

Raw Mettle

by Mark Crosswell

Chapter One

Cole was dreaming about work again, the kind of dream that was as frustrating as it was vivid. He was at work, trying to keep up with customer demands at a full-service gas station. His job was to pump gas, clean windshields, check the oil, and air up the tires. But in his dream, he wasn't able to get the gas pump to work and the customer became impatient, honking his horn rhythmically as Cole became increasingly frustrated. His boss was hovering over his shoulder, speaking in his normal drunken slur, asking the same question over and over again: "Are you gonna help 'em or not?" Every time the horn honked, his boss would ask again. Out of frustration, Cole tried to yell at the customer, but the words wouldn't form and he woke himself up out of breath. The horn in his dream was the alarm on his cell phone.

I can't believe I dream about this shit," Cole grumbled.

Cole's best friend, Toby, was leaning against the wall and smiling. It was cold in the room and Toby was still covered by the sleeping bag he'd used to spend the night in.

What are you smiling about?"

Just listening," Toby replied.

Cole sat quietly for a moment and then it became very clear. The rhythmic sound of thumping against the wall from his mother's room and the muffled sounds of passion would have been easy to hear from where Toby was sitting. For Cole, it was nauseating and embarrassing.

Come on, let's get out of here," Cole whispered.

I gotta take a shower."

Take one in the locker room at school. I do it all the time."

You're kidding?"

It's better than running into whoever this guy is that Mom brought home last night, and right now we don't have any hot water. Come on, grab your clothes."

Alright."

Toby was amused but understood. Cole was his alter ego and the only friend who would put up with him. If it weren't for Cole, he'd have spent the night alone at his own house while his parents were out of town, scared to death of anything that moved.

Within moments, the two were dressed. They quietly sneaked down the hall and into the living room. Cole pulled on the front door, but it only moved a fraction before a metallic clank came from the outside.

Dammit."

What's the matter?" Toby asked.

Never mind. We gotta go out the window."

What?"

Just do it,” Cole said impatiently. He opened the window and pushed the screen out as the throes of passion were now coming at a fever pitch. The two climbed out and Cole pushed the window shut.

What s up with your door? Make the landlord fix it.”

It ain t broke, dude.”

What do you mean?”

Cole pointed to the padlock placed on the front door with a large red eviction notice tacked next to it.

Looks like she’s behind on the rent again.”

Where you gonna go?”

I don t know,” Cole said as they walked to the parking lot, That s her job, not mine. This is the cheapest apartment complex in town, and we can t afford it. We haven t had electricity in three days, and she goes out partying every night.”

This place doesn t cost squat, man. I thought she worked?”

She works. And then she spends and spends, and gets drunk, and brings a different guy home every night.”

That s messed up,” Toby said, shaking his head. Nobody would believe this.”

Nobody needs to know, do they?”

No. Don t worry, I won t say anything.”

I appreciate it.”

Seriously, where are you gonna stay if you re evicted?”

I can always go to my sister s house for a few days, but I d rather stay in my car til Mom gets it figured out. She usually does something and it works for a couple of months and then it happens again.”

I had no idea.”

It ain t something I brag about.”

Toby thought he could hear Cole s voice cracking during his last comment, and he could see Cole s eyes were misty as they got in his car.

Sorry things are like this for you,” Toby said as he looked back over toward Cole s apartment.

You ain t the only one. And I ll tell you this: I m sure as hell not planning to live my own life this way and that s a promise.”

The fifteen-minute drive to school was in silence. Toby thought about Cole s predicament and the last comment Cole made. Cole was a good person and a hard worker, but he didn t make the best choices. Toby didn t see him being anything like his mother, but was afraid Cole would probably wind up living in the same conditions without some sort of intervention.

Cole s thoughts were like rumblings in a dark, angry storm that seemed to hover over him. It moved as he moved and rained on anything positive he tried to do. He was dealt a bad hand of cards in life and knew he couldn t bluff his way through. Nor was he naive enough to think a pair of aces were going to magically show up in his hand. He believed in working hard and doing what he thought was right, but up to now it had gotten him nowhere. Something needed to happen or circumstances needed to change for him to have any hope, and there was little evidence either of those were on the horizon.

Karlin Brinn laid on top of her comforter in a t-shirt and sleep shorts, her head elevated on the pile of pillows behind her, staring at her toes. They were perfect, lining up trimmed and polished, but not too polished and not too flashy. That would be a cardinal sin for a member of the Selles.

Are you awake?" Lauren asked from the doorway.

Somewhat."

You okay? You have to be cold. Why aren t you under the covers?"

Hot. Maybe hot flashes. What do you think?"

At seventeen?"

I don t know, all of a sudden I get hot. My life is dull, or it seems dull. Maybe I m aging quickly. Maybe early onset menopause?"

You re silly."

Are you sure?" Karlin asked facetiously. I might be an outlier. An enigma to womankind."

I d buy the enigma part. As for menopause, I seriously doubt it. Ask your dad, he s the one that finished med school."

What do surgeons know? He can t even remember my birthday."

Lauren looked away briefly as if the critique had been aimed at her, then refocused on Karlin.

Let s not go through that. What s really the matter?"

I don t know. It s like this constant cycle of boredom, frustration, anxiety, and then back to boredom. I feel like throwing things at times."

Good thing you surround yourself with pillows. If you re worried about whether it shows, I haven t noticed. You re always so reserved and quiet, I m not sure anyone can tell when you re upset. Have you talked with Lori or Lucy? You know, just to get things off your chest?"

I d never talk to Lucy about this. She d go on and on about immature feelings and such. Lori would worry about it to death."

Do you want to talk to me?"

No."

Your counselor?"

Nope."

Father Nick?"

God, no."

Lauren took a deep breath as she shook her head.

I guess you re stuck with carrying this burden yourself. Are you girls having your meeting tonight?"

Yeah, right after school."

Where at?"

Here. That s okay, isn t it? I mentioned it a few weeks ago."

It s fine, I just forgot. Your dad will be sleeping, he s working nights this month."

We'll keep it down."

Just keep Lucy in check, she gets a little rambunctious at times when she starts talking about her boyfriend."

I'll keep her in line."

Alright. Don't be late...never mind," Lauren said.

Karlin stared blankly at her mother as she walked away. Karlin was never late, never unprepared, never surprised, and certainly never overjoyed about anything. And as she reflected on these things, it occurred to her that perhaps it was the root of her frustrations.

Lori Palmer sat at the table in the sun-filled conservatory having breakfast with her father. He would be leaving for London in a few hours, and it was the last time she'd see him for at least a week.

What are you going to do over there, Daddy?"

We're going to find a solution to an enormous problem on a project that we previously bid on. The people doing their architecture have created a catastrophe and the company that hired them are asking if we can fix it. That's the plan, at least," he said with a smile. Winston Palmer was a large, brutish man whose looks ran contrary to his light-hearted spirit, witty banter, and cultured British accent. Those traits and his architectural brilliance made him a wildly successful businessman.

I'm sure you will. How long is the flight?"

Altogether, about thirteen hours. Agonizing to say the least, but the sleep will do me good.”

Are you going alone?”

I m taking a few architects and my assistant along.”

Felicia?”

Yes,” he replied with disdain. Another dreadful part of the trip. You ve met her, I think?”

I have. Two years ago, I think, at your company party. She didn t seem so bad. Sort of dull, but not bad.”

The woman casts a pall over everything. Like a black hearse passing by an outdoor wedding. I always thought she d make a great undertaker.”

How mean!” Lori said as she laughed. Why do you keep her around?”

She s very good at what she does, always a step ahead of me. She has a wonderful business sense and probably keeps us out of hot water. A very valuable asset, that woman. A valuable, dreary asset.”

Well, I hope you have a good trip, I have to get to school.” Lori leaned over and gave him a hug from behind. I m going to say bye to Mom before I go, can you text me when you get in tonight?”

First thing, love,” Winnie replied as he kissed her cheek.

Shave before you go,” she admonished as she walked through the French doors into the house.

The Palmer house was an architectural marvel. The furnishings were extravagant, and there was never a shortage of anything nor a whim that couldn't be fulfilled. Lori thought about her father's appearance and how it was the antithesis of everything around him. He showed little regard for the way he presented himself other than the way he communicated. His clothes were almost always tattered, his haircuts were few and far between, and he went days without bathing. It certainly wasn't representative of his obvious success and it certainly wasn't a problem for his wife, the stunningly beautiful May Palmer.

Lori made her way up the stairs to the open door of the spa, an expansive room with minimalist touches that served as a sanctuary for her mother. Lori could see the back of the chaise lounge where her mother lay bathing in the sunlight from the easterly windows. There was a waterfall made of stones in one corner that spilled into a pond with koi and exotic plants. The music played softly from speakers somewhere in the room, a mystery that Lori still hadn't uncovered. Lori walked up to the side of the chaise, her mother calmly relaxing with her eyes closed in her normal, natural state. May shunned clothing, makeup, and jewelry at every turn except for a green, uncut amethyst around her neck. Lori grabbed a towel from the rack and threw it over her mother's midsection.

"Cover up, you're going to get skin cancer or something," Lori said. May opened her eyes and smiled, smoothing the towel over her breasts and crotch.

"Off to school?"

"Yeah, just said goodbye to Dad and thought I'd check to see if you wanted to go do some Christmas shopping this evening?"

"Tomorrow night maybe? I have a fundraiser this evening."

Okay. Need any help?"

No but thank you. Maybe keep your dad company tonight before his trip."

He s leaving this morning."

This morning? Hmm, I thought it was this weekend. Well, I guess you have tonight to yourself."

You didn t know he was leaving today?"

I knew it was soon, but then again..."

He s still here, you should go down and see him."

I will," May replied dismissively.

Okay. I suppose I should go. We have our meeting this afternoon."

What meeting?"

The Selles. Karlin, Lucy, and I."

At Karlin s house, right?"

Yeah. I m not looking forward to it. Is everything okay with you and Daddy?"

Fine, he s just very busy and forgets to tell me things."

I guess. I ll see you this afternoon?"

I ll be gone by three, so maybe this evening."

Okay, love you," Lori said.

You, too."

Lori took a little longer to get back downstairs, her mind trying to sort through the feelings she was going through. Her father having breakfast alone before an international flight

and her mother seeming to be indifferent was unsettling. She knew their family life wasn't exactly traditional, but this seemed a step beyond that. Lori's antennas were now up and operational. Her congenital tendency to worry about minutiae was nothing new, but when the subject involved the two people she loved the most, it was quite troubling.

Lucy Fulmer thought about feigning illness to get out of going to school. The news that her boyfriend would be coming home for the holidays was a complete surprise and she couldn't sit still. He'd confirmed to her in an email the night before that he would be home in two days and he fully expected to see her within hours of his arrival.

"That's tomorrow!" She whispered to herself. "I'm going to cater to his every whim, as a woman of purpose should. He's going to see how much I've grown and how much I've sacrificed of my own time to be the woman he deserves."

She looked into the mirror on her vanity, looking for any imperfections she may have disregarded in the last few days. Her skin was pure and white, never blemished by the cruelties of teen acne or damage from the sun. Her lips were full, her hair long and shimmering, and her figure was, in a way, stalled.

"No tits and buck teeth," she grumbled, her mood suddenly souring. "Thanks, mother, for your fucked-up chromosomes."

Lucy looked through the folders meticulously lined up on her desk, thinking about everything due today and what she wanted to achieve. Her calendar reminded her of the meeting this afternoon at Karlin's house, causing her to sneer.

I m getting a little tired of wet-nursing those two adolescents,” she said. She was alone in the room, yet she fantasized that her parents were listening through the door or the walls, worrying that their little princess was becoming a woman. I m beyond them now, and by the time Barron goes back to D.C., I ll be a full-fledged woman.”

Lucy smiled, hoping she’d said it loud enough for anyone trying to eavesdrop. She wanted them off-balance because she always got the attention she craved when they were.

She opened the folder on Barron containing pictures, press announcements, and his emails to her she d printed. She took them into her bathroom and laid the picture on the sink and began to read the his most recent email.

“...You know I dread being home for the holidays. My parents always parading me around like a goddamn show dog to people I couldn t care about less. If I come home, it will be to see you, not them. Have you thought about the expectations I mentioned last week? We re no longer kids, and I think we can find more productive ways to spend our time than we have in the past. Surprise me. Show me that you want this to work out.”

Barron

Lucy felt her insides begin to burn and her face flushing as she reread the words “...If I come home, it will be to see you...”. She’d responded to him within seconds of seeing the email, letting him know that she was ready to take their relationship to the next level.

She closed the door to her bathroom for privacy and held Barron s picture up in her left hand while scrunching the four fingers of her right together and putting them in her mouth. She

slowly worked them in and out, for only a few seconds, until the memory of events a few years ago made her gag, spewing a small amount of vomit on Barron s picture.

Shit!” Lucy whimpered as she used tissues to wipe the photo clean. Lucy, you ve got to let that go. All of it! It s going to ruin your time with Barron if you don t.” She rinsed her mouth and wiped off the picture while battling the tears that were trying to form. There was a knock on her bathroom door.

Lucy, are you okay?”

I m fine,” she replied. Just a little morning sickness.”

What?” Her mother asked weakly. Lucy could hear the concern in her voice and it cheered her up.

I m just kidding, mother. I m fine.”

Okay, just checking.”

Carol Fulmer walked out of Lucy s room, oblivious that Lucy was holding both middle fingers up in her direction.

Chapter Two

Cole sat quietly at his desk, math being the furthest thing on his mind. The half-finished test in front of him was a failure, but he didn't care. His mind was on more important things as he stared absently into the distance. He wasn't sure what brought him back into focus, but he realized his gaze had fallen on Karlin's breasts across the room. She looked back at him blankly as he sat up in his seat nervously and looked away. He'd always felt intimidated by her. She was very smart, attractive, and always impeccably dressed. She was out of his league, but it didn't stop him from fantasizing about her. More than once he'd thought about how she would look in a

pair of jeans, a sweater, and her hair pulled back in a pony-tail. That thought was cut short as his gaze fell on Lucy who glared back at him with a mocking expression. Cole raised his middle finger to her and her hand shot up in the air.

Lucy?"

Dr. Reece, I don't think Cole's feeling well," Lucy said.

Cole? Are you ill?"

Everyone's attention was on Cole now and he could feel his face reddening with the attention.

No, ma'am, I feel fine."

Well, Lucy, what made you think he was ill?"

Just the way his face looked, I thought he was sick."

If we're going by looks, Lucy's on her deathbed," Cole replied.

There was a nervous laughter in the room and the bell rang before Lucy could counter. Cole dropped his test on the teacher's desk and exited the room before Lucy could confront him. Karlin caught Lucy by the arm, keeping her from giving chase.

Cole walked down the hall amid the usual buzz of swarming students all going in different directions. But the hall could have been empty as far as he was concerned. His mind was on other things, like where he would be living a week from now, or how he was going to afford a new set of tires for his car. And the same nagging question kept going through his head: *Why the hell are you in school if you aren't even going to try to pass a math test?* He needed a quiet place to think. Perhaps he'd skip the last few classes of the day and go to the lake before going to work. The thought lightened his mood as his stride increased and he felt a sense of

purpose with something to look forward to. He was mere steps away from the exit door when he saw movement in his periphery, a girl stumbling toward him.

Shit!” He yelled as they collided, landing on top of her as they fell to the floor.

Get off of me!”

“I’m trying,” Cole said in frustration as the swarm of students moved closer to get a look.

Cole stood and put his hand out for the girl to grab, but then felt a shove from the side.

What the hell, Dillman?” Gary Creighter barked. You re in that much of a hurry that you gotta knock my girlfriend down?”

I didn t see her coming til the last minute,” Cole replied and then turned to look at the girl. Sorry, I hope I didn t hurt you or anything?”

I m alright,” she said quietly.

Apologize to her,” Gary said.

I just did.”

Do it again.”

What more do you want? I told her I was sorry. It was an accident.”

Accidents don t just happen; you weren t paying attention. Now tell her you’re sorry.”

Blow me,” Cole said as he turned to walk away.

Gary began to follow him, his ego bruised by the audacity of someone like Cole speaking to him that way. Before he could get to Cole, his friends grabbed him and held him back.

Meet me at the monument after school, asshole!”

Can t wait,” Cole replied, slamming the exit door on his way out.

Cole got to his car before noticing he'd left the building without his jacket. His t-shirt was doing little to keep him warm and he breathed a sigh of relief when he felt his car keys in his pocket. His car was everything to him; a source of pride, a means to subsist, and a way to escape when he needed to be alone. But at the moment, he needed shelter from the cold. He started the motor, shivering as he waited for the engine to warm.

It's happening. No matter what I do or how hard I work. I can't focus, I don't have a clue about what to do and I can't stand where I am. And the worst part, Cole, is that you're probably going to turn out like your mother. The one fucking thing that you've never wanted to be was like her and everyone's trying to make damn sure it's going to happen. I'd rather die."

Cole sat in his car, trying to keep his emotions in check as his mind seemed to spiral out of control. All he was looking for was any glimmer of hope, but it was always a moving target and usually a two-edged sword with despair on the opposite side. The only joy he found in life was working hard and getting noticed for it.

Grades are like that, Cole, his subconscious said. You know, those things that indicate how hard you're working in class? A's across the board in Junior High, and now you struggle for a D. You're a fuckup.

Cole pounded his steering wheel and swore. He was so far behind he didn't think it was possible to salvage a decent grade this year. He was simply marking time. Time that he could be doing more useful things with, like finding a full time job to learn a trade. He even thought about hitting the road, working long enough from one place to another to keep him moving. That would give him time to think about what he wanted to do with his life and maybe give him some exposure to other things in life. Anything at this point would be a relief from feeling like a total

failure. *And walking away from your responsibilities and your troubles would make you exactly like your mother*, he thought.

As he waited for the next two hours to go by, he would wonder why he kept winding up in this very situation. He didn't look for fights, or trouble, but circumstances always seemed to be out of his control and he was tired of it. Trouble seemed to stalk him, making his life miserable. He couldn't have known how this single event would wind up shaping his future.

Hazel Dillman ran the comb through her customer's hair, cutting the strands with precision. She was a natural as a beautician, her hands maneuvering effortlessly with combs, scissors, and rollers, creating results that left her customers pleased. It was Hazel's only saving grace because her mouth was always getting her in trouble. She was loud, obnoxious, and unapologetic about both.

I told him, You don't judge me you son of a bitch, I'm doing my best and if you don't like it, you can kiss my ass.

I'm sure you did. I've never known you to take anything off of anyone," her customer said nervously. She was aware of Hazel's temperament and watched cautiously as she wagged the scissors around while talking.

He didn't like that one little bit and told me if I was late on one more rent payment, he'd throw me out. Well, he doesn't know it, but I've got some other plans and I won't need his shitty apartment anymore, and you know what?"

Before her customer could answer, Wade put his hand lightly on Hazel's shoulder.

"Can I talk to you for moment?" he asked. His voice was quiet, but his reddened face showed his discontent. "This will only take a moment, Mrs. Atkins. I m sorry."

"Why sure," Hazel bellowed. "When the boss wants to talk to you, you listen!"

"Oh, that s fine," Mrs. Atkins replied.

Hazel followed Wade out the back door. Wade s hands trembled as he lit his cigarette, inhaling the first drag deeply as if taking a shot of courage.

"Hazel, this is the third time you ve worked for me— "

"I know what you re going to say. I m too loud, I cuss too much. I do this, I do that, and you don t like any of it. Why do you always target me?"

"Because you re the only one who does it here. You re running off business and I— "

"I bring in business, my customers like me."

"Do they like chasing you all over town from one shop to another?"

"They ll go where I go, mind your own damn business."

Wade raised his hands in the air, exasperated by her cavalier attitude.

"One more chance, Hazel. That s it. You re a childish, irresponsible bitch," he said, spittle coming out with the words spoken in anger. "You came to me saying you were ready to change and the same thing starts all over. Either find a way to muzzle that mouth or find another shop. And I don t care how desperate I get I won t hire you again."

Wade stormed back inside leaving Hazel stewing in her own thoughts.

Go to hell, you faggot bastard,” she grumbled to herself. I don t need you or anybody else. I ve got plans and all of you can kiss my ass.”

She thought about getting in her car and spending the rest of her afternoon in a bar. She was tired of her responsibilities with work and her obligation to raise Cole. Wade had been kind to take her back, and they d had moments like this before. But Wade wasn t nice about it this time, telling her exactly what he thought instead of sugar-coating his words like before. She knew she pushed people to the point of ruining a relationship, but in her opinion, she was the only person who had the guts to tell people like it is and she wasn t about to let anyone tell her to dial that back.

She looked over at her car that was ready to take her away from all the phonies, flakes, and snobbery. Somewhere out there was a horny man at a bar who d buy her drinks long enough to get in her in bed. At the moment, that sounded like a really good way to end the day. It wouldn t be the first time she d packed her belongings and quit, leaving a woman sitting in the middle of a haircut. The only thing stopping her was that her keys were in her purse, next to Wade at the front desk.

The thought of Cole crossed her mind as she walked back into the shop. He always had his keys in his pocket, ready to hop in his car to get away from her. He was clever that way, always thinking ahead, always becoming a little more responsible like everyone else. He d also gotten into the annoying habit of pointing out her deficiencies, too.

To hell with that little bastard, she thought as she stiffened her back and returned to her work-station.

As Cole sat in his car waiting, Lucy was becoming intolerable, trying to rush Lori and Karlin through the parking lot.

What s your problem, Lucy?” Karlin asked.

I don t have a problem, I just want to get going, that s all.”

Then take off, we ll meet at my house later.”

Why are you in such a hurry?” Lori asked.

Lucy took a step toward them, motioning for them to lean in.

Cole Dillman s going to get his ass kicked,” she whispered. I hear he s fighting Gary Creighter by the monument.”

So? You want to see that? I thought we were trying to be above all of that?”

We are, but I want to see him suffer. I want to see him looking like the scum he is, wallowing around in his own filth and blood. That s what he deserves.”

For what he said in math class?” Karlin asked. “A little petulant, don t you think? If I remember correctly, you started that whole thing.”

Don t even try to tell me you didn t see him flip me off! And Math class is just the tip of the iceberg. You have no idea how good I ll feel to see him get the shit kicked out of him,” she hissed.

Whatever. Okay, let s go,” Karlin replied. But what are you going to do if he wins?”

I ll beat him myself,” Lucy said absently as they began to walk. Karlin and Lori looked at each other and shook their heads.

What are they fighting over any way?”

Cole pushed Gary's girlfriend down on purpose. He hates Gary but he doesn't have the guts to do anything about it, so he took it out on Gary's girlfriend like a coward. That's what I heard."

Doesn't sound like Cole," Karlin said.

Really? So how well do you know him?"

Not hardly at all, but I've never seen him be a jerk."

Well, you're terribly naive. Everyone knows he's an asshole and a bully."

Everyone but me," Karlin replied, "and probably quite a few others."

He gets in trouble a lot," Lori said.

How do you know?"

She just knows, Karlin. For Pete's sake, get a clue."

I work in the Dean's office, remember? Any time someone gets in trouble I hear about it. It isn't bad stuff, though, never mean. Skipping school, parking violations; that sort of thing. He gets in fights, though—" Lori began.

See, I told you!" Lucy said smugly.

But everyone says they aren't his fault," Lori said to finish her thought.

Don't encourage her, Lori. Of course he says it isn't his fault."

No, other people say it. I— "

God, can you two please shut up?"

It's no use, she's got her mind made up."

Lucy whirled around to face the two, her face reddened and eyes glassy with anger. She clenched her fists by her side, looking as though she would take on anyone.

"I thought you two were my friends. Why are you completely dismissing everything he's done?" Lucy yelled, drawing the attention of the other students hurrying toward the monument.

"Calm down, Lucy," Karlin said as Lori reached her hand out to soothe Lucy. "Nobody's taking sides, and yes, we're your friends."

"I wish I could tell you both why I hate him so. It's so vile, so cruel, it would make you want to vomit. But I can't," Lucy continued as she looked into the air and clenched her fists in dramatic fashion. "As God is my witness, I can't."

"Okay, now you're losing me. Cut the act and let's just get this over with."

Lucy glared at Karlin for a moment before leading the way to the fight. Within a few minutes they reached the gathering by the monument. The excitement and growing thirst for action took Lucy's thoughts away from Karlin as she stood on her tiptoes and tried to push people out of the way. But Lucy wouldn't forget Karlin's little snipe. It wasn't that Karlin was wrong, Lucy thought, but she could have kept being right to herself.

Chapter Three

Cole gripped the steering wheel of his car, his palms sweating as the tension mounted. He kept watch on his rearview mirror for signs of the crowd that was sure to gather. He glanced over at the monument where it seemed most of the after-school fights occurred. It was a small monument made from a piece of granite placed along the tree line at the far end of the parking lot. Because of its location, it was out of view of the school and faculty, perfect for the occasional tussle.

It wasn't the first time Cole had been here for the same thing, but it was the first time that he worried about being late to work because of it. And just as the notion to skip the fight and head to work came to him, a sudden banging on his passenger side window brought him back to the moment.

Are you ready?"

Startled, Cole took a deep breath and tried to regain his composure as he unlocked the door to let Toby in.

I guess. Does it matter?"

Only if you didn't show up. I saw what he did in the hall. He nudged Rachael in front of you as you were walking by. You couldn't have avoided her. He was looking for trouble."

I'm not surprised. Used her to get to me, the little coward. I had my head down and didn't see her until we both wound up on the floor. It doesn't matter now."

He's panicking. He was hoping you'd left, but someone said they saw you waiting in your car in the parking lot."

He should know better. Arrogance, I guess."

Toby looked over his shoulder the same time Cole looked in the rearview mirror.

Here they come. Gary has his little gang with him and it looks like they've got a crowd, too."

What do you want to bet his buddies jump in if I start beating him?" Cole asked.

Wouldn't surprise me. I gotta go, I can't get caught up in this shit."

Thanks for the support," Cole said sarcastically.

Cole watched as Toby wound his way through the maze of cars to get back to the football field house. The season had ended and today was the day to turn in equipment for the year. As one of the managers, Toby would be busy sorting, cleaning, and packing everything away for the rest of the afternoon.

Toby was driven by his parents to be class valedictorian. It would improve his chances of getting into the Air Force Academy, a dream they'd had for him since his freshman year. The

political connections had been made and all he had to do was clear the hurdles and he was a shoo-in. Toby wasn't so sure it was the route he wanted to go, but for the time being he knew his efforts would pay off no matter what he pursued. He was deathly afraid of being around trouble and having Cole as a best friend was like doing somersaults in a minefield. Cole understood this, but it was discouraging not to have his best friend by his side at times like this. Cole smiled, though, knowing that Toby would be worthless in a fight anyway.

Cole took off his watch, put his head back against the headrest, and drew in a deep breath. The anxiety before was always worse than the fight itself and he was ready to get to it. He got out of his car, walked to the monument, and leaned against it as he watched Gary approach him with a sneer.

Gary walked cautiously just out of arm's reach of Cole. The crowd of students grew by the second as Gary and his friends slowly began to surround him. Cole focused on Gary while trying to keep up with where the rest of his gang stood.

"You think you can push my girlfriend down and get away with it?" he asked nervously.

"I heard that you pushed her in front of me. Didn't he, Rachael?" Cole asked. She looked down at the ground and said nothing. Cole shook his head, pushed himself away from the monument, and leaned in toward Gary. "I have to get to work, let's get on with it if you want to fight."

"C'mon, Gary, kick his ass! Knock the shit out this long-haired creep," one of the friends yelled. The rest were urging him on as well, although more timidly.

Gary moved a little closer to Cole, nervously sizing him up.

"You got this coming, asshole, so hold on tight."

Gary grabbed Cole's t-shirt with one hand and drew the other back slowly. Cole watched him for a split second and almost laughed. A moment later, Gary was on the ground, having been hit twice by Cole. He looked up in disbelief.

Hey, fucker...." Gary said, stunned by Cole's quickness.

You think this is a movie? I'm supposed to stand here and let you hit me?"

Get up, Gary," a friend said angrily. "C'mon, kick his ass!"

Gary looked around at the crowd who waited to see what he'd do. He stood slowly, steadying himself and then leapt toward Cole, trying to knock him to the ground. Cole stepped back far enough that Gary stumbled, wrapping his arms around Cole's knees. Cole drew his arm back to punch him, but was grabbed from behind and pulled to the ground. After that, there were a flurry of punches and kicks to his face and ribs. He curled up to protect himself and could see Gary standing with the rest of the crowd outside of the fray. Moments later it was all over, with the usual comments filled with false bravado from those who had jumped him. Somebody yelled "Teacher!" and the crowd dispersed quickly.

Should have known," Coach Naylor said while walking up and shaking his head.

Had you known you wouldn't have come over," Cole said.

Cole stood up and brushed the dirt off of his t-shirt and jeans, feeling more adrenaline than pain.

Why don't you try getting along with others for a change, Dillman? Make it easier on all of us."

It's a two-way street, Coach, it ain't just me."

You seem to be the common denominator, both on the field and off."

Then I'll make it easy on all of us; I quit."

Oh, there you go. You can't take a little criticism, so you just quit. Is that it?"

No. I'd already decided to quit the team. I don't get to play as it is and—"

You'd get to play if you'd just do what I told you and stop being such a goddamn hardhead!"

Cole was unfazed, having been down this road with Naylor many times and keenly aware of Naylor's short fuse.

Yeah, I've heard you every time. But for me—"

That's your problem, it's always all about you."

Coach, coach," Cole said, putting his hands up defensively. It's fine, we don't have to argue. I'm done and no hard feelings."

Bob Naylor stared at Cole, not ready to stop arguing and trying to control his anger. He could keep his frustrations in check for most people, but Cole had a knack for pushing his buttons. The truth of the matter was that every time he looked at Cole it was like looking at himself thirty years ago. Naylor took a deep breath, put his hands on his hips, and then became angrier when Cole extended his hand to shake.

Fine," Naylor said, ignoring Cole's gesture and turning to walk away. Go turn in your gear and stay of my field house. You might want to clean up before you go anywhere, you look disgusting"

Thank you."

Cole turned to get in his car and noticed the only people left of the crowd were Karlin, Lori, and Lucy. He hardly knew them, but Lucy's animosity toward him was something he never understood.

Fighting again, Cole?" She asked.

Do you care?"

You re so childish, nothing but trouble. You should—"

You should mind your own business."

This is my business," Lucy hissed, matching the intensity in anger that Cole had seen from Coach Naylor just moments earlier. This is *my* school and you tarnish its image with your behavior and classless stupidity."

Lori furrowed her brow at Lucy and then shook her head slightly as Cole made eye contact with her. She didn't agree with Lucy's statement and she wanted to make that clear to Cole. Karlin remained her stoic self, not showing any outward emotion or interest. Cole twisted his mouth a little, regretting the words he was about to say because of how the other two would perceive him.

Go fuck yourself, Lucy, and leave me alone."

You don t say that to me, you inferior prick." Lucy yelled as she tried to make her way toward Cole. Lori held her arm, keeping her from advancing.

I ll say anything I want."

Cole slid into the car seat and tried to close his door. Lucy had made it far enough to grab the handle, momentarily keeping him from closing it.

Come back here you coward!" Lucy screamed.

What are you going to do, gum me to death? You've got more gums than teeth."

Lori gave Lucy's arm one hard yank and pulled her away again.

I'll tear your fucking eyes out if you ever look at me again."

Cole closed his door and stared at her as she tried to break Lori's hold on her arm. Karlin looked curiously at Lucy with just the slightest grin curling the sides of her mouth.

Cole, please just get out of here," Lori begged, "And seriously, there's really no reason to fight. Ever."

I didn't have a choice, Lori."

There are always choices, Cole. You can always walk away."

Easy for you to say. Believe it or not, some things are worth fighting for."

Cole started his car and drove across the parking lot to the field house. He turned his rearview mirror so that he could look at his face, noticing a muddy mixture of blood and dirt below his nose and on his chin. His shirt wasn't much better and he felt the scrapes on his elbows as he tried to use the armrests.

Not bad, considering," he said to himself. "It could have been a whole lot worse."

Cole pulled his gear from the locker and took it to the supply room where Toby was meticulously checking the equipment for damage.

Here's my shit," Cole said.

How are you feeling?"

Not bad, about what I expected. His friends jumped in, but I got a few shots in on him."

Yeah, I saw it. Somebody took a video on their phone. Gary's gonna have a hard time living this one down. Wait 'til you see it."

I think you could beat him.”

Jerk,” Toby said. Cole grinned and laid his stuff on the floor with the other gear.

I gotta get to work, see you tomorrow.”

Take care. You should clean up some before you go, you look like you lost.”

“I’ve heard. See ya.”

Five minutes later Cole was on his way to work, trying to ward off the memories of the day. He’d failed another math test, gotten into a fight, and was now going to be late for work. Telling Lucy to go fuck herself, though, was a bit of a bright spot. One thing that bothered him, however, was what he’d told Lori: *Some things are worth fighting for.*” The fight with Gary certainly wasn’t a test of morality or virtue, and it wasn’t the context he meant when he made the statement. But Lori wouldn’t know that and the opportunity to clarify his sentiment was quite unlikely. He’d just have to live with the fact that Lori would see him as an idiot.

Lauren Brinn watched through the window as Karlin and Lori drove up. They both looked somber as they walked through the front door.

Boy, a couple of long faces.”

Hi, Mom,” Karlin said as she kissed her mother’s cheek.

Hello, Mrs. Brinn,” Lori said.

What’s going on? Where’s Lucy?”

Last I saw, she was giving a cop an earful. She took off angry from school and I think she got pulled over for speeding.”

Must have been something terrible to cause that much excitement.”

Just a boy she doesn't like. She got mouthy and then got what she had coming to her,” Lori said as Karlin nodded in agreement.

I'm sure you'll hear all about it if she shows up.” No sooner had the words left Karlin's mouth, Lucy's car came to a screeching stop in front of the house.

There she is. We'll let her vent first and then I'll get some tea going for you girls. Remind her to keep it down if you would.”

I will.”

The front door opened in a rush and Lucy stormed in, leaving a trail of her purse, scarf, and jacket on the floor as she headed for the den.

One would think she lived here,” Karlin said to Lori as they both looked at the aftermath of Lucy's entrance. Lucy, what do you think you're doing? Pick that stuff up.”

Lucy ignored her and sat down on one of the wingback chairs, looking at her feet while fuming.

Hey,” Karlin said, nudging Lucy's foot with her own.

What?”

Go pick up your stuff and shut the door. You're letting in the cold.”

How about a little compassion here?”

How about a little respect? If you don't like it, go home.”

Lucy took a deep, angry breath and stomped into the foyer. She picked up her belongings and put them in the closet, but before she could slam the door, she caught the discerning eye of Lauren. She quietly closed it and walked back into the den.

I apologize. It's been a difficult afternoon."

Accepted, and keep the noise down, my dad's sleeping," Karlin replied. Let's say the mantra and— “

Do we have to say the mantra every time?" Lucy whined.

It was your idea. I don't care if we say it or not."

Let's just say it and get it over with." Lori said, trying to keep the peace.

Alright," Karlin said to get them started. "*We live to benefit ourselves and ourselves alone. Our goal is independence from all others, rising above the commonplace and accepting nothing short of excellence.* Now, let's talk about this week and where we are. Lori, we've both got research papers due tomorrow, want to swap and proofread?"

Excuse me?" Lucy said in disbelief. You want to talk about this shit when I..."

Hey, hey, hey!" Lauren said as she entered the room. Let's watch our language in here. You three may talk that way at school but I don't want to hear it in my house."

Sorry, Mrs. Brinn," Lucy said.

We don't use that kind of language at school, Mom."

My ass, I wasn't born yesterday," Lauren said as she walked back into the kitchen.

Karlin put down her agenda of events and the minutes of their last meeting.

What s wrong with you, Lucy? And what about all the profanity today? I thought we agreed it's something we were going to stay away from?"

Lucy looked at Karlin as if she were a child.

That s in the company of others. Amongst ourselves we should be free to do as we wish. Don t be naive, and don t tell me that any word is too profane for the likes of him."

All of this is about Cole?"

Of course this is about Cole. You were both there, you saw how he talked to me and how he treated me."

You brought it on, Lucy. Why did you even say anything?"

Yeah, if you don t like the guy just keep your distance."

I didn t bring on anything, he was doing something stupid. I just might be trying to help him, did you ever think of that? Besides, why are you to defending him? This is insane."

If you want to help him maybe you shouldn t talk to him like he s dirt," Lori said.

He is dirt! God, don t you get it?"

Look, stop it. Why are we here? Why do we meet every week?"

To vent. To support each other during our times of need, and right now I m not feeling any support."

No, we meet every week because we decided a few years ago that we wanted to rise above stuff like this. Right? We want to do well in school, we want to aspire to something greater than being housewives..." Karlin said, but she could hear her mother clearing her throat

from the kitchen. We're not trying to be snobs, we just want to go further than the average person. Agreed?"

I have no problem with being a snob, but what's that got to do with this?" Lucy asked.

You need to learn to rise above this kind of stuff, Lucy. You can observe all you want but you aren't going to impress anyone by ridiculing Cole or bringing yourself down to his level."

So, you agree that he's a peasant as well?"

No, that isn't what I said, and it isn't what I think. But you're too smart to get into a shouting match or a put-down contest with people like him. You need to act with some class in these situations and stop letting your temper take control. We didn't have to go see that fight, but you insisted. And now here we are. You could have made a better decision."

Lucy sat quietly, Karlin's words gnawing at her. She twitched her mouth from side to side, wanting to say something but also knowing that Karlin was right. She looked over at Lori, who nodded in agreement with Karlin.

Fine," Lucy said after a few moments. You're right, rise above it."

There you go. Are you better now?"

No, but I have to remember that I'm more mature than he is. Besides, I'm just going to let Barron handle it."

Karlin looked at Lori, who returned the look with an eye roll. It was rare that they could gather for any length of time without Lucy introducing her boyfriend into the conversation.

Let's not get into Barron today," Lori pleaded.

Why not? He's just as much a part of why we're meeting—"

I disagree. He's your boyfriend, that's your business. And what more could you possibly tell us that we don't already know?"

In case you forgot, Karlin, we talk about how we're achieving our goals."

And Barron is a goal?" Lori asked.

Hey, Barron's going places and I'm going to be a part of it. Two heads are better than one and I'm staking my claim on him before someone else does."

How romantic," Karlin said sarcastically. Lori simply shook her head.

He's coming home for Christmas. He hadn't planned on it because he gets so bored with his parents during the holidays. But I told him that I'd clear my schedule; my time is now his.

Can you believe I had to remind him my birthday is coming up?" she giggled. Men are so forgetful sometimes."

Well, good for you. Look, I'm done for the day and I could use some time for Christmas shopping."

Me, too," Lori said. Okay with you, Lucy?"

My God, if you two aren't insanely jealous. Fine. When do you want to meet again?"

In two weeks, we're going to be busy through the holidays at our house."

Sounds good. I'll let Mom know that we don't need the tea."

Well, I hope you two have a wonderful Christmas. My Barron will be home the day after tomorrow and I'll be out of touch," Lucy said as she walked to the foyer and began putting on her jacket. And Lori, is that lip gloss on your lips? I thought we were going to forego makeup?"

Chapped lips,” Lori replied, but her face showed a hint of guilt. Borrowed it from someone at school.”

Ick! Well, have a Merry Christmas. Goodbye, Mrs. Brinn.”

Merry Christmas, Lucy, and happy birthday if we don t see you before.”

As soon as the door closed, Lori and Karlin looked at each other in relief.

She said she would be out of touch after tomorrow, what a relief.”

I d say she s a little out of touch now,” Lori countered. I m going, too. I have to work on that paper for tomorrow and I m way behind.”

I m done with mine, I just didn t want Lucy to know. She s always wanting to proofread it as if she s inspecting my work.”

Really? I mean, I don t doubt it, but she s never done that to me. Maybe she doesn t see me as a threat.”

I m not a threat, she s just a lunatic.”

I think you re right, but she is afraid of you. You re strong, you don t put up with anything. I think she just looks for ways to try to feel equal.”

I guess I d rather have her that way than as an enemy.”

Me, too,” Lori said and then she lowered her voice a bit, as if not wanting Lauren to hear her. I ve got a question about the mantra we say.”

A little weird, isn t it?”

I don t believe that anymore. At least not the first line. What about you?”

No, I've been feeling that way, too. I think it was cute a few years ago, but so was this Selles thing we got going. It's getting a bit cumbersome."

Yeah, I'm feeling the same way. Anyway, gotta run. I'll see you in class tomorrow."

Sounds good. By the way, you look good with lip gloss."

You think so?"

Know so."

Lori waved as she walked out and Karlin closed the door behind her. Karlin was glad everyone was gone. Not that Lori was a problem, but it had been an odd afternoon and she wanted some time to reflect. It was something about Cole, something that he said or did, or perhaps it was just a look he'd given her that she found odd. It was something that put a different light on him. Not a bright light, but one that showed her a part of him that she'd never seen. She just couldn't quite put her finger on it. And catching him staring at her breasts in class had secretly made her day.

Chapter Four

Cole's car door was open before he came to a complete stop. He was only a few minutes late, but Tommy Maines was known to fire kids for less. When sober, Tommy liked Cole's work ethic and ability to get things done, but Tommy was probably close to drunk by now and anything could happen.

Cole ran around the building, seeing Tommy pumping gas into an old pickup, glaring back at him.

"Sorry I'm late," Cole said while looking at Tommy's glassy eyes. "The coach stopped me in the parking lot at school and I couldn't get away."

Did he knock the shit out of you, too?" Tommy asked, pointing at the blood on Cole's shirt.

No, that was something else."

Go find an old shirt in the back room and hurry up. I'm doing what I pay you to do."

Yes, sir," Cole replied and rushed inside.

There was a threadbare sweatshirt with the words "Tommy's Gulf" embroidered on the left breast that fit well enough. It smelled of oil and stale alcohol, and Cole was sure it had never been washed, but it covered his t-shirt and provided some warmth.

I'll be inside, get this shit cleared out," Tommy said, pointing to all the cars backed up at the pump.

I'll have it done in no time."

Don't say it, do it."

Cole shrugged off Tommy's attitude, it wasn't anything new. Tommy was a mixed bag when he was drinking. Sometimes he was happy, most times not. When he was sober, Tommy could be like the father that Cole never had. Cole could talk to Tommy, confide in him, and Tommy was always ready to help Cole when he was having trouble. He even let Cole sleep in the station for a few nights when Cole's mother threw him out of the house. But the alcohol made everything different and today was a bad day.

Working at Tommy's was like stepping back in time, and that was one of the reasons Cole enjoyed working there. It was a full-service station where the customer paid a premium to have Cole do it all for them, and he did it very well. There was nothing complicated about the job, it only required good customer service and an ability to work at a fast pace. Where other

teenagers had failed, Cole had shown a particular knack for the job and both he and Tommy knew it. There was only one downside: Cole's wages. Cole barely made enough to cover his expenses while helping his mother with rent. Somehow, Cole was going to have to find a way to make more money.

The outside buzzer sounded, indicating the office phone was ringing. Cole looked through the glass in the office to see if Tommy was available to answer it. Moments later Tommy was standing at the door.

Cole, you got a phone call," Tommy growled.

Be right there." Cole finished with the customer and ran inside where Tommy was slurring obscenities under his breath. He picked up the phone and punched the flashing button.

This is Cole."

Cole, it's Suzanne. Sorry to call the business line, I tried your cell."

It's okay, it's busy as hell here and my phone's in the car. What's up?"

I hate to ask, but I need some help. Breanna is showing signs of having another seizure and I've got to get her in. Can you come watch Tess?"

Just a minute," Cole said and then looked over at Tommy. Tommy, we've got a medical emergency, I..."

I don't give a shit, I got customers, she can find somebody else," Tommy said as he stood up and tried to storm out of the office. He knocked over a display of fan belts, grunted, and then staggered through the door to the service bay.

Cole briefly thought about who else his sister could call, but then chased the thought from his head. It was an emergency and she needed his help. It was also the right thing to do. Cole put the phone back up to his ear.

Suzanne, I ll be there in about five minutes.”

What about Tommy, he sounded angry?”

Fuck Tommy, I ll be there shortly,” Cole replied and then hung up the phone.

Cole walked into the service bay where Tommy was pretending to look at a sales brochure.

I gotta go, Tommy,” Cole said. Sorry, it s an emergency.”

Cole never waited for a response or to see what Tommy s expression was. Tommy didn t say anything as Cole walked off and Cole knew better than to try to read anything from it. He d know tomorrow if he still had a job or not.

Toby sat looking at the piles of jerseys, jock straps, shoulder pads, and helmets stretched out in front of him. They were filthy and smelled, and he wondered if being the equipment manager was worth the credit in school. He thought about Cole’s fight to take his mind off of his task. He d already heard about it and seen the video showing who won, who lost, and who cheated.

Toby,” Coach Naylor said from the doorway.

Yes, sir?

Got a minute?" he asked, and then motioned for Toby to follow him to his office.

Toby sat down in one of the chairs across the desk from Naylor.

Toby, next year when you're a senior we can put you up for a scholarship at Baylor. Do you know about that program?"

No, sir," Toby replied, leaning forward with interest.

It's for managers, an opportunity to do what you're doing only at the college level.

You've got the grades for it so far and you do a good job. I can find anybody to clean this stuff, but you have the grades, a gift of organization, and you're a forward thinker. Have you given any thought to where you might go after high school?"

Not much. Maybe a little, but I'm leaving my options open. My parents want me to go to the Air Force Academy, but I've got other ideas."

That's smart. Just don't screw it up hanging around with Dillman."

Cole? Not a chance. He's a good guy, a little misunderstood."

He's trouble, Toby, and I saw you out there talking to him before the fight."

Yes, sir, I was. I was letting him know what happened so he wouldn't feel guilty."

I'm not following you."

Gary pushed his girlfriend in Cole's way while Cole was walking down the hall. Cole ran into her by accident and knocked her onto the floor. Gary acted like Cole did it on purpose. I just wanted Cole to know the truth."

Are you sure Gary did that? He lives just a few houses down from me. He's like a son to my wife and he's always been— “

A jerk, coach. He's always been a jerk. He can play up the good guy routine but he's a creep and a half."

Well, he isn't as bad as Cole."

No, he's worse in my opinion. Cole isn't bad. He's actually a nice guy that has the deck stacked against him."

Naylor closed his eyes and shook his head.

He's got you fooled. I've been teaching and coaching kids for twenty years and I've seen enough of all of you to know where the bad apples are hiding. He's trouble and I'm worried that he's going to get you in trouble."

Toby stood up and put his hands in his pockets, grinning as he looked over all the objects on Naylor's desk and then looked at Naylor, himself.

I watch out for him, Coach Naylor. He's like my alter ego, does all the things I wish I could do. Maybe some things I'm afraid to do. Believe it or not, I learn more from him than he probably does from me. And believe me when I tell you that he's doing pretty good to keep his sanity in the environment he's in."

I'll take your word for it. All I can tell you is to be careful. If you slip up, I couldn't in good faith put you up for that scholarship."

I appreciate that and I think I can stay out of harm's way. He doesn't try to get me into trouble."

Alright. Think you can finish up in an hour?" Naylor asked.

No, sir, but I'll be finished by tomorrow afternoon if that's okay."

Yeah, that s fine. See what you can get done.”

Yes, sir.”

Toby went back to the storage area feeling a bit frustrated. Everything he d told Naylor about Cole was true, but Toby also knew that Cole could be stubborn and combative with things beyond his control. Naylor happened to be one of those things. Naylor was right about Cole being trouble, but Toby knew that Cole didn t look for it, it just seemed to find him. He also knew that Cole had a knack for putting himself in the wrong place at the wrong time and suffering for it. Toby had tried to tell him, but Cole had a quiet way of dismissing things he didn t agree with. Cole’s independence would be his downfall, Toby thought, but it’s the only thing he had going for him.

Cole got to Suzanne s house as quick as he could. She was waiting in her car for Cole to arrive, and as soon as he pulled into the drive, Suzanne left quickly to get to the hospital, waving at him as she left.

Tess?” Cole called out as he came in the house.

Uncle Cole, Breanna s sick again.”

I know, doll. Come on, let s get a — “

Uh oh, it s Grandma,” Tess said as she pointed to the window.

Cole looked out the window and saw his mother parking along the curb. He looked down at Tess, who looked back at him with disappointment. He didn't know why she was there, but he was going to take the opportunity to go back to work.

Sorry, doll, but it looks like Grandma's gonna be watching you til your mom comes home."

Can't you stay with me?" she begged.

I have to get back to work. Sorry."

Cole opened the door to meet Hazel outside.

I'm only here for a minute, I'm going to the hospital to sit with Suzanne. I gotta pee first," Hazel blurted loudly.

Thanks for telling the neighborhood," Cole replied. Look, I need to get to work. I thought you could watch Tess until Gerald gets home."

You can wait until Gerald gets home, it ain't gonna hurt you to watch Tess," she yelled. You don't ever want to do anything for anybody, you're so damn selfish!"

Cole extended his arms from his side in frustration. It was classic Hazel, go full bore on the offensive to get her way.

Mom, I don't mind watching Tess, but I left work early to be here. If you can stay and watch her, and I can get back to work."

I took off work early, too. You know my job's more important than yours, I'm the one that pays the bills and you're so damn ungrateful you don't even give me a thank you."

Okay, thank you. Now, go back to work and I'll stay here."

Don't tell me what to do!" Hazel yelled. I know when I can afford to take off of work and if I want to sit with Suzanne, I'm damn well going to do it."

Let Gerald sit with Suzanne, you're not going to do anything but upset her. Every time you get involved in something you make everyone miserable."

Cole could tell by the wild look in her eyes that he'd gone too far, but it felt good to get it out there. He didn't want to hurt his mother but he thought it needed to be said.

Shut up," she hissed as she came closer. I'm sick and tired of your insolent mouth!"

Hazel stepped up in front of Cole and swung at him with her fist. He caught her wrist and held it briefly, but as he started to let go, she swung the other and he caught that one as well. Holding her, he walked her backwards to one of the folding chairs on the patio and slowly forced her down to sitting. She was furious, but helpless. In the past, Cole had always deferred to his mother, but this time he stood his ground and she didn't know how to handle it. When she sat down, he let her wrists go and stepped back. She didn't move.

If you're not going back to work then I am. You can stay here with Tess," Cole said as he turned to leave. He looked back at Tess who was staring at him through the screen door with hurt in her eyes.

Before he could get to his car, Suzanne pulled into the driveway beside Cole's car and rushed toward the house.

How's Breanna?" Cole asked.

I forgot her medicine. They don't stock what she needs and— "

Do you know what your brother just did to me?" Hazel whined as she charged toward Suzanne.

No, Mom, and I don't really care right now," Suzanne replied, ignoring her and walking briskly into the house with Cole following.

Hazel plopped down in the front yard and started sobbing with her head in her hands. They had grown accustomed to her fits, looking for pity and apologies that she didn't deserve. Blind allegiance was expected, and everything was supposed to go on the back burner for her feelings, but this time it didn't work.

I going back to work," Cole said. Is it okay if Mom stays with Tess?"

Yeah, that'll keep her away from the hospital. I gotta run, thank you for coming."

Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

I will. Gerald's with her right now so I think we're okay. Better go before Mom leaves first."

Good idea."

Suzanne and Cole both hurried to their cars, disregarding Hazel as she continued to sit on the lawn. Cole could see a few of the neighbors watching from their doorways and windows and he was anxious to get away.

When Cole got back to work, Tommy was backed up again with customers. Some were waiting on gas, others lined up for oil changes, flats, and unknowns. Cole walked past Tommy to show that he'd returned and began helping another customer. When Tommy finished with his, he gathered the day's receipts and drove off without saying a word. Cole smiled and whistled a few notes of a tune.

What are you so happy about," Cole's customer asked through his car window. The man looked annoyed and impatient.

It s a great day, sir,” Cole replied.

What makes it so great?”

I didn t get fired. Merry Christmas.”

Well, somebody around here needs to,” the man said and drove away.

Lucy laid on her bed, unsettled from the day s events. It was bad enough that Cole had the audacity to make fun of her appearance, but to have Karlin and Lori defend him was just short of mutiny. She got up and looked in the mirror on her vanity and smiled. Her teeth were white, clean, and straight, but the front two had prominently grown longer than the others. To make matters worse, she could hardly smile without showing a wide gum line, a genetic gift from her mother. It had been worse before her braces and she was often teased about it, but it was a distant memory until Cole brought it up again.

I need a plan,” Lucy mumbled. Specifically for Cole. Wish I could kill him. I wish Barron could kill him. God, wouldn t that be erotic. Cole, Brent, and the rest of his whole inbred, dysfunctional family. Can t do it, though. Who the hell wants to go to prison for a Dillman? Public embarrassment, that s what s needed. Think for a minute, Lucy.”

Lucy s hate for Cole soon gave way to thoughts of Barron. This time, however, there was an added tinge of excitement. In their last conversation, Barron demanded that their relationship become more intimate with his upcoming visit. Instead of raising red flags, Lucy welcomed his demands as an opportunity to become a woman. He was becoming more insistent and ruthless,

threatening not to see her if his needs weren't met, and she melted at his words as they spoke over the phone just days ago. His selfish tone and careless disregard of her feelings took her breath away. She could see how irrational it would seem to those on the outside of their relationship, which made it even more special. Very few people understood men of power and destiny, and only a fraction of those realized how a strong woman could provide the drive and direction for such men. Lucy knew to her core that she was such a woman and wondered if Barron understood the depth of the plans she had for the two of them. She momentarily wondered if her upcoming birthday had anything to do with his demands. He'd abstained from having sex with her until her eighteenth birthday because of the optics in case she became pregnant. His dreams of being a politician rested on his ability to keep his nose clean and he had every intention of doing that.

As Lucy contemplated their relationship, Barron sat in a dank apartment far removed from the storm brewing in Fallon, Texas. He contemplated his decision to take a Christmas break away from being a volunteer in Washington D.C. He wanted to stay, surrounded by the monuments and buildings that epitomized everything he wanted to achieve. He would be obligated to withstand the never-ending gatherings that his parents had in store for him if he did come home simply for guaranteed sex from a bucktooth girl named Lucy.

He wasn't sure how it started. One day he was happy getting a position with a Congressional Representative, a dream opportunity that took him far away from the vicarious dreams of his parents. It was soon after that they'd introduced him to a girl he'd never met and certainly wouldn't have pursued. She'd written him, listing things she thought they had in common, with whimsical ideas about their future, and had included a picture of herself. Barron found little to get excited about in her letter or the picture. But she'd obviously made an

impression on his parents, and they encouraged him to see her, thinking she was perfect for the career he was pursuing. They'd given him money to date her which gave him the opportunity to get away from them.

Barron saw Lucy as she was, a teenage girl with a wild imagination about the future. She didn't understand him in the least, but he understood her and knew how to play on her dreams. She was into power and status, and wanted to be seen as shrewd. And that's how he planned to take advantage of her: Treat her like shit under the guise of being ruthless. She was driven, gullible, and about to turn eighteen, and he was going to make his vacation time count.