

## TubeLight

1968

June

*“Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?”*

### CHAPTER 1

I'd do it. Whatever the cost

Smells of injury. Urine, excrement, dying tissue. I wanted to bolt. Finding Jimmy in a huge VA hospital without the required front desk check-in, the supreme challenge. “Spinal Cord Injury Service” was all I had to go on. Another “T” intersection. Left or right?

“You lost?”

A young man in a wheelchair looked me over from head to cleavage. Flattering? Not if you don't want to be remembered. “I'm looking for a friend.”

“You're in luck. I know pretty much every guy on this unit. What's his name?”

Giving him Jimmy Trent's name would connect me to him, put me on the Veteran Administration's radar. That could be dangerous. The man evidently decided I needed a prod because he suddenly reared his wheelchair onto its back wheels, stallion-like, and balanced by shifting his hands back and forth on the rims.

Amazing.

“So who's your friend?”

From the waist up this guy looked great, muscled like a weightlifter. Clean cut and about Jimmy's age. Maybe Jimmy wasn't as bad off as Donna, our old classmate,

reported. Hopefully he'd gotten better, didn't need my help. Tension in my shoulders eased.

"First visits are always rough," the man coached, hands relaxing their grip, allowing the chair's front wheels to reconnect with terra firma. "Is your friend a para or a quad?"

"A what?"

"Sorry. Excuse the lingo. Is he paraplegic, like me? You know, paralyzed from the waist down? Or a quadriplegic—paralyzed from the shoulders down?"

Donna mentioned something about a cervical injury, C5-C6 injury level.

"Hey, pretty lady, I'm still here."

I looked down and saw the man spinning his wheelchair in a tight circle. "A neck injury. His hands are partially paralyzed."

"He's a quad. Turn right here. Halfway down the hall you'll find the nursing station. They'll know where he is. Good luck and for his sake—stay positive. We all need that, especially quads." Snapping an informal salute, he sped off.

No nurses. No one but Jimmy could know I'd been here. If I'd inherited my mother's strange power, everything was about to change for all of us.

Tires squeaked. I whirled around. A thin, unshaved man with long, unkempt hair inched toward me in a high-backed wheelchair. The heels of his hands strained against knobs on the wheel rims as he labored to propel the chair over the green linoleum.

"Neon? Neon Ryder." A weak but familiar voice floated up to me.

*Oh no. This shell of a man can't be Jimmy Trent.*

Sunken eyes stared out from his sallow face. They widened. "What are you doing here?"

Hollowed cheeks. Atrophied arms and legs. Was it really him? "I came to see you and . . ." My fantasies of our future disintegrated. The lump in my throat swelled, choking off explanation.

Jimmy's stunned face contorted in anguish. "You shouldn't be here. I wanted you to remember me the way I was." He looked away, dabbing at his eyes with the backs of his hands, the curled fingers apparently useless.

"You never returned my phone calls, never wrote back." How could he with those paralyzed hands? "It's summer break—I haven't even been home yet because I wanted to see you so bad I drove straight here."

He blinked and chewed his lower lip. "When I was in 'Nam I thought about you day and night. Dreamed of what we'd do when I came home. But now? There's nothing left of me. I'm a twenty-two year old man without a body. That's why I never contacted you. You should've taken the hint."

He thought about me day and night? I was over the moon. Like me, he must have fantasized of our life together. "I'm here to help you, Jimmy." I tried to project a confidence suddenly missing-in-action.

"You can't." He looked away. "No one can. I'm a quad. Four useless extremities. I'll be like this the rest of my life."

My God, my poor Jimmy. We should have made love before I left for Stanford. Only four months from legal and concerned about me being underage—insignificant now. About to nosedive into depression, I changed the subject. "Donna said you had surgery. Didn't it . . . ?"

At last he looked me in the eyes—finally a spark of our old connection. "They fused bones in my neck. To keep it stable, that's all the experts did. You wouldn't understand. You were always so naïve and optimistic, about everything. No problems in Neon Ryder's happy little family. Nothing to fear or hide."

Of course he'd think that. The school gossip about his mother's death, his father's drinking, the family's financial problems. Perhaps he was right about me being naïve. There was good chance I couldn't do a thing for him.

Jimmy's leg spasms jerked both of us into the present. Elbows extended and locked, he pressed down on his thighs with flattened hands. The tremors stilled and the distressed expression melted from his face.

"That looked painful. Does it hurt?"

"No and yes. Hard to explain to the un-initiated," he offered a wry, sad smile.

"Definitely embarrassing."

"Talk to me. Tell me everything. What happened? Exactly what's injured?" I tilted my head back a little and tried to deflect the tears running down my cheeks. "You don't know how much I missed you."

Jimmy took a shallow breath, obviously the only kind he could. "During the TET Offensive it got crazy. A sniper shot me in the neck—bullet severed my spinal cord. The medic must have injected me with morphine. 'Cause I can't remember the chopper ride or the flight home."

Struggling to find the right words, I gave up and settled on, "I'm so glad you weren't killed."

"Yeah, well I'm not. From the chest down my body is an immovable block of ice. No feeling below the nipples." He extended his elbows again and leaned forward in his chair, the heels of his hands against the seat cushion. "This relieves pressure on my ass, otherwise I'll get skin sores from not moving. They get large enough and you need a skin graft to close them."

I swallowed. The magnitude of his injury was overwhelming—nothing I'd prepared for, despite Donna's warnings and my own research.

"Have to lock my elbows 'cause there's no nerve supply to the triceps muscles that straighten them. No biceps either." He touched one toneless upper arm. "I can only pick things up by extending my wrists, letting the fingers curl into my palm. That's 'cause the finger tendons are shortened in this position." He demonstrated. "This grip is so weak it's pathetic."

I suppressed rising doubt and focused on his hands, “I’m sure I can help.” I was sure of nothing and I might make him worse.

“You can’t help. No one can. Don’t you see, tube light?” He spat the hated old name at me, mouth twisting in anger, muscle cords knotting in his neck.

I reeled, struck by the verbal blow, eyes stinging with unshed tears. Kids flung that childhood label at me in grade school and I’d cringe. But he’d never hurt me with it. A nurse walked by, gawking at us. “Let’s go outside, somewhere private.”

He shook his head and turned his chair to leave when his shoulders suddenly lifted in a shrug. Determined to act before I lost my nerve, I grasped his wheelchair handles and pushed.

“What are you doing?”

The high pitch of alarm in his voice grated on my ears. I ignored it and rolled him toward the ward’s exit sign. No matter if I made him better or worse there’d be hell to pay either way but I had to try.

Shirtless men in wheelchairs played basketball on the out-door court.

Their muscular torsos and arms glinted with sweat under the afternoon sun. The one who’d given me directions waved. I turned away, hoping he wouldn’t remember me.

I chose a secluded spot with a huge tree shading a stone bench. The shrubs surrounding the area would be waist high on a standing person. Perfect. I sank on to the bench, eye level with Jimmy. We were well screened except for the narrow entry way adjacent to the sidewalk. I’d do it quick and disappear.

“You’ve been through so much it breaks my heart.” The desire to rush and get away conflicted with a need to take time, re-establish our relationship. “When we last talked, you were going to transfer from UCLA to Stanford. Nothing about joining the army. What happened?”

“Finances. Picked up more hours on the *Tribune*’s night shift as a pressman. Carried a full academic load until my grades slipped. Dropped two classes to bring

everything up to the required 3.5 for my scholarship. My units fell below some bullshit deferment number. Next thing I know, I'm drafted and on my way to Vietnam."

At least he didn't come back in a body bag like two of his classmates. "You can go back to school. Is your scholarship still available?"

"No. Besides, it only paid for tuition and books. Living expenses piled up."

I tried to cheer up both of us. "You've got the G.I. Bill."

"Yeah. Pay back from my Uncle Sam for ruining my life."

I leaned forward and smiled into his wounded eyes. "May I touch your neck, where you were injured?"

His face paled and he placed the heels of his hands against the knobs on his wheel rims. Preparing to escape. "No. I don't want you to touch me, anywhere."

"I promise not to hurt you. I'd never cause you pain."

"You're being here is pain to me." His eyes explored my face, must have picked up on something. "You need to leave. Now."

"If that's what you want." I rose from the bench as if to comply.

"I'm sorry." He swiped at escaping tears. "Thanks for coming. It's just—"

This might be the only chance. My hands shot out and grasped his neck.

His head flailed back and forth. "Leave me alone. What are you doing? You're choking me."

If only he'd quit moving.

"Stop it." Paralyzed hands batted at me.

The firm, unyielding texture of the scar on his neck bulged under my fingers. My grip tightened. Electrical tingle, then a surge that arched between us. I was deep inside his tissues.

Power pulsed from me and streaked into him. I was pure energy, coursing along nerves, repairing, healing.

Rush of air. Impact. Pungent odor of soil, grass against my cheek. A pinpoint of light grew steadily smaller until it winked out.