

1

My Hero

My hero is my dad. He is a great person. He works hard, is nice to everyone, and tries to help people.

His victim would have screamed if she could have. He had seen to it she could not open her mouth. There would have been terror in her eyes. He had made certain she could not open them. He had rendered her blind and mute, making her the perfect woman. Beautiful. Seen and not heard. Obedient. He had immobilized her so she could not fight him.

Sometimes he helps me with my homework because he is good at math and science. Sometimes we play catch in the back yard, which is really fun and cool. But he is very busy. He works very hard.

Her uncontrollable trembling and the swear that ran down the sides of her face showed her terror. He had locked her inside the prison of her own body and mind, and there would be no escape.

The cords stood out in her neck as she strained against the bindings. Sweat and blood ran in thin rivulets down the slopes of her small, round breasts.

My dad tells me no matter what I should always be polite and respect people. I should treat other people the way I would like to be treated.

She had to respect him now. She had no choice. The power was all his. In this game, he always won. He had stripped away all of her pretense, the mask of beauty, to reveal the plain raw truth: that she was nothing, and he was God.

It was important for her to know that before he killed her.

My dad is a very important man in the community.

It was important that she had the time to reflect on that truth. Because of that, he wouldn't kill her just yet. Besides, he didn't have the time.

My dad. My hero.

It was nearly three o'clock. He had to go pick his child up from school.

2

Five Days Later
Tuesday, October 8, 1985

"You suck, Crane."

Tommy Crane sighed and stared straight ahead.

Dennis Farman leaned over from his desk, right across from Tommy's, his fat face screwed up into what he probably thought was a really tough look.

Tommy tried to tell himself it was just a stupid look. Asinine. That was his new word of the week. Asinine: marked by inexcusable failure to exercise intelligence or sound judgment. Definition number two: of, relating to, or resembling an ass.

That was Dennis, all the way around.

He tried not to think about the fact that Dennis Farman was bigger than he was, a whole year older than he was, and just plain mean.

"You suck donkey dicks," Farman said, laughing to himself like he thought he was brilliant or something.

Tommy sighed again and looked at the clock on the wall above the door. Two more minutes.

Wendy Morgan turned around in her seat and looked at him with frustration. "Say something, Tommy. Tell him he's a dork."

"Say something, Tommy," Farman parroted, making his voice really high, like a girl's. "Or let your girlfriend talk for you."

"He doesn't have a girlfriend," Cody Roache, Farman's scrawny toady, chimed in. "He's gay. He's gay and she's a lesbo."

Wendy rolled her eyes. "Shut up, Cockroach. You don't even know what that means."

"Yes, I do."

"Because you are."

Tommy watched the clock tick one minute closer to freedom. At the front of the room, Miss Navarre walked back to her desk from the door with a yellow note in her hand.

If someone had tortured him, held fire to his feet, or stuck bamboo shoots under his fingernails, he would have had to admit he was kind of in love with Miss Navarre. She was smart and kind, and really pretty with big brown eyes, and dark hair tucked behind her ears.

"Twat," Cockroach said, just loud enough that the bad word shot like a poisoned dart straight to Miss Navarre's ear, and her attention snapped in their direction.

"Mr. Roache," she said in that tone of voice that cut like a knife. "Would you like to come to the front of the room now and explain to the rest of the class exactly why you will be staying in the room for recess and lunch hour tomorrow?"

Roache wore his most stupid expression behind his too-big glasses. "Uh, no."

Miss Navarre arched an eyebrow. She could say a lot with that eyebrow. She was sweet and kind, but she was no pushover.

Cody Roache swallowed hard and tried again. "Um . . . no, ma'am?"

The bell rang loudly, and everyone started to bolt from their seats. Miss Navarre held up one finger and they all froze like they were in suspended animation.

"Mr. Roache," she said. It was never a good thing when she called someone Mr. or Miss. "I'll see you first thing tomorrow morning at my desk."

"Yes, ma'am."

She turned her attention to Dennis Farman holding up the note in her hand. "Dennis, your father called to say he won't be able to pick you up today, and you should walk home."

The second Miss Navarre dropped her hand, the entire fifth grade class bolted for the door like a herd of wild horses.

"Why don't you stand up to him, Tommy?" Wendy demanded as they walked away from Oak Knoll Elementary School and toward the park.

Tommy hiked his backpack up on one shoulder. "'Cause he could pound me into a pile of broken bones."

"He's all talk."

"That's easy for you to say. He hit me once in dodge ball and I didn't breathe for like a week."

"You have to stand up for yourself," Wendy insisted, blue eyes flashing. She had long wavy blonde hair like a mermaid, which she was always wearing in the styles of rock stars Tommy had never heard of. "Otherwise, what kind of man are you?"

"I'm not a man. I'm a kid, and I want to stay that way for awhile."

"What if he went after me?" she asked. "What if he tried to hit me or kidnap me?"

Tommy frowned. "That's different. That's you. Sure, I'd try to save you. That's what a guy is supposed to do. It's called chivalry. Like in the Knights of the Round Table or *Star Wars*."

Wendy flashed a smile and wound one blond braid into a shape like a cinnamon roll pressed against her ear. "Does that mean I'm your Princess Leia?" she said, batting her eyelashes.

Tommy rolled his eyes. They turned off the sidewalk and onto a trail that cut through Oakwoods Park.

Oakwoods was a big park with part of it clipped and cleared and set up with picnic pavilions and a bandstand and playground. The rest of it was more wild, like a forest with simple trails cut through it.

A lot of kids wouldn't cut through the park because there were stories about it being haunted, and homeless weirdos living in it, and someone claimed they once saw Bigfoot. But it was the shortest way home, and he and Wendy had been going this way since they were in the third grade. Nothing bad had ever happened.

"That makes you Luke Skywalker," Wendy said.

Tommy didn't want to be Luke Skywalker. Han Solo had all the fun, blasting around the galaxy with Chewbacca, breaking the rules and doing whatever they liked.

Tommy had never broken a rule in his life. His day-to-day existence was orderly and scheduled. Up at seven, breakfast at seven-fifteen, to school by eight. School let out at 3:10. He had to be home by 3:45. Sometimes he walked. Sometimes one of his or Wendy's parents picked them up, depending. When he got home he would have a snack and tell his mother everything that happened that day. From 4:00 until 6:15 he could go out and play—unless he had a piano lesson—but he had to be cleaned up and at the dinner table at 6:30 sharp.

It would have been a lot more fun to be Han Solo.

Wendy had moved on to other topics, chattering about her latest favorite singer, Madonna, who Tommy had never heard of because his mother insisted they only listen to public radio. She wanted him to grow up to be a concert pianist and/or a brain surgeon. Tommy wanted to grow up to be a baseball player, but he didn't tell his mother that. That was between him and his dad.

Suddenly, behind them, came a blood-curdling war cry and what sounded like wild animals crashing through the woods.

"CRANE SUCKS!!!!"

"RUN!!" Tommy yelled.

Dennis Farman and Cody Roache came leaping over a fallen log, their faces red from shouting.

Tommy grabbed Wendy's wrist and took off, dragging her along behind him. He was faster than Dennis. He'd outrun him before. Wendy was fast for a girl, but not as fast as he was.

Farman and Roache were catching up to them, their eyes bugging out of their heads like a gargoyle's. Their mouths were wide open. They were still yelling, but Tommy could only hear the pounding of his heart and the crashing sound they made as they bounded through the woods.

"This way!" he yelled, veering off the trail.

Wendy looked back, yelling, "FART-MAN!!"

"JUMP!!" Tommy shouted.

They went over the edge of an embankment and flew through the air. Farman and Roache came flying after them. They landed like so many stones, hitting the ground and tumbling.

All the colors of the forest whirled past Tommy's eyes like a kaleidoscope as he rolled, until he finally came to a stop on a soft mound of dirt.

He lay still for a moment, holding his breath, waiting for Dennis Farman to jump on him. But he could hear Dennis moaning loudly somewhere behind him.

Slowly Tommy pushed himself up on his hands and knees. The ground he was on had been turned over recently. It smelled like earth and wet leaves, and something else he couldn't name. It was soft and damp, and crumbly like someone had dug it up with a shovel. Like someone had buried something . . . or somebody.

His heart jumped into the back of his throat as he raised his head . . . and came face to face with death.