boy, he lacked the courage to pursue anything sexual with a girl. The thought never occurred to him as they sat in the moonlight, having their first private conversation.

Her black hair rolled in soft curls past her shoulder blades, and her lush eyebrows highlighted a twinkle in her eyes when she smiled. She wasn't fat, but she did carry a few extra pounds. She liked it that way, because it gave her a voluptuous look. Her hips were wider than most girls, but they added to her hourglass figure. She also liked having a larger than average bosom, something she tended to flaunt, though she'd never admit it. And she did like to jog occasionally so that her weight didn't soar beyond those few extra pounds. She looked fit, but not toned. She looked gorgeous to Tom, but at the moment he felt none of the sexual urges you might expect from a boy sitting next to a girl in the dark on a romantic evening. He just liked sitting next to her.

The conversation became easy, relaxed. Then the conversation stopped altogether, replaced by a silence brought on by familiarity rather than nervous tension. They enjoyed a comfortable, peaceful silence. A shared silence.

Monica watched the water ripple toward the shore, the moonlight caught by each tiny wave and sparkling like thousands of diamonds on the surface. Tom stared at her face, limned by the same silver glow of moonlight to make her look angelic. A beauty by almost any boy's standards, Monica could have her choice of

dates on a Friday night. He had no idea why she wanted to spend this romantic lakeshore evening with him, for he saw himself as an average teenager with an unappealing intellect.

Monica never noticed. The qualities most people found unappealing in Tom attracted her. She laughed at his simple views about life, and it was a complimentary laugh born of admiration. Tom's refreshing spirit appealed to her. She marveled at how Tom intuitively knew what she felt, and he also knew when to shut up and listen. Twice she'd felt crappy during those team-building sessions the head counselor made them participate in. Both times he had comforted her from a distance, without imposing. He had stood by her and quietly offered friendship.

She liked his easy-going manner; how nothing bothered him. For Tom's part, he liked having any girl flirt with him. His small, thin features made him mildly handsome but had yet to entice girls to flock to him.

"I wish we were going to the same school," Monica said.

"Me too, but another part of me is glad we go to different schools," Tom replied.

"Why's that? You don't like me?" She said this with a coy smile and a twinkle in her eyes. Tom was looking out over the water and missed her teasing look.

"Oh no! I like you a lot and I..." Then he looked over and saw her expression, her smile as contagious as it was beautiful, and smiled also. She tried to stifle a laugh, but it came out anyway—a hearty laugh from her gut, yet still exquisitely feminine. Tom's shock was endearing, and she leaned over and kissed him on the

cheek. She lingered close, and then lowered her head against his shoulder. Tom put his arm around her, and the two continued to watch the nighttime sky.

"No, I like you a lot. What I mean is...if we went to the same school then maybe we wouldn't have met like this...gotten to spend time on this lake. You might not have liked me at school."

He said this using a matter-of-fact tone with no hint of sadness. Everyone liked Monica, the popular cheerleader, and all the boys chased after her. Since becoming best friends with David, Tom's popularity had soared with the guys, but none of the girls had chased after him. Ever.

"Don't be so sure. You may not even realize just how charming you are, Mr. Becket. I would have been all over you no matter where we met." Monica's boldness both frightened and welcomed him. While it caught Tom off guard, her boldness also made up for his lack of confidence with girls. She was doing most of the work, making it easier for him.

"What the hell are you guys doing over there? Are we gonna have to turn a fire hose on you or what?" David and the two girls sat a hundred feet farther down the shoreline. Monica smiled and yelled back, "Just a minute! I can't find my bra!" Their giggles drifted over and embarrassed Tom. He'd find her sassiness difficult to adapt to if they kept this up.

Monica Sheppard stood up and looked down at Tom. "Come on, or we just might get into a little trouble after all."

Tom stood, brushed his pants, and joined her in the walk back to the others. Along the way she took his hand, swinging it in an exaggerated way as if to

announce something special had taken place between them. Without saying a word about it, they'd stepped beyond friendship.

Tom could feel her heart beating rapidly. He felt none of the actual beats but instead felt the feelings coursing through her beating heart as she fell in love. He had connected with Monica in a tightly woven, emotional bond-more than the typical crush.

Tom's extraordinary gift had always given him insight into other people, and now as they walked he could feel her emotions just as she felt them. They coursed through his body as they coursed through hers. He had some understanding of his ability-to empathically know another's emotional state of mind-but he had absolutely no control over it.

For several months he had thought his ability to read people had left him. Now he felt the full force of Monica's joy and knew the phenomenon remained.

Sara lay in her bed at home, sleeping a wonderful sleep. Her dreams came with magnificent feelings of wonder and love. If she had woken up, she would have felt the butterflies in her stomach, the thumping of her heart. In her dreams she saw everything Tom saw; felt everything he felt. Through Tom, her unconscious mind sensed Monica's butterflies, and the girl seemed familiar to Sara.

Thursday, June 30, 1988

The next day Tom finished lunch and sat in the ranch's mess hall with Monica. The other kids had left to go to the softball tournament, but Tom wanted more

than anything to stay with Monica all day long, skipping the tournament. They had spent the lunch hour talking nonstop about everything imaginable. Everything Monica said interested him, and nothing dampened his attraction. He found her playful teasing inviting.

He only wavered in his attention after David joined them at their table. David sat across from them and looked Tom in the eyes with a mischievous look. Tom waited, anticipating some scheme to land them on kitchen duty or, worse, get them kicked out of camp.

"Guess what I've got?" David said as he hunched over the tabletop. He used a low, quiet voice like one might expect to hear from the local con artist-hey, bub...comere! You won't believe the deal I've got for ya!

"What?" Tom said this with a dreadful tone because his enthusiasm hung several levels lower than David's. Hearing his friend's reaction took some air out of the older boy's tires, but when he saw Monica's curiosity he perked back up.

"You two want to have some fun tonight out on the lake? We can borrow one of the canoes from the boathouse and go out to the middle of the lake."

Tom said, "Okay...that sounds like fun. I thought you didn't care about canoeing though."

"I don't care about canoeing, but if we're going to smoke reefer, I can't think of a better place to do it. Nobody will see anything out there in the middle of the water. Hell, they won't even smell anything. It's perfect!"

Tom hated the idea. He'd never had any desire to use drugs. Once he had drunk a couple of beers with David and had enjoyed it, so he loved the idea of sucking

down a few brewskees with the others. They were under age, but so what? What could happen to them?

But pot went over the line. Pot could land him back in a detention center. Tom had endured a few days after starting the woods fire when he was eleven, and he had no wish to experience that again, thank you very much. As he opened his mouth to shoot down David's idea, Monica spoke up.

"Great! That sounds excellent! We can take two canoes, and the girls can come with us...tie them together like one big raft!"

Monica's reaction astounded Tom, and for the first time he wondered how he could have misread her so terribly.

Then he reconsidered. Maybe he should give it a try. For all he knew, pot would be better than drinking. And David was right: they'd get away with it. No one would find out as long as they threw the evidence overboard. They'd get in trouble for sneaking out and stealing canoes, nothing more.

"Where'd you get the pot?" Tom asked.

"Who cares? Are you in or out?"

"I'm in," Monica said. She looked at Tom, linked her arm through his, and gave him a gentle, teasing bump. "Come on, it'll be fun."

Once again, Tom saw his remaining reluctance vanish. Monica had captured his heart, leaving him unable to think it out. "Okay, let's do it. Tonight?"

"Tonight." David said.

Sneaking out had become a regular occurrence. They now roamed the camp with impunity, never fearing the risks, and tonight they'd go farther over the line by breaking into the boathouse. To circumvent the locked door—a precaution most likely the result of previous unauthorized adventures—Monica's friend had placed a rolled up magazine in the back window earlier during the day, allowing a means of entrance after the custodian locked the door at dusk. The window slid open easily, and David silently climbed through.

Within moments the door unbolted from the inside, and the others joined David in the dark interior. The boathouse only stored canoes now, but years ago the camp had owned a motorboat. It had mostly gone unused, so the camp had sold it two years earlier and put the money toward an additional rack of six canoes. That made a total of forty-two canoes in the long boathouse. David and Tom picked the two canoes closest to the water and carefully lifted each from its place, one at a time. The girls gathered paddles and seat cushions that doubled as floatation devices.

Five minutes later, the group paddled toward the center of the lake, their paddles dipping in the water as they glided along. Several hundred feet away from shore, they increased their speed. Tom and Monica shared one canoe, while David and the two girls sat in the other.

The moon, brighter than the previous night, floated just above the horizon—a huge, yellow orb. They spent a good part of an hour with the canoes tied up together, having a raft party in the middle of the lake. Tom felt giddy from the pot and liked it. Everything seemed funny, and he soon forgot his reasons for staying

away from illegal drugs. He let his mind go numb, and the smoky substance swallowed his body. Deeper and deeper he went, enjoying the trip with Monica.

At one in the morning they separated the canoes to head back to shore. Tom and David steered the canoes back to camp with difficulty, and several times the canoes bumped together, raising hysterical laughter each time. A hundred feet offshore, one of the girls in David's canoe dropped her paddle in the water. David stretched to reach it but to no avail.

It's odd when people find themselves in predicaments requiring reason, yet their minds cloud over despite themselves. Instead of paddling the canoe closer to the floating paddle, where he could easily grab it, David untied his shoes, removed them, and then peeled the socks from his feet. Leaving his white T-shirt on, he jumped in, splashing the others.

At first, the rest of them laughed, forgetting the noise. Ever the practical joker, David pretended to overlook the paddle, and spent the first thirty seconds treading water with his head tilted back. He scanned the surface, feigning a search for the paddle while the others pointed him in the right direction. He submerged under the water, maybe as another joke or maybe to swim more efficiently, and after a while the laughter died away, and they submitted to a nervous quiet as David remained under the surface. They watched the area where David had gone under, waiting for his head to pop back up.

"I don't see him, do you?" Monica asked. Tom shook his head.

They became anxious and started looking everywhere for any sign of him.

"Oh God, I don't see him!" The two girls remaining in the canoe panicked, but Tom had begun panicking as soon as David had splashed into the water. He'd already sensed something terrible was happening.