

## THE FLETCHER'S PRIDE

### Chapter 1

Karlin watched Cole get in his car, hoping he would look back towards her house and see her waving. But the moment he closed his door, a large pickup truck came around the side of Cole's car and then stopped in the middle of the road, just ahead. A large, menacing looking man got out and Karlin recognized him as the truck driver from Primo's Pizza earlier. He stood in the middle of the road, daring Cole to get out of his car. Karlin picked up her phone and dialed 911.

*911, what's your emergency?*

"There's a man who is threatening someone in the street in front of my house."

*What's your address?*

"232 Willow Bend in Fallon. We had trouble with this man earlier...wait, my friend just took off in his car and went around him. I think the man's going to follow him."

The moment Karlin stopped speaking, Lucy's car roared past the pickup, going in the same direction as Cole.

"There's someone else involved now, I think. This isn't good."

*What is your name, ma'am?*

"Karlin Brinn."

*Karlin, do you know the people involved? Tell me what's going on."*

"Oh, no! I just heard a wreck or something. We live on a cul-de-sac. I can't see anything, but I just heard some metal and glass crunching."

*I'm getting some units coming your way. Is this the pickup that's involved in the wreck?*

"No, it's Lucy Puller. It's her car. She was chasing my boyfriend and...Okay Lucy's car just went back the other way. She almost hit the man in the road."

*And where is your boyfriend?*

"I don't know, I haven't seen him come back down from the end of the street yet."

"Karlin, what's going on?" Darrell Brinn asked.

"I think something's happened to Cole, Daddy. He went down to the end of the road and Lucy followed him, and then I heard crunching like a wreck."

*Karlin, where is the man in the pickup?*

“He just took turned around in the street and went the other way. Somebody got out of his truck and is running down to the end of the cul-de-sac. I need to go see what happened.”

“You stay here on the phone, I’ll go down and see,” Darrell said.

“My dad’s going down there to see what’s going on. I’m in the middle of the street now and there’s a lot of people down there with flashlights looking at something by Cole’s car.”

*Who is Cole?*

“My boyfriend! Haven’t you been listening?”

*Yes. Calm down, Karlin, I need you to tell me what you see. A deputy should be arriving there in about five minutes.*

Karlin was walking as quickly as she could to the end of the street. She felt a hand on her arm and it was her mother catching up to her.

“What’s going on?”

“I think Cole’s been in a wreck or something. There’s his car and there’s some people over there looking in the ditch. God, I hope nothing happened to him. Daddy should be up there to him by now.”

*Tell me what you’re seeing, Karlin.*

“I’m still about a hundred yards away, we’re almost there...oh, dammit!”

Karlin fell to the ground, dropping her phone in the grass as she writhed in pain while holding her ankle.

*What’s happening Karlin? Tell me what’s going on. Karlin?*

“This is Karlin’s mother, she just broke her ankle slipping off the edge of the pavement. I’m going to need an ambulance.”

*I have another ambulance en route to you, it may take a little time.*

“Thank you. I really can’t tell you what’s going on across the road from us.”

*We already have an ambulance coming that way. The first one there will take priority.*

“Can you tell me what’s going on with that?”

*No, ma’am, I can’t. How is your daughter?*

“Stable. She’s just in a lot of pain...she just vomited. I was a med student, I know the signs and I think she’s stable?”

“It was Lucy, Mom!” Karlin cried out. “I saw Lucy’s car, she did something to Cole.”

“Okay, sweetie, just lay still,” Lauren said, and then turned her attention back to the 911 operator. “Can I let you go? I’m hearing sirens now.”

*Yes, ma’am. Good luck and call us back if you need to.*

“Okay, thank you.”

“Can you see anything, Mom?”

“No, but your dad is over there. We’ll talk to him in a minute.”

Lauren saw headlights coming out of the garage close to where she assumed Cole was. The SUV skidded to a stop at the road and she watched Darrel and two others lift someone into the backseat and then took off. Della Springer was driving and Darrell was in the backseat with Cole.

It wasn’t like Darrel to get involved like this, Lauren thought. She didn’t know what was going on, but for him to decide to take off with Cole, especially with Della at the wheel, it had to be extraordinarily bad. If she hadn’t seen it herself, she would have wondered if this was one Darrell’s schemes to rekindle another affair with Della. She had to put that aside, though, and focus on Karlin.

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Cole kept trying to answer Darrell, but now words were coming out. He was in a fog, not understanding why the street lights kept flashing by in the windows of the car. All he could remember was feeling trapped and getting out of his car with a tire iron ready to fight the man in the pickup. What happened since then was a mystery. His only comprehension was seeing the streetlights whiz by and a familiar face asking him question. Had he been in pain earlier? It seemed that he was, but now everything seemed to be getting numb. Then everything went dark.

“How’s he doing?” Della asked.

“Not sure. He’s making eye contact with me, but he’s pale and his pulse is thready. Are you still on the phone with EMS?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell them to meet us at the gas station on Broadway and we’ll meet them there. I want lactated ringers ready to go. Internal injuries, that’s all I can suspect right now.”

“Okay.”

Della passed on the information over the phone as Darrell kept scanning and probing around on Cole.

“They’re about two minutes out.”

“What about us?”

“One minute.”

“Good job. Good driving.”

“This boy catches all the shit.”

“What?”

“Cole.”

“You know him?”

“Yeah. Good kid. He just doesn’t get any breaks.”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

“Does Karlin know him?”

“Yeah...how far?”

“We’re pulling in now. I see the lights of the ambulance up the road.”

“Good, pull over with plenty of area so we can transfer him fast.”

“Okay.”

There was flurry of activity as soon as the ambulance came to a stop, a police car pulling in beside them. In less than a minute, Cole was pulled out of the SUV and onto a stretcher with Darrell barking orders for what he wanted started. He climbed into the back of the ambulance and they left quickly with the police providing escort.

Della stood in next to her SUV trying to collect her thoughts. It seemed like only few minutes ago, Darrell ordered her to bring her car down so they could load Cole into it. She’d gone over a hundred miles per hour to get there quickly, worried that Cole might die in her backseat at any minute, and now she was left in the dead quiet of the night with her adrenaline pumping. A pickup pulled into driveway and honked at her, bringing her back to her senses. She was blocking the driveway to the pumps and needed to move. She pulled to the side of the parking lot, wondering if she should go back home or go to the hospital to find out Cole’s status.

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Lucy Fulmer was out of the neighborhood and halfway into town before she saw the first squad car go by with its flashing lights and sirens. At the speed he was going, she knew that her dangling headlight was the least of his concerns at the moment. The thrill of seeing the squad car buzzed through her entire body like electricity, causing her to grip the steering wheel tight as she shook with excitement. She began feeling woozy, overwhelmed with the events of the last fifteen minutes, and pulled into a gas station to catch her breath.

There was a cold breeze blowing, and with it came the sound of sirens from a distance. It was music to her ears, the more the merrier. She had pulled to the far end of the fuel pumps, hoping not to gather too much from anyone working there. As the sirens got closer, she quickly put the nozzle into her gas tank and began to fill it up while watching the road. She saw a SUV coming from the other direction pull into the lot on the other end of the station and watched as the ambulance slowed and stopped next to it.

“What the hell?” Lucy asked herself, wondering if this had any connection to what she’d just done to Cole.

Lucy watched as Darrell and the EMS crew pulled Cole out of the SUV and put him on a stretcher. He face was ashen and his body was limp as they loaded him into the ambulance and left. Lucy felt her legs buckle beneath her, and her head spun as she grabbed for the bumper of her car to hold onto. The woman with the SUV stood there until a familiar truck pulled in and honked at her. Lucy squeezed her eyes tightly and then opened them, focusing and beginning to panic as the truck made its way behind her car. The driver got out and approached her.

“What the hell is your problem?” he asked.

“I don’t have one anymore, I just took care of it. What’s yours?”

“I saw you go down there. You ran over that kid.”

“How do you know? You didn’t see it.”

“Like hell I didn’t. And look at the front of your car. This is a nice-ass car and you went and fucked it up. Look at that headlight. You’re going to be easy to find.”

“Nobody knows but you. And why have you been stalking me all night?”

“I ain’t been stalking you, I was ready to beat the shit out of that kid. You got to ‘em first.”

“So now what? You’re going to rat on me? I did us both a favor.”

“I didn’t get my pound of flesh,” Eddie said as he took another look at her front bumper. “Maybe we can work something out.”

Eddie didn’t wait for an answer. He went back to his pickup and fumbled around in the toolbox in his pickup and then returned with a pair of wire cutters. He walked past Lucy staring her in the eye and then clipped the wires of the dangling headlight.

“One missing is better than one flashing you in the eyes. That should take some attention off of you.”

“Thanks,” Lucy said sarcastically as she looked at her now dismembered light. She reached for it, but Eddie pulled it out of reach. “Come on, I can get that fixed down the road. Give it to me.”

“It’s gonna cost you.”

Lucy looked at him with contempt, eyeing him up and down as if disgusted with his heavy physique.

“Fuck you, keep it.”

“It ain’t the light, bitch. If you want me to keep my mouth shut, you and me are going for a little ride.”

Lucy closed her eyes, squeezing them shut tightly as she clenched her fists. She knew by looking at him that he was the type of person that would tell in a minute if she didn’t play along. But it was worth it to keep him quiet, at least until morning when she would be well on her way to Washington, D.C. She took a deep breath and decided she would control as much of this as she could.

“Fine, how are we going to do this?”

“Park your car in the back and I’ll pick you up. And don’t even think about runnin’.”

“Kiss my ass, I’m not afraid of you,” Lucy said as she got in her car.

“You will be in a little bit,” Eddie mumbled to himself as he got in his pickup.

Two hours later Eddie pulled up behind Lucy’s car and looked at her with a grin.

“How did you like it?” he asked while pointing at his crotch. Lucy said nothing, her eyes brimming with tears. “I said, how did you like it, bitch?”

Eddie had a grasp of Lucy’s hair, jerking her head violently to get an answer from her. Lucy swallowed, her throat sore from being choked earlier and she could taste the blood from her swollen lip.

“The best I ever had.”

“I told you it would be. You won’t ever forget. Nobody’s ever gonna plug you like I just did. Get the fuck out.”

Lucy got out of the pickup, repulsed by the sickening laugh coming from inside the pickup. Eddie sped away as Lucy leaned against the side of her car, using her hands to steady herself while walking to the driver’s side door. Though he was well out of sight, Lucy had to get away, to go somewhere and hide in case he came back. Lucy started her car and screeched her tires as she sped down the road. She was sobbing uncontrollably and as soon as she felt safe, she pulled over on the shoulder of a quiet road and tried to regain her sanity. She opened the car door to get some cold air and tried to stand. Her legs wobbled and she held on to the door for balance as a wave of nausea overcame her, vomiting and feeling as though she was going to lose consciousness. She dropped to the ground on her tail and leaned back against her car and as she put her hands to her head, the pain from having her hair pulled so hard was the final insult.

“Yeah, I won’t forget you, you backward son-of-a-bitch. I’ll bide my time and you’ll never fuck another woman again.”

But the memory of his hand across her mouth, suffocating her as he violently thrust himself inside her over and over made her feel helpless and ashamed.

“What have I done to deserve this?” she screamed while looking into the sky. “Why does nothing work out for me? Why must you always crush me when there are so many people so much more deserving?”

The answers didn’t come. They never did. But she had hope. She hoped that she’d rid the world of the least desirable person she could think of who seemed to have been sent by God, himself, to destroy her life. That hope gave her the strength to get back in her car and get on her way.

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Cole opened his eyes, feeling as if he were in a dream. Whatever he tried to focus on seemed to have a darkness around it, as if he were looking through a tunnel. From looking at the window, it appeared that it was daytime, though everything around him was dark. He felt hot,

entrapped by his surroundings, and began to panic. He tried to push the blankets off with his feet, but every movement sent a searing flash of pain through his left side.

“What’s the matter?” a familiar voice asked. Cole looked sideways to see Suzanne floating at the side of his bed.

“Hot,” Cole said with a gravelly voice.

“Want me to pull some blankets off?” Cole nodded his head and Suzanne gently pulled the covers back. “Do you remember waking up a little while ago?”

“No.”

“You were pretty out of it. Karlin was here. I met her and her mom. She’s pretty.” Cole just nodded. “Do you remember what happened?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well—” Suzanne began, but the nurse entered the room and interrupted.

“Hello, Cole. I’m Trina, your nurse for the rest of the day. Are you in pain?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you would be. See his blood pressure up and his pulse rate is over a hundred?” Trina asked Suzanne. “Good indicators that somebody’s in pain. You keep an eye on it and let me know if that happens if I ain’t in the room.”

“Okay,” Suzanne replied.

“I’m gonna give you something for pain, Cole. Some Demerol. The morphine made you sick earlier, that’s probably why you’re hurtin’. This’ll be good.”

“Thank you.”

Trina put the needle into the IV port that went to his arm and that was the last thing he remembered until opening his eyes again. The tunnel vision was gone and his throat felt dry. The crescent moon shone through the window, though he had no concept of the time. He was alone now and recognized the call button on the side of his bed that was the same as Toby’s in his hospital room. He pushed the nurse’s button and immediately saw a head poke around the door.

“You’re awake,” the nurse said as she entered. “How are you feeling?”

“My throat hurts. Can I get some water?”

“Yeah, what about pain. Are you hurting?”

“Not much. My butt’s sore.”

“Well, let’s get you some water and we’ll reposition you in a minute.”



“Wait, why am I here?”

“You got hit by a car, honey, so I guess you were either playing in the street or forgot to look both ways.”

“Oh,” Cole said. His only recollection was getting out of his car for a tire iron and the big truck driver waiting down the road in a pickup. “Was it the big guy?”

“I don’t know anything about it, really. I think the police want to talk to you first, so I probably shouldn’t say anything. Here’s some water. Slow sips, we don’t want you throwing up right now.”

“No we don’t.”

There was a commotion in the hallway and the nurse went quickly to the door. It only took a second for Cole to recognize the phony, unnerving voice in the distance.

“I want to see my baby!” Hazel cried.

“Mom, knock it off,” Suzanne chided as she kept pace with her mother.

“Don’t you dare—”

“Ma’am, you’ve got to quiet down,” the nurse said.

“You can all kiss my ass, I’m here to see my son.”

“Not until you calm down. I’m not going to let you upset him.”

“I’ll knock you to the floor, bitch—”

Suzanne whirled Hazel around by her arm, pushing her against the wall and putting her hand over her mother’s mouth.

“You were just fine until we came through the door, and now you’re putting on airs like you always do. All you’re gonna do is get yourself in trouble and upset Cole. This isn’t about you, now shut your mouth.”

Hazel glared back at Suzanne and noticed the nurse was on the phone while staring at her. Suzanne took her hand away from Hazel’s mouth and backed away a few steps while Hazel adjusted her glasses.

“I’ve got security on the phone right now. Do I need to have them come down?”

“No,” Hazel said angrily. “Where is he?”

“He’s in this first room, right here. If you start carrying on, I’ll have them come in and remove you.”

“I’ll go in with her,” Suzanne said.

“Okay.”

Hazel walked haughtily to the door, but as she entered, she had to grab a chair when she saw Cole’s face.

“My God, I thought you said he just got hit in the spleen?”

“The black eyes and swelling in his face is from a few days ago, Mom. He got in a fight or two—”

“Well, I’m not surprised, you can’t tell him nothing.”

“You don’t know…” Cole began, but trailed off as a pain shot through his side.

“What did you say?” Hazel asked as she came closer.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. I want you to go home.”

“Cole, I—”

“You left me to fend for myself. That’s what I’m doing. I’m not trying to be mean, but I don’t want anything to do with you right now. You’ve got your life and I’ve got mine.”

“I drove ten hours to get here and you don’t even appreciate it. You’re the most ungrateful little son-of-a-bitch I’ve ever seen.”

“Sorry you feel that way,” Cole said and then looked away from her. “You can take your time going home, but I’d appreciate if you started now.”

Cole laid quietly, looking out the window. He felt horrible, and perhaps she was right to a certain extent, he may have been ungrateful. But any strong feelings he’d had for his mother had winnowed away over the last few years and he didn’t want anything more to do with her. After a few moments, he heard her turn and walk out of the room.

“I’m sorry, Cole,” Suzanne said as she took hold of his hand. She was crying now, and not trying to hold anything back. It was as if the years of frustration with their mother had finally come to a head for all of them and the emotions could finally be turned loose.

“Me, too. I didn’t want to be mean. I hope you know that. I just can’t do it anymore.”

“No, I don’t blame you.”

“I do feel sorry for her. I don’t think she even realizes how she is.”

“I know.”

“Well, how’s your pain,” the nurse asked, trying to remain professional while wiping her own tears away.

“I’m okay for now. Sorry you had to see that.”

“I’ve seen a lot of things...regardless, let’s just focus on you for now. I’ll be out in the hall if you need me.”

“Thanks,” Cole said as the nurse left the room. Then he turned his attention to Suzanne. “Why am I in here?”

“Do you know a girl named Lucy Fulmer?”

“Yeah?”

“She hit you with her car. Karlin thinks she did it on purpose.”

“Karlin...you know Karlin?”

“I do now. She saw Lucy’s car take off down the road after you did and all she knows is that you wound up in a ditch and her dad brought you in. She saw that Lucy girl driving back down the road afterwards. You had a lot of people trying to get to you last night.”

“I only remember the truck driver in the pickup.”

“He was there, but he didn’t have anything to do with it. His friend got out of the truck and went down to see how you were and the other guy turned around and left. I know the police were going to question him. Anyway, Karlin went down the road to find you and broke her ankle.”

“Oh, shit. Oh, no, that’s the worst news. That ain’t the way to start out with a girl.”

“She’s already been by to see you, but that was early this morning while you were still out. You’re missing a spleen, that’s why your side probably hurts.”

“What does that do? Is that bad?”

“What they tell me is that it cleans the blood, but you can live without it. I’m sure they’ll go over all that with you.”

“I’m screwed. The apartment, my job, I won’t even be able to pay my insurance on my car.”

“Well let’s just see how things work out. You’re gonna need to stay with us for a while until you’ve recovered. Me and Gerald already talked about it and we’ll help you with your car if need be.”

“You can’t afford it.”

“We’ll figure out something, just worry about getting well. We’re going over tomorrow to get the rest of your stuff at the apartment, okay?”

“Yeah. This sucks. I mean, I appreciate it, but—”

“I know what you mean, you’re fine. We’ll get along just fine. Okay?”

“Alright. Thanks, Sis.”

“No problem. I gotta get home, are you okay for a while? I know Gerald’s gonna drop by later.”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“Hey, look at that. Somebody else here to see you.”

Suzanne walked out and Toby could lift his head just enough to see Toby being pushed in by a wheelchair by his mother.

“Hey! You’re up,” Cole said.

“I got tired of waiting,” Toby replied.

“For what?”

“You told me yesterday you’d come by and see me today. I’ve been waiting all day.”

Cole laughed and then grabbed for his side as the pain twisted at his flank.

“Dammit, don’t make me laugh.”

“Yeah, sucks doesn’t it?”

“How are you doing, Cole?” Toby’s mother asked.

“Sore. A little confused.”

“I can’t believe what I heard,” Toby said. “The rumors on social media are all over the place. I’ve heard everything from Lucy getting revenge on you for getting her pregnant or maybe getting her boyfriend canned from some high paying job.”

“Dude, I didn’t even know she hit me. But if she’s pregnant, it ain’t by me.”

“I didn’t think so. You’ve got more taste than that.”

“Cole, is there anything we can get you?”

“No, ma’am. I’m sorta regrouping right now and everything is upside down.”

“I know, and we feel terrible for you. You let us know if we can do anything, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am, and thank you.”

“I need to get Toby back to his room, we’ll come back by tomorrow and check up on you.”

“Okay. See ya, Tobe.”

“Tomorrow, Dude.”

For the moment, Cole was alone with his thoughts and his emotions began overwhelming him. His eyes became blurry and he could feel the tears rolling down the sides of his face. He tried to concentrate, looking for one thing that he could focus on to stem the tide of negativity coming from all sides in his head. He reached for the tray next to his bed, knocking over the box of tissue that he was reaching for; nothing was working out for him.

“You need some tissue, sweetheart?” his nurse asked as she put the box back on the tray.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What’s the matter, baby?”

“I don’t know. Too much to go into.”

“I know what I’ve heard and maybe I understand a little. You want something to cheer you up?”

“Is there beer in the room?”

“No, and you’re too young to drink anyway. Look here,” the nurse said as she held up an electronic reader. “See if you recognize any of these people.”

Cole cleared his eyes and took the reader from her. It was a guest signature book with pages and pages of get well wishes. Most were people he knew, others simply had heard about what had happened and sent their sentiments. As he scanned the list, he saw Tommy Maines, Bob Naylor, Pete Sanders, Lori and May Palmer, Della, and Thad Harper. But two things stood out to him: Lewis and Carrol Fulmer sent prayers and best wishes, and Karlin’s name was nowhere to be found.

“All this since last night?” Cole asked.

“Yeah. I usually don’t see that many, you must be a pretty popular guy.”

“I didn’t expect that many.”

“Sounds to me like you’ve got a lot of people on your side, baby. Sounds like they believe in you. Don’t be afraid to ask for help.”

“That’s hard to do.”

“I’m afraid your gonna have to for a little while.”

“I think you’re right.”

“Okay, I’ll be out in the hall if you need anything. By the way, here’s your cell phone. Somebody found it in the ditch last night and dropped it off this morning. It’s all charged up and ready for you.”

“Thanks. I have some catching up to do.”

The nurse left the room and Cole began looking at the multitude of texts, emails, and messages left. It was encouraging, and humbling, but the one person he was thinking of was absent from everything so far and that’s what hurt the most. He put his head back on the pillow and put his phone down on his chest.

“It was fun while it lasted,” Cole mumbled to himself, thinking of the fleeting five to ten minutes he’d spent alone with Karlin while taking her home the night before. But before he could give it anymore thought, his phone rang and the caller ID said Karlin Brinn.

## Chapter 2

“Luuuuucyyyyy, why don’tcha gimme some pooooosyyyyy, before they put you in a noooooosyyyyy,” Billy Leske sang softly from his cell. His twin brother Donnie tried to muffle his laugh so he could listen for a response. After a few moments, Billy began badgering her again. “Hey, Lucy, reach your hand outside the bars and I’ll put my dick in it.”

“Fuck you!” Lucy yelled, finally unable to tolerate the catcalls and whispers any longer.

“Hey, someday, sister, I’m all in. But for now I could use a rub and tug, know what I mean?”

“Bend your friend over and do him.”

“Awww, that’s sick. This is my twin brother.”

“You’re all fucking inbred around here anyway, have at it and shut up.”

“Little girl’s got a damn mouth on her doesn’t she,” someone said from another cell.

“Yeah, a big one with big-ass buck teeth, too,” Donnie replied. “With an overbite like that, she can suck your dick and scratch your balls all in one breath.”

The laughs and cheers from the cells weren’t enough to drown out the scream of outrage from Lucy.

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up...”

“Hey, pipe down. All of you,” the deputy said as he approached Lucy with two other men. Both were in suits, but one wore western style boots and a silver star on his lapel. “Lucy, stand up and face the wall and put your hands behind your back.”

Lucy looked out of the cell from her bed, not trusting anyone in the small town Alabama jail.

“Who are they?”

“This is an attorney that your parents hired and this is a deputy from Manchester County her to extradite you back to Texas.”

“I want to talk to my attorney first.”

“You have that right, but we’re taking you to a conference room first, so stand up and put your hands behind your back.”

Lucy did as she was told and was walked out of her cell. As she passed they passed the cell next to hers where the Leskes were being held, they began taunting her again.

“Hey, last chance for a good time, Bucky!”

“Fuck you, I’ll tear your—”

“Don’t say anything,” her attorney said. “Keep your eyes straight and your mouth shut.”

Lucy looked back at him in anger, but she knew he was right. She continued to walk as the catcalls lessened until they were out of the area with the cells. Moments later they were in a room smaller than a walk-in closet.

“Lucy, are you aware of your Miranda rights?” the officer in the suit asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“You’re under arrest for the attempted murder of Coleman Lee Dillman. Do you have anything to say?”

“Not to you, no.”

“Very well, I’ll leave you with your counsel.”

The room emptied and the attorney pulled a chair out for her to sit down. He noticed the bruising around her neck and puffy lip, along with what appeared to be old, yellow bruises on her shoulders and wrists.

“Lucy, I’m John Fallety. I’ve been hired by your parents to get you through the next few days. You’re old enough to seek your own counsel if you want, but I’m here to help. How are you doing?”

“Tired and innocent.”

“Okay, well, let’s jump right into it. But tell me how you got those bruises and the swollen lip. Did you get those here?”

“No, I was raped last night in Fallon.”

“Raped? By who?”

“I don’t know his name. A big guy who was stalking me all night. I was nervous and trying to find a way out of the neighborhood and before I knew it I was trapped on a dead end street. You know, a cul-de-sac type of street, and I panicked when I knew I couldn’t get out. So, I—”

“This cul-de-sac. Was it the same one that you encountered Cole Dillman?”

“I don’t know. I just turned off my lights and tried to make it around so the truck wouldn’t see where I was going and I think I hit a car or something and just kept driving.”

“You turned off your lights?”

“Yeah, I thought that if I did that, the pickup would think I stopped somewhere and come down to the end and then I wouldn’t be boxed in. He was still down the road a ways and wouldn’t have been able to get passed him.”

“So you’re telling me you don’t know what you hit?”

“No. Just a car or a mailbox or something, I don’t know.”

“There’s sufficient evidence that you hit Cole Dillman with the front of your car. He has paint on his clothing that matches your car and you have some damage to your fender that suggests something happened. How do you explain that.”

“Oh, my God!” Lucy said, summoning tears. “I don’t know. Is he alright? I couldn’t live with myself if I thought I had hurt him.”

“Well, he is hurt, but he’s alive.”

“Oh, thank heavens!”

Lucy’s words and explanation were intriguing to John, though he’d been around long enough to know defendants would say almost anything. It was tiny clues in Lucy’s demeanor, though, that made him suspicious of her sincerity toward Cole.

“So, let’s talk about the rape you mentioned. Tell me about that.”

“I kept going and I saw that he never moved from where he was and I turned on my lights. He was parked sort of in the middle of the road and I had to drive on the shoulder and to get around him. My tank was empty and I had to get to a gas station fast, so I drove as fast as I could to Fallon. I never saw anyone behind me so I relaxed and pulled into a station. And while I



was pumping gas, he pulled in behind me and told me I had run over someone. He said that if I didn't have sex with him, he'd turn me in."

"Wait, you said you didn't know what you hit—"

"I didn't! And that's what scared me. I didn't believe him, but I couldn't be sure. I was so frightened, so panicked that I...I allowed him to do...this to me," she said in tears. "He held me by the throat while he, uh, entered me and then he put his hand over my mouth and nose and I thought I was going to pass out, so I bit his finger and he slapped me in the mouth. And he..."

"He what?"

"He laughed at me and started yanking me by my hair. It was so awful!"

"If I showed you a picture of him, would you recognize it?"

"Yes. Hell, yes. I could never forget that face."

John pulled out a folder with several photos and put one in front of her.

"Is this him?" he asked, but Lucy barely looked at it and fixated on another one in the folder.

"That one. The big guy with curly hair. That's him. You find him and you'll see he's got a bite mark on his finger. I'll swear on the bible that's him."

"And you don't recognize this man?"

"I've never seen him before. Are you trying to trick me?"

"No. He was a witness and may have been in the pickup you were talking about. He saw you run into Cole."

"I...I don't know what to say."

"We asked him and he said you followed Cole down to the end of the road and hit him and then drove off."

"I had no idea Cole was even down there."

"He also said that they passed by you several times earlier and that you followed Cole's car from a distance when he left someone else's residence."

"That's a lie. I wasn't following him. I was waiting on a friend, and I wanted to confront her about something. By the time I got to her house, she was already inside and that's when I realized I was passing by the red pickup again."

"You said earlier you were lost, though—"

"I was. I mean I panicked and forgot where I was, and—"

“So, you’ve been down that road before?”

Lucy sat quietly, darting her eyes to different things in the room to let her mind catch up. She was feeling trapped.

“All I can tell you is that I panicked.”

John pulled out Eddie’s photo and pretended to study it so that Lucy could regain her senses. He assumed she was lying, but the rape angle Lucy had brought to the conversation was intriguing. Her excuse for hitting Cole and not knowing it was thin, especially from what he’d he’s seen from the questioning of Karlin and Lori.

“And you’ve never seen this man before last night?”

“Never.”

“Did you tell the people here that you were raped?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I was afraid to say anything until I had an attorney.”

“So, they didn’t take any DNA evidence from you?”

“No.”

“Have you showered, or—”

“No. The evidence will be there. I haven’t done anything other than urinate.”

“Then I’m going to have them do that now. Are you okay with that?”

“Do they have any females here?”

“We’ll make sure it will be a female. They can get a nurse to come if need be.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. Look, you can try to fight extradition charges to go back to Texas, but all you’re going to do is blow a lot of your parent’s money. Eventually you’ll go back, but in the meantime you’ll stay here.”

“No, I’ll go back,” Lucy said, stiffening her back with seemingly renewed conviction.

“I’ve got nothing to hide and I think this Eddie piece of shit needs to be put away before he can harm another defenseless girl. I mean, that is rape, correct? Even if I agreed, it was under duress.”

“Yes, if it can be proven. We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. But at the moment, we need to crystallize what happened between you and Cole.”

“Nothing. I can tell you right now, nothing. I had no intention of ever harming Cole.”

“Very well. We’ll get the rape kit and get that done and then we’ll work on getting you back to Fallon.”

“Am I going to jail there?”

“Yes. Once you’ve been arraigned, you will have the opportunity to make bail.”

“What are my chances?”

“Depends on how convincing you are to the judge and how much money your parents have.”

“I see.”

Lucy felt suddenly nauseous, remembering how she’d treated her parents when they met with the Stocktons. They obviously still cared enough for her to send an attorney to Alabama, the only ray of hope she had going for her. She had to think of a way to get back on their good side because in the end, the only way she could finish Cole off would be to have her freedom back.

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Karlin sat on the couch, her right leg in a cast, elevated on a pillow. The pain was starting to subside after she took her medication, but it did nothing to remove the cloud of anxiety and uncertainty around her. Her phone vibrated and she saw the text from Suzanne that Cole was awake.

“I can’t do this,” she muttered to herself. The urge to swear, cry, and hide under her bed were all rolled into one little ball that was spinning in her head.

“What’s that?” Her mother asked.

“All of it,” Karlin said with a heavy sigh.

“Who was your text from?”

“Cole’s sister, Suzanne. He’s awake now. She says he’s doing good.”

“That’s good news, right?”

“Yeah, yeah it is. Don’t get me wrong, it’s great news. I’m just a little overwhelmed I think.”

“Tell me.”

“I’ll be fine—”

“No, Karlin,” Lauren said as she leaned forward in her chair. “Talk to me. Dammit, give me a chance to help you, or just open up to me. Please, for one goddamn time in your life, let me in.”

The weight Karlin felt before was not ten times heavier. She didn’t want to talk, she wanted to keep it bottled up because that’s how she dealt with things. But she could also see that her mother was yearning to help in the worst way.

“Okay. I don’t know that I really want a relationship with Cole.”

“Because of this? And that’s fine, you don’t have to do anything. I’m just wondering how you got from where you were last night to where you are now.”

Lauren’s tone caught Karlin by surprise. Her mother was calm, attentive, and didn’t seem to be surprised at what Karlin had said. It helped her to relax.

“I think this pulled my head out of the clouds. Not the ankle, but everything that happened last night.”

“Tell me what you mean about in the clouds.”

“Promise you won’t laugh.”

“Not a peep.”

“I got caught up in the fairy-tale. Me. Ms. I’m too practical to fall for that stuff. I was infatuated, for God’s sake. It’s embarrassing that I felt giddy about a boy, having a boyfriend, and that’s supposed to be normal, right? And if I feel bad about that, there’s something wrong with me.”

“So, you let your guard down and someone’s gotten so close that you want to put it up again.”

“Yeah. And he didn’t do it, I did it. I let it down and it’s like I put neon signs all over the place with arrows saying, ‘Me, me, right here, open for business!’.”

“Forgive me for smiling, but the image of you with neon signs...nonetheless, I get it. I always wondered what kind of person would be able to get through to your heart. I think I knew it wouldn’t be your average person. Anyway, why the change of heart. That’s what I don’t quite understand. There had to be something.”

“Does it matter?” Karlin asked.

“I think it does. Mainly because I think we see things a certain way when we’re not quite ourselves. Our emotions can sometimes be so overwhelming that we see things in a different perspective. It can be good or bad, I guess.”

“I think it was when we went to see him this morning in the ICU. I really, really wanted to see him, no matter what. And Daddy kept saying we’d had enough for one night, but he finally caved. I don’t know what I was expecting, but suddenly, him lying there in bed looking frail and his hair all...you know, matted down and his black eyes, and...I just don’t know.”

“The bubble burst, so to speak.”

“Yeah.”

“So, he’s not going to be like that forever, you know.”

“I know. But then I started thinking about other stuff. I mean this was in the news last night. Did you read the article in the paper? It called me his girlfriend. I never said that! I never talked to anyone except the police.”

“That is a big deal,” Lauren said, looking away as if contemplating what to say next. In her statement to the police, she’d mentioned that Karlin was Cole’s girlfriend in passing. Lauren never thought the statement would come back to haunt her and there wasn’t a chance in hell that she was going to admit to being the source that the paper used. “And you’re not comfortable with that term, I take it.”

“No. I read it and the first thing that went through my mind was all my classmates reading it. They’re going to think I’m dating the biggest loser in school.”

“What? That’s not how you’ve portrayed him to me. And it certainly isn’t what I’ve been hearing about him from May Palmer and by his actions.”

“But that’s the way he’s perceived by a lot of people at school, Mom. Even the ones that don’t know him say it. God, this is so out of hand. I can’t even go on social media without seeing it all over. People are stunned by the idea that he and I are dating, and I would be, too, if I were in their shoes. Plus the fact that he took me home one time. We haven’t even gone out on a date. Regardless, I don’t want that kind of attention.”

Lauren felt horrible, having unwittingly put Karlin in an uncomfortable position, but it was too late now and the best she could do was try to help Karlin manage it.

“Okay. So, let’s appeal to the rational Karlin now.”

“Alright,” Karlin said as she took in a deep breath. “I’m all for that.”

“It’s done. The story in the paper is out there. Right or wrong, it’s out there and you can’t undo, and you can’t dwell on it. At least the rational Karlin wouldn’t.”

“It still sucks.”

“I know,” Lauren said, risking a slight grin. Karlin smiled back weakly, but it was evident she was still miserable. “And the social media stuff, you can’t do anything about it. What you can do, though, is communicate with Cole.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s in this just as much as you. Maybe you don’t think this is a big deal to him, but you need to tell him how you’re feeling about all of this. Unless you’re just planning on ghosting him.”

“No, I couldn’t do that, but I’m still not following you.”

“Be honest with him and tell him how you feel, that’s all. There’s a possibility that maybe he’s going to be just as overwhelmed as you, only in a different way. People think someone was trying to kill him, can you imagine all the questions? And if you two put your feelings in the proper perspective, you’ll both be on the same page when you’re asked about it. That’s it in a nutshell, right? What your classmates are going to think or say?”

“I think so. Yeah.”

“So, the cat’s out of the bag, embellished perhaps, but now you have to deal with it. Find out how Cole feels. Tell him how you feel. And you know what? Take some time today to reassess that. I get the impression that you really like him, but don’t like the baggage that comes with it.”

“I think you’re right. It is the baggage. And you know, we’ve been doing this ‘Selles façade for so long that perhaps I’m the one that hasn’t been realistic about things. But it’s hard to let that persona go, you know what I’m talking about?”

“I’d be lying if I did. I’m not the deep thinker you are, sweetheart. And people like you are so firmly planted in your beliefs that it takes a lot to knock you over. But when it happens, it’s a pretty hard fall.”

“I feel like Lori did after he came to her rescue. I want things to go back to normal.”

“Do you really? You’re not even a little curious about how things could be with Cole? I would be. Someone that can make a girl like you a bit wobbly? I don’t think I’d be ready to write that off so quick.”

“Well,” Karlin said, her face beginning to flush and a smile creeping across her face, “it did feel nice. But now it’s scary.”

“It’s worth it. Look, you’re acting as if you’re getting cold feet at the altar. You’re projecting this way too far, take it slow and just see if things develop. It doesn’t have to be forever, first loves rarely are.”

“I’m not in love.”

“Okay, call in infatuation. You were smitten. I think you still are judging by your blushing. Go with it. Who gives a rat’s ass what anyone else thinks? Isn’t that what the ‘Selles was all about, doing things your way regardless of somebody else’s opinion?”

“It sounds good on paper, but I’m not so sure I’m up to the challenge.”

“If anyone is, you are. So, what are you going to do now that you know he’s awake?”

“I don’t...wait, Lori just texted,” Karlin read the text and then put her head back on the pillow on the couch. “She knows Cole’s awake. Wants to know if I want to go with her to see him.”

“Do you feel up to it?”

“No. Every time I move around my ankle hurts, even with the meds. But I feel like a coward because even if I could go, I don’t want to. Not yet.”

“Well, there’s the Karlin I know. You’re being honest with yourself and that’s good. But I still think you should reach out to him. Maybe a phone call or a text.”

“A text. Definitely a text. I’ll let Lori know, I think she’ll understand.”

“I think it’s smart if you stay close to home for a couple of days.”

“I think you’re right. And thanks.”

“For?”

“Talking.”

“Are you kidding?” Lauren asked as she walked over and put her arms around Karlin’s neck. “You made my decade. Don’t be a stranger.”

“I won’t.”

Lauren walked into the kitchen, elated that she’d gotten through to Karlin, and a bit giddy about seeing Karlin with a romantic interest. The emotional ground they’d just broken was overwhelming, and now that she was out of Karlin’s sight, she allowed herself to pump her fist

in the air and let the tears of happiness flow. Karlin was a real girl, alive on the inside, and Lauren had just been allowed to see it after all these years.

Lauren didn't know how long she'd been lost in thought, but it had to have been minutes gone by when she heard Karlin's voice talking on her phone.

"Hello, Cole?...Hi, hey, get off your butt," she said, followed by a giggle.

"Yes!" Lauren exclaimed in a suppressed whisper.

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Lori ran upstairs to the spa, seeing her mother sitting naked, cross-legged within a circle of candles. The glow of the uplighting along the back wall gave the room an aura of a sunset as the sound of chanting monks came from somewhere.

"Mom, I've got some good news: Cole's awake and doing good!"

May took in a deep breath and let out a sigh while hanging her head in exhaustion. A streak of tingling traveled through her spine and her nipples became erect. She thought she could feel the spirit of Cole filling the room, even from ten miles away. Sensations were coursing through every inch of her body and she felt a sense of panic that Lori might notice.

"That's fantastic," May said, her words sounding forced and constricted.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, the news just caught me by surprise. I was meditating and it was like waking suddenly from a deep sleep. Can you hand me my robe? Watch for the candles."

"Here," Lori said as she came around to face her mother. May was still sitting on the floor and seemed unusually guarded. Lori had never known her mother to try and hide her nakedness, but she was glad she did.

"Thank you. Give me a moment to regroup and I'll join you down in the kitchen."

"Okay."

May waited until Lori was out of the room before standing. She was exhausted from worry over the last twenty-four hours, yet felt electrified, every nerve ending reaching out from her body craving stimulation. As she put on her robe, she could feel the soft cotton glide across her skin, caressing her curves and covering the obvious signs of lust. Within moments, she was in the kitchen with Lori.



“So how did you find out?”

“His sister texted and said he was awake and was doing good. I called Karlin to see if she wanted to go, but she said it’s painful to move around even on the meds. I feel sorry for her, I know she’d want to go.”

“Look at your eyes. I don’t think you’ve gotten any sleep since all of this, are you sure you’re up to it?”

“Whatever I’m feeling is miniscule to what he’s going through. If he’s going to be a part of us, he needs us now.”

“I’m so proud of you, you have no idea. So, when are we going?”

“I was planning on leaving in a few minutes, but if you want to go I’ll wait for you.”

“Let me throw something on. Give me two minutes.”

“Is it just me or does this feel intoxicating?” Lori asked.

“I agree. He seems to give me hope for some reason.”

“Exactly! Someone to cheer for. I know this is irrational, but sometimes I think about what kind of person Cole would be if Daddy had gotten his wish to have a boy. Seriously, someone with his heart that didn’t have the weight of the world on his shoulders.”

“What...what do you mean by your dad wanting a boy? Did he say instead of you? I really don’t think that’s true, sweetie.”

“Oh, no, not instead of me. He’d said before that he would have liked to have a boy, too. I’m guessing there’s still time, right? Oh well, hurry, go get dressed.”

Lori’s enthusiasm was blinding her to the overt outrage boiling inside of her mother. May walked down the hallway to her room ready to punch holes in the walls with her fist. Once inside her closet, she felt free to vent her frustrations in private.

“You want a boy? I’ll give you a boy, no problem. I’ll give you a dozen boys, but it isn’t going to happen unless you fuck me, you British bastard! There are men jerking off just from their memory of me and you won’t even touch me. And then whining about wanting a boy to Lori? This has gone on long enough.”

When Lori first told her the news about Cole, she had planned to put on something modest when she decided to visit him. Something that showed her motherly instincts and concern for the boy who’d more than proven his character for her and her daughter. But it was time to step out a bit. Not for Cole, that could wait if she ever decided to do it. She wanted the

recognition, to be ogled and visually seduced by the eyes of men. Or women; the thought had presented itself many times. And this time she meant business with her tight jeans, boots, tank top shirt, and custom fit leather jacket.

As May reentered the kitchen, Lori's eyebrows almost eclipsed her forehead in surprise. She fanned her face for a second and May suddenly felt like she'd overdone it.

"My, my. Are you going to stand guard over his room?" Lori asked.

"Stand guard?"

"You look like you're ready to go to war with someone, like being Cole's bodyguard. You look good, though."

"Thank you. I'm feeling a bit...hmm, I guess I would call it a bit driven at the moment. Yeah, I'm feeling protective, I think. Maybe it's time someone protected him for a change. Are you with me?"

"Oh, yeah," Lori replied with a grin.

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"I'm afraid I'm tied down at the moment," Cole replied to Karlin's comment. "My butt's a bit sore, though, if that makes you feel better."

"You probably had it coming for something," Karlin teased.

"You're probably right. I heard you broke your ankle out there. I'm sorry."

"You didn't do it, you don't need to apologize."

"Maybe, I just have this sense of guilt for you—"

"If anyone's guilty, it's Lucy. I'll be okay. Daddy said it was a clean break and in about six weeks I'll be fine."

"Getting around in school's gonna be difficult."

"Then you better get better so you can carry my books."

"Get a knee scooter with a basket on it."

"No, even if I hadn't broken my ankle, I'd still expect you to carry my books."

"Geez, I didn't know strings were attached. I suppose I can do that. By the way, uh, I don't know how to bring this up. Have you been on the social page at for the school?"

"Yeah. It seems like somebody started a wildfire and it's out of control."

“I agree. I know this will sound weird, but I was hoping we could get our stories straight before school. You’ll probably be back in before me, but I’ve got people asking me already about it. I haven’t answered anyone, but my plan was to tell them that we’ve become really good friends. You know, sort of this odd pairing of people that enjoy each other’s company.”

“That’s an interesting take—”

“Don’t get me wrong, I like you. A lot. I’ve sort of had this secret crush on you for a long time, but I never would have done anything about it if all of this hadn’t happened the way it did.”

“Why not?”

“The truth?”

“Better be.”

“Pardon my French, but up to now, I’ve been a fuckup. I thought you were out of my league, so to speak. I didn’t think I was good enough, and I still feel that way now. I’m hoping to prove—”

“You don’t have to prove anything, Cole. That’s already been done, that’s why I said those things last night and why I called.”

“Well...well, I guess I’m at a loss for words. But I feel like a very lucky guy.”

“Me, too.”

“But you’re better looking than most guys.”

“Shut up,” Karlin said with a chuckle.

“Seriously, though, I think the pressure is going to be on you more than me and I understand it. There’s going to be people giving you a hard time for having any interest in me at all. I may have proven myself to you in some way, but they don’t know that. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that if you feel like we need to keep a little distance for a while, I understand.”

“You know, part of me wants to jump through the phone and kick your butt for thinking that I can’t stand by my convictions and face everyone. I want you to know that I don’t care what anyone says, and it makes me angry that you think I can’t handle it. But then I think about it and you’re right, it’s going to happen.”

“Karlin, I don’t think you’re weak, I know you can handle it, but to me, we barely getting to know each other. I know how I feel, and you say you know how you feel, but there’s so much more to learn about each other. I just don’t want you to be pressured.”

“You’re worried about me, aren’t you?”

“I’m worried for you. I guess in the long run I don’t want you to have to put up with it, but I don’t see any way around it. I’m just trying to lessen the blow.”

“Do you know what the most difficult part about dating you is going to be?”

“It’s probably a toss-up of a dozen or so things.”

“No, it’s just one that I can think of. I’m going to have to do all the worrying about you, because I don’t think you ever think of yourself.”

There was silence for a few moments and Karlin felt as if she may have made him feel discouraged.

“Hey, I didn’t mean it in a bad way. Maybe that’s something we can work on. Some self-confidence. Self-worth. I’m not saying you don’t have any, but I really don’t think you know your true value and you have so, so much.”

“Thanks. You know, I feel that I’m a good person, but it doesn’t seem to do anything for me. Maybe that’s where the negativity comes from.”

“I think you’re right. Well here’s something to feel good about: I think you’re right. I think I’m going to run into a lot of ridicule over this, and we don’t know each other that well. I agree. So, I like your idea. We’ve become very good friends, and that’s true. But between you and me, I’m hoping for a lot more.”

“Cool,” Cole said. “So am I. Hey, someone just showed up in my room and I’m getting a little sore. Can I call you tomorrow.”

“You better.”

“Promise. Good night, Karlin.”

“Good night, Cole.”

Cole hung his phone up and looked curiously at the couple standing at the threshold of his door.

“Hello,” Cole said.

“Hi, sorry if we’re interrupting,” the woman said. She had a slight, friendly smile, but she looked tired and very upset. The man with her looked gray and somewhat frightened to be there.

“No, it’s okay, uh, come in.”

“You’re Cole, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, Cole, we’re not supposed to be here I’m betting, but we felt compelled to come see how you were doing and if there was anything we could do.”

“I’m...uh, I guess...”

“Cole,” the man said, “We’re Lucy’s parents. And we don’t know all of the ins and outs of this, but we feel terrible that this has happened to you. No matter what, nothing calls for this.”

“Thank you. I think I’m going to be okay. How’s Lucy?”

“She’s,” Carol stammered, surprised by Cole’s interest in Lucy, “She’s on her way home. That’s about all we know.”

“But she’s okay, right?”

“Physically, I haven’t heard of anything wrong—”

“She’s going to be fine,” Lewis said. “Our concern at the moment is you.”

“Yes sir. And I really appreciate that. You know, I don’t know what it is that she gets so upset about. And to be honest with you, I’ve said some mean things to her, but it was always defensive. I’ve just never understood it.”

“We’re just now realizing there’s been a problem and perhaps there’ll be time that we can maybe put this to rest. But that’s for another day. We’re wishing you a very speedy recovery, and if there’s anything we can do, well, we’ll do our best.”

“Thank you, sir. And it was nice to meet you both.”

“You as well,” Carol said.

They turned to leave and met Lori and May at the door.

“General, Mrs. Fulmer,” Lori said in surprise. It was an awkward moment for all of them and Lori was looking for a way to ease the tension. “I haven’t seen you in a while, it’s, uh...”

“Difficult,” Carol said as she reached out and touched Lori’s arm to reassure her. “We just wanted to come by and see how Cole was doing.”

“That’s sweet. Have you met my mother?”

“Once, I believe. It’s May, correct?”

“Yes,” May replied, and though her voice was warm and soft, her expression showed she wasn’t happy to see them. “It’s good of you to come see Cole.”

“I’m sure someone is going to tell us we shouldn’t, but we can’t just stand by and let lawyers run our lives.”

“I would have to agree with that.”

“Listen,” Carroll said, lowering her voice so Cole wouldn’t hear, “would it be possible that we could talk to Lori tomorrow about all of this? We’re so in the dark about what’s going on. We just want to understand it.”

“Absolutely, I—” Lori began, but May stopped her.

“You know...I don’t want to be hypocritical about this...” May began, thinking about whether there were any legal minefields of their own if Lori talked to them.

“We understand,” Lewis replied. His face became more distraught, and May could tell that his feelings were genuine.”

“If I can be there with her. Would that be okay? I have some questions of my own.”

“Don’t we all? Certainly, we’d love to talk to both of you. I think we’re going to be pretty busy tomorrow. Lucy will arrive back in town tonight or tomorrow morning. But I’ll call Lori when we know we’ll have some time and if it fits your schedule.”

“Sounds good.”

“Thank you so much and it was good to see you again,” Carroll said.

“You, too. We look forwards to hearing from you tomorrow.”

The Fulmers left the room and Lori bolted toward Cole’s bedside.

“How are you?”

“I’m sore.”

“You look miserable.”

“I’m going to call for some pain stuff here shortly. I’m sorry, I don’t want to be rude.”

“Hey,” May said as she walked up. She’d been standing in the background for a moment to let Lori greet Cole first, and to steel herself for seeing him. “How’s the best dancer in Fallon.”

“Mrs. Palmer, it appears someone else swept me off my feet.”

“Oh my God!” May said with a laugh, joined by Lori.

“But yours will always be more memorable. I’m struggling with pain now—”

“Call them. Right now,” Lori said as she grabbed the remote and pushed the nurse’s call button.

“I’m sorry—”

“No, it’s fine. We were just so excited you were awake we couldn’t wait to come see you.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“What’s up, Romeo?” the nurse asked as she winked at Lori and May.

“I’m having a lot of pain.”

“We’ll take care of that. Ladies? We need to call it a night.”

“We were just going. Cole, take care and call Lori if you need anything at all, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thanks for coming by.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Cole,” Lori said.

“Cool.”

Lori and May left and within minutes the nurse had administered meds through Cole’s IV. He felt angry that he wasn’t able to enjoy the moment with them, but the pain had become unbearable. He thought about Lori’s smile as she was leaving. She looked tired, but she looked so happy and vibrant at the same time. She didn’t look like some rich kid who held her nose in the air toward a junkyard dog like him. It was sweet, and he felt so lucky to have gotten to know her. And the memory of May looking the way she did tonight rushed to his head as fast as the morphine and he was only able to relive it for a very few glorious seconds before drifting off to sleep.

Cole would wake up later around two in the morning feeling a little more coherent than earlier. He looked around the empty room and felt relieved that nobody was there that he would have to talk to. It was quiet and he had some time to himself for the first time since he could remember. For the first thirty minutes, all his worries hung in the forefront of his thoughts, frustrating him and giving him anxiety. And then, as if a switch had been turned on, acceptance of what he could and couldn’t do about anything became crystal clear. It was like a breeze blew fresh air into his room, carrying the scents of wisdom and hope with it. For the next two hours he did what he’d been wanting to do for a long time: Sit quietly in an empty room, stare at the walls, and figure things out. And before he drifted back off to sleep, he had a plan and a vision to straighten his life out. There were a lot of unknowns and uncertainties, but he was Cole Dillman, the guy that Lori and May came to see. The guy that the parent’s of his arch-nemesis came to see. And he was the guy who somehow turned the head of Karlin Brinn, who had so much faith and hope in him.

“I’m Cole-Fucking-Dillman,” he said groggily. “And I’m going to do unbelievable things.”