



CROSS

A GENTRY BOYS STORY

NYT & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CORA BRENT

CROSS

(A Gentry Boys Novella)

By Cora Brent

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Dear Readers,

I apologize in advance for breaking your hearts with this one.

-Cora

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

CENTRAL STATE PENITENTIARY AT EMBLEM

Con-man,

Remember when I started calling you that?

I didn't mean for it to catch on but it did. You didn't mind until the Reynoso brothers started chanting 'Convict-man' instead. Then you got all kinds of pissed off because in Emblem-speak there's no worse insult than saying a guy is going to wind up in an orange jumpsuit on the wrong side of the barbed wire.

Anyway, I set those kids straight and let them know they could expect some heavy bruising if they didn't shut up. That's what brothers do.

You know, sometimes when I'm out in the yard I see the high school kids filing past with one eye on what's going on behind the fence and the other on the wide world that lives on their side. You know the type I'm talking about. The ones who are testing out their cool factor, flipping the bird, kicking up the dust, trying to hedge a dare that's not worth a fucking thing because they are on the right side of the fence and they aren't really risking anything.

They are what we were once. You remember. I know you do.

Back then, as soon as the last school bell rang we'd shoot the shit for a while behind Carson's Garage in the hopes one of those guys had left a pack of cigarettes lying around for us to swipe. Then we'd roam through our kingdom of a shit town before drifting too close to the prison perimeter, teasing and taunting until the guards chased us into the canal.

Chase tells me you're in school and I'm glad. School was always where you belonged. You only pretended otherwise because of me. Chase and his brothers did a good thing getting you out of town. Weird how we didn't see our cousins for so many years and yet they didn't hesitate to jump right in when life turned to crap. Deck too. I remember when we were kids we used to see him riding around town like a leather-clad hell raiser and we were proud that we shared a last name. He's been here to visit a few times and I'm grateful. I know it's only because of who he knows on the inside that I'm not getting my ass kicked all over the place. I guess there's something to the bonds of blood after all. And hell, maybe someday we'll find out if the rumors are true, that any or all of them might be more than first cousins. It wouldn't surprise me. You know how Mom's face always went blank and bloodless whenever someone dropped a hint that we weren't Elijah's sons? She would never deny it. She would never confirm it. She would never say a fucking thing.

Why the hell do I keep writing things like that as if you don't know all the good, bad and ugly Gentry family history? You had a front row seat. You know everything I know, no more, no less. Maybe I keep writing it down more for me than for you. Maybe it's too easy in here to forget that life happened, that it's still happening.

Conway, all those times we strutted past this place, spitting into the wind, daring it to spit back, I don't think we ever considered what it was like for the guys watching us from the yard. At least I know I never did. You might have. You were always the one who thought about people.

There are things we never could have known about being inside the cage though. In here you keep track of everything. And dude, I mean fucking *everything* from the number of tiles lining the floor of your cell to the number of steps from the mess hall to the rec yard to the number of minutes that have passed since your last meal. Time has a different meaning as it passes. It doesn't take much to carve a landmark out of this wasteland of hours.

I know this morning when I woke up it was exactly the one hundred and twenty second time I opened my eyes inside these prison walls.

I know this the twenty eighth letter I've written to you.

I know that it's been four months to the day since she died. The same amount of time has passed since you and I saw each other, since we even spoke.

I'm not sure which one of those things hurts the most. Don't think I'm blaming you. Not at all. Or comparing my pain to yours. I'm not.

I only send these letters to Chase first because I wanted to make sure you were getting them. He says he always hand delivers every one and that you stopped tearing them up right away but he's not sure you read them either. I hope you do, if it would help at all. It hurts thinking of you out there alone in the world. But I'm glad you're living at Deck's house up in

the valley rather than in this wasteland. I guess by kicking you to the curb Mom did you a favor, although I'm sure that wasn't her intention. She hasn't been here to visit. At this point I don't really want her to come anyway.

I miss you, Con. I miss life. I can't even imagine what this has done to you. If you've read even a handful of the other twenty seven letters then you've already heard the truth and you know that nothing was as it seemed.

Someday I'll get out of here. A lot more days need to pass by before then. A lot more letters need to be written, even if it's just me saying the same thing over and over again and never knowing if you read a word of it.

I think about her. Not in the same way you do and I might not have any right to think about her at all. But she was beautiful and kind and by the end she was my friend. She was full of love and confusion and none of it was her fault.

I'm sorry, Conway. I can't say that to her so I say it to you because you're all that's left.

I'm still your brother. I'll be your brother forever. It's the only thing that matters to me at this point. I'd do anything to make things right with us. I hope in the distant day when we see each other again it will be possible.

Please look after yourself out there in the meantime.

Strength in brothers,

Stone

FIVE MONTHS EARLIER.....

CHAPTER ONE

ERIN

People don't wake up the morning of their last day and know that it's the last day.

Well, most people don't.

Maybe the idea occurs to the ones who know they are terminally ill. Or those who have a shred of something extra sensory. Or those who plan end it all themselves.

There was no reason that such morbid ideas should have been on my mind as I watched the sunrise make shadows on the wall. I didn't have any intention of dying on this day or the next one or any time soon. But my fingers betrayed some small guilt and snuck beneath the cap of my right sleeve to trace the scab flanking my ribs. I hated knowing how it got there.

The house was too quiet. Vaguely I remembered being disturbed by a monsoon storm that had blown through here last night. The winds must have knocked out the power.

I could hear my little sister Katie snoring in the next room and usually the air conditioner drowned her out. A glance at the empty face of my bedside clock told me I was right. It was still early but the house would heat up fast if the power wasn't fixed by mid morning.

I pressed the half-healed wound and winced over the raw feel of the skin, but I was relieved not to see blood when I

pulled my fingers away. I didn't like blood. Blood was a necessary byproduct but it still bothered me. My mind strayed back to those gloomy ideas of death and I sat up, shaking out my hair.

I didn't have a death wish. That was never the point. My best friend Roe was the only one who knew about that secret shame but she would never say anything to anyone. She didn't even live around here.

Without even thinking I reached for my phone. The time was even earlier than I'd thought. Only six hours had elapsed since I'd stumbled through the front door half drunk on passion. Even though it was long after curfew and my dad was sternly waiting on the living room couch he didn't do a thing except sigh and wave me off to my room where I happily curled up into a ball and slept soundly.

It was way too early to expect a message from Conway but there it was anyway. He must have sent it right after he left me and retreated next door to his own house.

Sweet dreams, butterfly.

It was a nickname that went way back, before we kissed, before we were us. Back to a time when I had bony knees and a gap-toothed smile, when I used to trail after the neighboring Gentry brothers in a desperate bid to be included in their games. Stone would scowl at the sight of me scrambling to keep up with them. I was a small, nervous girl and he was the neighborhood king. I did not interest him at all. But Con, younger than Stone by a mere ten months, would smile and wait for me.

Once I caught up to them by the foot of the butte, pretending like I just happened to be in that place at the same time. Stone, never a fool, threw me an annoyed look and started hiking up the side like I wasn't even there. But Conway paused thoughtfully.

“That’s like you,” he said, pointing to a small, fluttering object.

I’d felt my face scrunching up. I was ready to cross my arms and be offended. “How am I like a butterfly?”

He broke into a grin. “They surprise you when you’re least expecting it.”

The Gentry boys grew up faster than I did. They were messing around with all kinds of girls by middle school and getting into the sort of trouble that was worthy of their last name. As long as there had been a town of Emblem there had been Gentrys in it; a tribe of tall, muscular mischief-makers.

Around that time my own father started grumbling over the antics of our next door neighbors. Elijah Gentry had finally died of some slow, wasting disease the same month our small family was turned inside out from the loss of my mother. While I became cook, babysitter, and housebound dutiful daughter as my father tried to paste together the pieces of his heart, the Gentry boys dealt with their father’s death by running wild. They came and went all hours of the night in all kinds of bad company. Aside from their mother’s occasional screech of ‘No good little shits!’ echoing over the neighborhood, no one did a thing.

“They won’t end up fit for decent company,” my father sighed one night, glaring out the open kitchen window as the

boys whooped and howled while riding up and down the street on a pair of dirt bikes that they'd probably stolen.

"You don't know that," I snapped as I cleared the dinner dishes away, wondering why I should feel defensive of two rowdy boys who weren't even my friends.

My father had looked at me with some surprise since I didn't usually argue. But then again, he wasn't usually so pessimistic. He probably hadn't really meant to speak the words aloud in the first place.

"You're right," he finally said softly and then helped me clear the table. After that, the subject of the Gentry brothers didn't come up again, not for a long time.

I had stopped trying to chase them, staring moodily down at my own skinny body and figuring I'd never catch up anyway.

I *did* catch up though. Without even trying.

Maybe every girl on earth is allowed to own one single season. I had mine two years ago. It seemed like my body changed overnight and I'd been too busy to really notice. Apparently the Gentry boys hadn't noticed either, not until opening day at the Emblem town pool when I kicked my shorts away and slipped my t-shirt over my head.

"Damn, honey," whistled Stone as he sauntered by in all his bronzed glory and did a double take at my bikini. When his eyes slowly lifted and reached my face I saw a fire in their blue depths that shot straight through me in a delicious shiver.

Stone Gentry idly ran a hand over his muscled chest and considered me as he jerked his head. "Why don't you come hang out in the deep end, Erin?" He was barely sixteen and he

already spoke with a low, sexy rumble in his voice that seemed like it was invented to test female willpower.

“Thank you, Stone,” I said primly and not a little smugly. “I think I’ll wade in slowly.”

He shrugged and retreated to go find an easier conquest.

I slipped into the cool water and hung out by the wall in the four foot deep section, trying not to get splashed by the dozens of other swimmers. I didn’t even notice Conway was around until he was right next to me. He’d already been underwater. His hair was slicked back and even though I’d seen him running around the neighborhood a thousand times without his shirt I still stared.

“Hey there, butterfly.” He reached out and playfully tugged a lock of the long brown hair I’d forgotten to tie up.

Conway’s fingers lingered on my shoulder and his eyes met mine with the same lusty fire I’d seen in his brother a few minutes earlier. But something about Stone’s intensity had frightened me a little. He was the type who wouldn’t be shy about going right after what he wanted. I wasn’t ready for that. There was something different about Con though, something gentler. I wanted him to keep on looking at me forever.

“Hi,” I whispered back.

He kissed me that night. And the next night. And most nights since then. People say it’s impossible to find love before you understand what it is, but I say that’s bullshit because we learned together, Conway and me. God, I loved that boy. I loved him so much.

Katie let out a mighty snore in the next room and then whimpered a little. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and waited to see if she would cry out. I would go to her if she did, even though she would just get annoyed. Old habits died hard. I'd been coaxing my little sister out of her bad dreams ever since our mother's death five years ago.

A few seconds of silence passed and I relaxed, listening to the peculiar ring of silence that was strangely devoid of the ever-present hum of electricity. People have forgotten what true silence is, all of us. Years ago, when we were still a whole family, we spent a week camping up north, in a pine forest outside Prescott. When the dark descended and the light vanished it was the same kind of silence I heard now. Peaceful, and yet odd.

The memory of the camping trip was fleeting but stirred up something. The echo of my mother's voice was so loud for an instant I expected her to walk into the room.

It was a stupid thought. She had made sure she wouldn't be walking into this room or any other room. I didn't want to think about that right now. Or ever.

Instead I stared at my bare legs and had a sudden flashback to the sight of them in the moonlight, in the bed of a pickup truck, right before Conway carefully settled on top of me. We'd almost done it last night. Not like all the other 'almost' times that never even really came close.

Last night I wanted to and when I let him slide my jeans off it wasn't just for him. I'd felt him pressing against the flimsy barrier of my panties as my body opened and strained and begged while he moved himself against me.

“Love you so much,” he’d whispered and covered his mouth with mine as his hands explored and our bodies intertwined. He wanted so badly to get under my shirt but backed off when I stopped him. It wasn’t a good time for him to go there, not after the things I’d done lately. If he wondered why I was sometimes shy about certain things, he never pushed me to tell him why.

“I love you too,” I told him and meant it completely.

Somewhere in the background his brother Stone was fucking Courtney Galicki against the trunk of a nearby mesquite tree. They were being loud as hell about it too, a frantic kind of *thump thump thump* that sounded fierce and frenzied.

In the end we didn’t get there.

Courtney moaned and Stone roared as they pounded out a tribal rhythm. But Con put his head on my chest and sighed, replacing the condom in his pocket before he even unwrapped it. I threaded my fingers through his hair and kissed his forehead, grateful that the boy I loved knew me better than I knew myself sometimes. Our first time shouldn’t be in the back of a rusty scrap heap while his brother screwed with abandon not twenty feet away. But when I put my hands on him he guided me lower so I could get him off like we’d done dozens of times before.

Conway had already done everything with other girls before we got together. I never asked him how many there were. It didn’t matter. Yet sometimes I got jealous of the idea that anyone else had ever touched him.

The power was still off and the house was still silent. My breathing quickened as I thought about the way Con had panted and shuddered as he finished in my hand. Then I thought about the way he'd touched me to return the favor and I had to press my legs tightly together to stifle the sudden ache between them.

“MOTHERFUCKER!”

The shout came from next door. Sometimes I couldn't tell Con's voice from Stone's.

I hopped off the bed and took two steps over to the only window in the small bedroom I'd lived in since I was born. Pushing the eyelet curtains away and sliding the window open, I had an instant view of the Gentry's property.

The Gentry house had started to look somewhat shabby these past few years. My father commented on it often enough, even offering to help Tracy Gentry repaint the exterior and do something about the landscaping. She told him to piss off and mind his own fucking business. Con's mother was not my favorite person.

The shouting had come from Stone. His back was to me and he seemed to be yelling at a closed window. He wore nothing but a pair of loose boxers and growled another curse as he pulled a cigarette out of his mouth and crushed it against the stucco. If the sharp gravel covering the heavily weeded yard hurt his bare feet he gave no sign. Their house had the same exact layout as mine and the bedroom the brothers shared was the same one my two younger sisters occupied here. The boys shouldn't have had to share a room; I knew there was an empty one, the same room that was mine.

However it had been closed off and unused ever since their father died in it.

I watched in silence as Conway's brother stalked over to the front door, tested the knob in vain, cursed another blue streak and then grabbed a cheap plastic lawn chair that had probably blown into his yard during last night's storms. I recognized the chair. It belonged to us.

He paused there for a moment, leaning on the back of the chair as he shot a moody glare at the closed bedroom window. The brothers were closer than brothers usually were. Practically twins, they were only ten months apart and in the same class, but they were always hassling each other for some reason or another. I didn't have any brothers, only sisters, so for all I knew that's just what brothers did. In any case, Stone had likely jumped out the window to pollute his lungs in the yard and Conway had used the opportunity to lock him out.

Suddenly Stone yawned and stretched, causing his boxers to slip a few crucial inches and almost offer an x-rated view. Ordinarily I would have averted my eyes right away. Stone was my boyfriend's brother. He was also a total dog. There was nothing tempting about him.

At least that's what my heart said.

Apparently the rest of me wasn't so sure because my eyes wouldn't budge and my breath caught before a sharp inhale.

Maybe he'd heard me in the midst of the unusual silence or maybe the fluttering of my curtain caught his attention. Stone stopped in mid-stretch and zeroed right in. I saw his gaze travel south immediately. I didn't have to look down to realize what he was staring at with unconcealed hunger. I never wore

a bra to bed and my shirt – thin, white and the victim of laundry shrinkage – strained against my breasts.

It was an erotic, painfully taboo moment that ended an instant later when Stone's head snapped up, the naked lust on his face replaced with the look of supreme boredom that he usually wore. He hiked up his boxers and pointedly turned away as if I wasn't even there.

I closed the window. I shut the curtains. I leaned against the wall, feeling strange and awkward and somehow completely wrong. My skin tingled and somewhere in my head a hideous whisper reminded me that I knew how to force unwanted thoughts away.

No. I wouldn't do that right now, not for this. Already the moment had gone stale and I started to wonder if it had even happened.

It *had* though. It had happened. Stone Gentry and I, for the briefest instant, had connected in a way that was unthinkable.

But that was all. It meant absolutely nothing. I loved Conway. I didn't have to think about it anymore. I wouldn't.

CHAPTER TWO

CONWAY

My brother could be such an asshole.

First he shook me awake before the crack of dawn just to extort some cigarettes. I wasn't a regular smoker but there were two loose cigarettes in the drawer of my nightstand. I threw them in his direction just to shut him up and then kicked off the bed sheet because sometime in the night the power was knocked out, taking the air conditioning with it.

That's when Stone decided to harass me about the morning boner that was making a tent in my boxers.

"That's some serious frustration there," he smirked, lighting up and blowing a cloud at the ceiling.

I threw a pillow at him. "Fuck you. Like you never wake up with wood?"

"Not like that, man. You see, I get my wood handled regularly. Unlike you."

I rose up on my elbows. All I wanted was for Stone to close his mouth and go somewhere else so I could roll over and get off. But that comment was a deliberate shot and I couldn't just let it go by.

"I get my shit handled plenty," I protested and it was only half a lie.

Erin and I fooled around all the time and the fact that we hadn't sealed the deal yet just proved that what was between us was real. She would have done it. She would have done it to make me happy. Yet when we had sex I couldn't let the reason be because I'd pushed her into it. We'd get there when she was ready. In the meantime I was getting lots of mileage out of hand jobs and jerk offs.

Stone wouldn't understand. He was always full speed when it came to fucking around, like he might not live another day if he wasn't being led around by a satisfied cock.

My brother blew another cloud of smoke and grinned with that kind of all-knowing Stone coolness that made me want to hit him something a whole lot harder than a pillow.

"Shut up," I ordered.

"Didn't say a thing, brother."

"I don't like what you're thinking."

He cocked his head and widened his eyes with mock innocence. "I'm not allowed to think?"

"Not if it's something dirty about my girlfriend."

"I wasn't having any thoughts, dirty or otherwise, about your girlfriend."

"Bullshit."

He laughed. "You think I'm into Erin? Forget the fact that she's wrapped around your ugly ass, I don't have the patience for that kind of noise."

My anger rose. "What noise?"

Stone pinched the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, examined it thoughtfully and then set it down on an ancient nightstand that was etched with years of battle scars. He batted his eyes and clasped his hands in front of his chest as he spoke in a high-pitched female voice. “Oh god, I love you. I love you more than ice cream or cheesecake.”

“Knock it off.”

Stone wouldn't stop. He kept on going in a breathy orgasmic way in a voice that was supposed to mimic Erin's. “Conway, I love you so much that I'm shitting out pink cotton candy and roses.”

“Stone!”

“And one of these days I might even reward you with my secret female flower so you can stop staining your sheets.”

I shot to my feet. “Get up,” I ordered.

He grinned. “No.”

“You really think you can make fun of my girlfriend like that and I'll just take it?”

“I wasn't making fun of your girlfriend, Con-man. I was making fun of you.”

I used my shoulder to knock him into the far wall, which was already cracked and dented from other lesser wars. Stone didn't push back this time though. He calmly resettled himself on his bed and reached for his cigarette while I breathed fire four feet away.

“You need to be quiet,” he warned mildly. “You'll wake our loving mother.”

I snorted. “Not likely. You know when she turns the lights out she takes enough sleeping pills to knock out a horse for two days.”

“Maybe. But it’s possible her guest is a light sleeper.”

That caught me off guard. “What guest?”

“Rover.”

I didn’t like the news but there was nothing I could do about it. My mother had always run around with various men, even when my father was still alive. Rover, whose real name was Andy Bowler, was probably fairly harmless as men went. He had a hangdog cartoon kind of face that led Stone to stick him with the Rover nickname. Like much of Emblem’s workforce, he was a prison guard. He hung around sporadically but never got in our way. Still, that didn’t mean I wanted to know that he was lying in bed with my mother down the hall.

Stone watched me with silent amusement. “So, Con-Man it would seem you’re the only member of the household who didn’t get down and dirty last night.”

I flopped back on the mattress, supremely annoyed. “You don’t know what I did or didn’t do.”

“Sure I do. I’m worried about you.”

I folded my arms over my eyes. “Like hell.”

“I don’t like seeing my brother get neutered.”

I took my arms away and peered at him. It was a typical offhand Stone kind of comment but it had a serious edge. Stone was frowning at his cigarette as it continued to burn in

his hand. He had the look of a guy who was trying to choose his words carefully. “You guys are just so intense,” he muttered and took another drag.

I shrugged. “Call it love.”

Stone raised an eyebrow. “Is it?”

I sat up. I knew Stone sometimes got annoyed that I was so into Erin these days that I didn’t run around with him as much as I used to. I also knew that he and Erin weren’t the best of friends. But aside from the occasional sarcastic comment he’d never hinted he had a real problem with her.

“Why don’t you like Erin?” I asked with some wariness because I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. I couldn’t imagine being pulled between my girl and my brother. They were the two most important people in the world to me.

Stone grimaced and scratched the back of his neck. He started to say something and stopped, shaking his head. “Never mind. I don’t dislike Erin. She’s hot and she’s nice and she worships the ever loving ground you walk on.”

I waited to see if he would say more but he didn’t. He just stubbed the burning cigarette out on the table and promptly lit the next one.

“Look,” I said, “I don’t really want to get another earful from Mom about making this place stink like an ashtray.”

He tapped out a few ashes into an empty water bottle. “You’ll get an earful from her whether it smells or doesn’t smell, whether the place is neat or clean, whether you pull A’s or F’s, whether it’s Sunday or Thursday.”

He was right. Our mother didn't make a secret out of the fact that she was sick and tired of dealing with two teenage boys. She wasn't the worst mother in the world. She gave us what we needed and kept a roof over our heads, but she'd always seemed bewildered by her role, forever hot and cold when it came to parenting.

Well, more cold if I was being honest.

It had gotten a lot worse since Elijah's death. Somewhere along the way she'd just kind of thrown her hands in the air and given up. Hardly a day passed by when she didn't let us know that after we graduated next year we were on our own. I didn't know if those were just words or if she really meant it, but she'd always had even less patience for me than she had for Stone. My brother and I didn't talk about that, not even to each other. We didn't talk about the gossip that hinted about things that happened before we were born. If Elijah ever heard it as well he never let on. He was a good father. I missed him.

I watched my brother as he cheerfully discovered a forgotten pack of cigarettes in a pair of discarded jeans. Great. That meant he'd be puffing away in here all morning, inflicting his personal philosophies on me when all I wanted to do was jerk off and take a fucking nap before I had to be at work at Carson's Garage.

"Come on," I complained, "take it outside. It's bad enough it's hot as an armpit in here. I don't feel like sitting in a smoke cloud."

He didn't argue. He opened up the bedroom window and hopped through it. I stayed where I was for a moment,

listening to him kick rocks as he wandered out to the yard. Then I jumped up and slammed the window closed, locking it. Stone whirled around, shouted a few obscenities and glared while I grinned and slowly extended my middle finger. He cursed again and walked away while I reclaimed my mattress and stuck my hand down my boxers.

I wouldn't leave him out there for long, cursing and smoking in his underwear. Just for a little while. Just long enough to remind him that payback between brothers was what kept the world turning.

I forgot about Stone as I closed my eyes and thought about lips and skin. I thought about a girl telling me she loved me and how much I wished she was here in the room right now. With me.

CHAPTER THREE

ERIN

At least twice a day it occurred to me that this was the last summer.

Not the last summer ever, just the last free summer.

Maybe the last good summer.

This time next year high school will be finished and people will already be starting to go their separate ways. The few who would be heading out of Emblem to the exotic college world would already be mentally checked out. Those who couldn't imagine leaving would be calling in whatever favors their folks had banked to try and get hired on at the prison or at any of the locally owned businesses lining Main Street. If they were really intrepid they would pack up their crappy cars and head out of this dustbowl in the hopes that a better life was somewhere beyond the town limits.

I didn't count myself among the intrepid. Or among the future labor force of Emblem. My father had sacrificed a lot to save what little life insurance money had come his way so there was some left for us girls to go to college. My grades were good and I wouldn't have a problem getting admitted to Arizona State, or so my guidance counselor told me. I had no idea what I was going to study when I got there but my counselor, a whisker-faced woman names Mrs. von Vechten

who'd once been a friend of my mother's, patted my arm and assured me that getting there was half the battle.

Speaking of battles, there was one going on behind me. I didn't want to watch so I had drifted out of the tunnel, away from the drunken hoots and the bawdy cheers.

A bunch of us had ended up here once the sun went down. Whatever force of nature had knocked out Emblem's power supply last night was apparently not easy to fix. Fourteen hours after I'd opened my eyes in my bedroom to the sound of silence the town remained silent. And now it was dark too, except for the prison, which operated on some kind of emergency generator. A halo of garish fluorescence made the Central State Penitentiary look like a cruel oasis. It was ugly to look at in the daylight. At night it was downright ominous.

The hangout everyone called 'the tunnel' was just an old railroad overpass. The line itself hadn't been active in decades and the single lane road that cut beneath it had been abandoned around the same time as the town's roads were reconfigured. My dad had once told me that before the days of asphalt this old road was lined with wooden plank boards and stretched all the way to Tucson, some seventy miles south. He said when he was a kid you could still find a lot of the old rotted planks half buried in the desert sand.

"Ah, you're slipping, you're slipping!"

"Shut up Stone!"

"Why are you fighting it, little brother? Just let go. It's okay."

"Fuck you."

There was a lot of shouting, cheering and half drunk laughter. The Gentry brothers were fighting their latest war of wills. They'd climbed up to the bridge and were hanging from the old tracks by the skin of their fingertips. Some of the other boys had tried it as well but they'd already fallen into the sand, leaving only Stone, Conway, and one of the Cortez boys to fight it out to the silly, pointless end.

I rolled my eyes at the sound of the action, but I was facing away and no one was watching me anyway. I'd been listening to the noise of those two trying to outdo one another since I was a toddler. Since all I'd ever had were two sisters I didn't know much about how brothers were supposed to be with each other, but it seemed like they should have outgrown juvenile nonsense like this. Somehow I guessed that the Gentry brothers never would, no matter how old they got.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I'd been careful about using it all day since there was no way to recharge at the moment. I smiled when I saw the text was from Roe.

"Kicked Anton to the curb. Hallelujah chorus."

That girl went through boyfriends like they were paper towels. She had shitty taste. The ones she picked were all macho pigs who treated her like she owed them money. I was glad to hear that her latest mistake was history.

I texted back. *"The chorus echoes all the way down here in sandy Siberia. Miss you."*

The reply came back in seconds. *"Want some company? I could take a drive down this week."*

"YES! Imagine emojis galore."

“You know I hate emojis. Thursday afternoon okay?”

“Perfect and you’re staying the night. No arguments.”

“Awesome. Dad’s away on business and stepmonster won’t even notice.”

I was still smiling as I pushed the phone into my back pocket. Roe was my oldest friend, my best friend, other than Conway of course. She moved away from Emblem after the seventh grade when her father hit the jackpot on some Phoenix real estate he’d bought up cheaply during the housing crisis. I didn’t understand or care about the dollars and cents behind it, but I’d heard an awful lot of Emblem folks grumbling about how Jefferson Tory was no better than a bottom feeder. It was probably just jealousy. When I’d asked my own dad about it he’d taken a minute to chew and swallow before answering that no man should be ashamed of self-preservation. Anyway, I sure didn’t begrudge Roe’s family their newfound wealth, but I did mind very much when they picked up and moved fifty miles away to Scottsdale. She’d been enrolled in some kind of swank prep school up there until some recent scandal involving one of her teachers. Whatever had happened was bad and she didn’t like talking about it. Now that she had a car she drove down here whenever she could, but I hadn’t seen her since school let out weeks ago.

A sudden eruption of shouting startled me, but in all the chaos I couldn’t make out what had happened. One of the boys dangling from the bridge must have fallen. If it was Conway he would look for me right away. As I turned back to the sight of the eerily dark landscape I listened for the sound of his footsteps, eager to feel his strong arms around me.

“Plotting a little world domination?”

Shit. Stone.

I tensed, not especially excited to be confronted in the darkness by Con’s wild brother. “Maybe,” I shot back. “But since I’m so dangerous you should reconsider coming too close.”

He chuckled and lit a cigarette. “I’ll take my chances.”

There was no wind but a sudden chill rolled through me like a cold fingertip up the spine. I crossed my arms over my body, a defensive pose.

“Those will kill you,” I said.

Stone wasn’t doing anything wrong. He was just standing three feet away, smoking his stupid cigarette, nowhere near close enough to touch me. Yet it made me uneasy. *He* made me uneasy. I shouldn’t feel that way. I’d known him my whole life. Never for a minute did I believe he’d hurt me. But he seemed dangerous just the same.

He laughed through his nose and I could see enough of his outline to catch the scornful shrug. “Something will kill us all.”

I tossed my hair, sniffed. “Doesn’t excuse self destruction.”

God, listen to me. I was such a hypocrite. *Such a fucking hypocrite!* Stone didn’t know that though. Conway didn’t even know.

He was quiet for a moment. Then I saw the point of light from the cigarette fall from his hands to the ground. I heard

the crunch that his shoe made in the dust as he squashed the flame.

“You’re right,” he said. “I quit.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

I didn’t believe him at all. I still didn’t know what he wanted. Stone didn’t usually seek me out for a chat. Generally Con’s brother and I exercised a sort of mutual wary tolerance. It wasn’t friendship, not even close.

“You doubt me,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Of course. You can be a real walking dick.”

He snorted. “That’s a ridiculous insult, Erin. Dicks don’t have legs.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t.”

I whirled on him. “That must be why your eyes were fastened to my chest this morning.”

As soon as I said it I wished I hadn’t. After all, hadn’t I also zeroed in on his crotch as he stretched in the yard? He’d seen me staring. Stone knew everything about girls and my quick flash of shameful lust probably wasn’t lost on him.

He laughed out loud. “So that’s what this latest bug up the ass is about? No worries, honey. That’s not a line I’d ever cross, but if you stick your tits out the window a guy’s kind of obliged to check them out.”

I would ignore him. That was the only way to deal with Stone. He loved attention more than he loved anything else. But my mouth wasn't listening.

"You're such a pig," I spat.

"So be it. Pigs are loveable creatures."

I just hissed and took a few deliberate steps away from him. That should be enough to send him in the other direction.

But instead of giving up and walking back to the group to answer Courtney's whiney complaints that he should come back over there and pay some attention to her, he decided to get on my nerves some more.

"You *do* like pigs, don't you, Erin?"

"Only when they're on my plate. Preferably in the form of bacon."

"Ah. You wounded me." I could hear the smile in his voice. He wasn't wounded. He sniffed theatrically and let the mockery drip from every word.

"Like hell," I snapped.

"You did."

"Okay." I spun around. "How did I wound you Stone? How is that even possible?"

He pretended to pout. "You don't like me."

"You don't like me either."

"Yes I do," he said quietly. "You're just fine."

I exhaled with exasperation. "Well, maybe you're not."

“What does that mean?”

“I’ve never seen you be anything but selfish. You don’t hesitate to drag other people down with you. You don’t even notice when they suffer for it.”

He sounded genuinely amused. “What people?”

I felt my face getting hot. If Conway heard this conversation he wouldn’t like it. But I couldn’t seem to close my mouth. “Like that time you got Con to go along with breaking into the school to steal all the teachers’ chairs and throw them into the town pool.”

He laughed. “Ah, yes. Tenth grade was fun.”

“Fun? Conway got suspended for three days.”

“So did I. And it *was* fun. We used the time off well, a marathon gaming session of *Deadly Combat*. I won.”

I made a noise of disgust. “Vintage Stone Gentry. Never ever thinking of anyone but yourself. Why can’t you at least give him a chance?”

“Conway? A chance for what?”

“Something better. He’ll never have it if he’s always trying to keep up with you.”

Stone slapped his pack of cigarettes against his palm. “That what you think? You imagine that I’m some kind of anti-Christ who you have to rescue Conway from? Conway, *my* brother. Jesus, all these years you’ve known me and you really think I don’t give a damn about anything.”

“I think you only give a damn about your next piece of ass,” I shot back. My voice had risen and I paused,

swallowing, before continuing in a lower tone. “I think you care about getting drunk and screwing around and forever avoiding anything that looks like work. As for Conway, I think you don’t want him to do any better than you. You don’t want him to have anything you don’t have.”

Always in my mind, but never had the words come out of my mouth. For two years Stone and I had stayed at a tense distance. I braced myself for what would come firing out of his mouth. He would say that I held Con back, that I stood in the way of Con’s fun. After all, Stone had rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath often enough in my presence for me to understand that was how he felt. He didn’t believe in girlfriends or loyalty. He certainly didn’t believe in love.

Stone surprised me though. He didn’t return the insults. He crept two silent steps closer and stood so closely I had to crane my neck to look up at him. In the dark he was just an outline. One that smelled of smoke and peppermint and the same aftershave his brother used.

“You’re wrong,” he said curtly and then stalked away.

I didn’t realize I’d been holding a breath until I exhaled and heard my heart pounding.

Suddenly I felt bad. Stone wasn’t exactly sensitive. But I had the uncomfortable feeling that I’d hurt him a little. I’d gone too far. Sure, Stone had faults but who the hell was I to challenge him over how he felt about his own brother? If someone had said something like that to me about my sisters I’d be ready to claw their eyes out.

A whole mess of shouting and backslapping erupted at the tunnel.

“How’s that dust taste, asshole? Gentry wins!”

When the noise died down I heard Con’s voice say my name but something cemented me to the ground I was standing on. Inside my head I heard myself calling out to him, running over and leaping into his arms. It was what I wanted. Yet still I stood there.

“Erin?” Conway asked and he was closer. I could hear the worry in his voice. Even in the best of times it was never wise to go wandering around in the desert if you didn’t know what you were doing, where you were going. This was an unforgiving place, filled with unforgiving creatures.

“Here,” I called and held my arm out, relaxing with a sigh when his hand found mine. A few dozen yards away other Emblem teenagers, people I’d known my whole life, howled like wolves and collided. They would be pairing off now. Stone was probably already leading Courtney, or whoever his nightly choice was, to the nearest backseat. It didn’t bother me. As Conway’s arms circled me I gratefully buried my face in his strong chest as he started absently stroking my hair.

“Why were you all the way over here alone?” He kissed the top of my head.

“I’m not alone now.” I spread my palms across his broad back, running my hands up and down, then lower. I both heard and felt his sharp intake of breath as I sank to my knees in the gritty sand, pulling him down there with me. Immediately his hand was under my shirt and we were kissing with eager hunger.

“Erin,” he groaned as I straddled him.

“Yes.” I kissed his neck, lightly, teasingly, the way he liked it. “I’m ready, I swear.”

“You sure?” he whispered. His hand traveled higher, unhooking my bra. I pulled at the soft cotton of his t-shirt until my hands found the muscled skin beneath.

“I’m sure.”

All at once we were rolling around in the sand. A rock dug into my back and something alive hissed in the brush, scrabbling around, unhappy about being disturbed. It wasn’t the ideal place to be intimate but I didn’t care. I needed him to be closer. I needed it so badly I could hardly breathe. And Con was in a fire of passion, hands everywhere, even more intense than usual. Tomorrow we could blame the strange darkness for taking this moment that we’d been waiting for forever.

But tonight we just needed to use each other. So we would.

He unzipped his pants. I helped him. He groaned.

And then with a gasp of brilliance the lights of Emblem resumed.

Main Street became unbearably vivid. The neighborhoods that had melted into the darkness unseen spread their wings in every direction. It was like watching a sleeping giant roar awake. Conway and I stopped what we were doing and looked out at our hometown while our friends applauded the return of electricity. Someone threw or dropped a bottle. The crash of glass was loud, so terribly loud.

“Stone!” whined a female voice.

“Hey Gentry,” hissed someone else, “you’re gonna fucking pay for that. Fuck. My last forty.”

Conway had twisted his head around at the sound of his brother’s name. It was true that he and Stone never missed an opportunity to knock each other over. But it was also true that if anyone dared to mess with one he’d have to have to face the wrath of the other. If Conway even got a whiff of anything like trouble he’d go barreling into the darkness ready to defend his brother. No matter what, the Gentry boys were a team. Everyone knew it.

I didn’t hear Stone’s response, if there even was one. Conway relaxed. He pulled me into his lap as I finished re-hooking my bra. His strong and steady heartbeat pulsed against my back and I matched my breathing to his. I closed my eyes as he held me close, saying nothing, doing nothing, while the imprint of the town’s garish lights disappeared behind my eyelids. We wouldn’t go any further tonight. We would hold each other until the clock demanded that we stop.

Until then there was just this. And this was enough.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONWAY

One afternoon this past spring Mr. Carson caught me and Stone swiping cigarettes from the glove compartment of an empty Ford truck parked behind his garage. We'd done it before. We would huddle behind the dumpster and wait for the mechanics to park in the lot behind the garage when they ran out of room inside. At night they moved everything indoors and locked up but they were more careless in daylight. We'd never found anything valuable and I'm not sure we would have taken it if we had. Small bills, loose change, cigarettes and once a yellowed, old fashioned map of the state of Arizona that appealed to Stone for some reason.

Stone had a pack of Marlboros clutched in his palm and I was still ducking out of the front seat when Mr. Carson happened to waddle outside to the scene of the crime. But instead of wearing us out and calling his goons to herd us out of there he scratched the back of his mottled neck and said, "If you boys want to hang around here so bad, why don't you throw on a jumpsuit and learn a thing or two?"

Mr. Carson was the kind of guy who didn't say something if he didn't mean it. Stone wasn't interested though. He was busy making some change in a numbers game he'd started some months back. But I'd always been fascinated by how things were put together, what made them tick. I was glad to have the chance to find out. Mostly I swept the garage and

kept the equipment clean but lately Mr. Carson had been letting me in on some oil changes and brake jobs. I liked it, working with my hands, the powerful pride that came from being useful. It came along with a hunger to learn more, to do more.

Erin always gave me a hard time for not stepping up in the classroom. She said I had no excuse because I was far from stupid. She was right. I always did well in math, really well. Years ago when we were still something like a normal family, the school would call my parents down once a year to talk about how high my scores were on these tests the state always required. My mother would yell at me for not 'living up to my potential' but then she'd kind of forget about it. My dad was different though. He'd slip me a ten dollar bill when no one was looking and tell me how proud he was.

Not my dad. Elijah.

I shouldn't think that way. I knew damn well Elijah Gentry had been my father in every way that counted. My mother didn't answer questions and really I wasn't even sure who my father was supposed to be. Some of the gossip pointed to his cousins, Benton and Chrome Gentry, but I didn't know whether to take that seriously. Chrome was dead and nobody in their right minds would want that violent sack of shit Benton as a father. They'd had sons of their own, cousins I remembered vividly, especially Deck. He was like a celebrity, riding around town all full of cool tattoos and danger. But along with the infamous triplets, he'd made his Emblem exit a while back and didn't come around much. I wished he would. I would have liked to ask him a few things.

“Quit daydreaming.” A steel-toed boot nudged me but the voice was not unfriendly. It was Booster, one of Carson’s mechanics. He’d allowed me to roll under the belly of an ancient Bronco for an oil change.

I finished up, double checking to make sure everything was tight and good to go. Booster was grinning at me when I rolled out from under the vehicle. Since he was missing a few prominent teeth the result wasn’t too pretty. Booster wagged a finger and clucked like an old grandmother.

“You ain’t being paid to hang out and think about girls.”

I wiped a greasy palm on the front of my jumpsuit and accepted the hand that offered to yank me to my feet.

“I wasn’t,” I argued, “thinking about girls.”

Booster bobbed his head. “Just one girl, eh?”

I cracked a grin. “The best one.”

He chuckled, shaking his head, and tossed me an oily rag to wipe my hands with.

Even when my thoughts weren’t about her specifically, Erin was always on my mind. And I wasn’t just bragging. She really *was* the best. She was beautiful and smart and so damn sexy it burned me up. I didn’t like a day to go by without seeing her and I was proud to walk around with her at my side. Sometimes she would get kind of quiet, almost sad, and when that happened I didn’t know what she was thinking, but that was fine. I knew she loved me like crazy and she didn’t need to tell me every thought that crossed her mind. I was lucky. How many guys get to really fall for the perfect girl

next door? It's like a sappy fairy tale or one of those Woman's Network movies that my mom's always weeping over.

Since I was only supposed to work until four and it was already a quarter after, I started cleaning up. When I got to my phone there were was a text from Stone, all full of profanity and telling me to get my ass home so we could go have some fun. Erin on the other hand sent a love message full of hearts and 'miss you' promises, asking when I was going to pick her up. Both messages made me smile, for different reasons.

The smile faded a little when I remembered that Erin's obnoxious friend Roe was still in town. She'd been okay back when she lived in Emblem, maybe a shade on the stuck-up side but nothing too annoying. But ever since her dad had struck it rich and moved the family up to some glittering palace in north Scottsdale, she strutted around with a my-shit-don't-stink kind of attitude, muttering in some fancy private school French about who the fuck knew what. I got it; the girl thought her money and her looks made her too good to breathe the air in some gritty small town. But even worse was the way she'd decided Erin was too good for it too. More to the point, it seemed she figured Erin was too good for me.

But I'd promised Erin I'd be nice and so far I had been. I didn't want to give Erin any reason to be uptight so I wouldn't be telling the snotty best friend to go to sit on a stiff one and rotate. Anyway, she must have given Roe the same warning because last night when we were all hanging out down by the canal Roe stuck quietly by Erin's side and didn't give anyone any shit. I told Stone that he ought to make it a mission to keep the damn girl busy until she piloted her Prius back to fucking Scottsdale but Roe steadily ignored him until he got

bored and wandered off to score some action from Courtney Galicki.

Dario, one of the other mechanics, was heading toward my neighborhood so he gave me a ride. It wasn't far, only about a mile, but in this hellacious heat I was always happy to have a way to stay out of the sun. Dario blasted heavy metal music for the quick ride and gave me a friendly wave when he paused in front of my house.

Sure enough, Roe's silver Prius was still parked next door. At least she was supposed to leave tonight. Maybe she wouldn't find her way back down here for a while. It was bad enough I had to deal with Erin and Stone rolling their eyes at each other every five minutes. The last thing I wanted was even more tension added into the mix.

I was all greasy and dusty from spending the day at the garage so I decided to go home and shower before heading over to Erin's. My mom's car wasn't in the driveway but the front door was unlocked. I searched around the kitchen for some food but the pickings were slim. The cheese was moldy, the milk carton was empty and a lonely box of corn flakes had expired nine months ago. There was a fresh carton of eggs in the fridge but I wasn't desperate enough to eat them raw, or to turn on the stove. I finally stuffed a piece of white bread in my mouth because it was better than nothing.

My back was to the doorway that led from the kitchen to the living room. That was why I was caught off guard when an elephant tackled me.

“Stone! Shit, get the fuck off.”

We collided with the fridge and I reared back to try and dislodge my brother, who'd hopped on like he was expecting a fucking piggyback ride. Stone had been working out hard these past six months and I felt every pound of his obnoxious muscles. I could hold my own though. I gritted my teeth and elbowed his six pack until he fell off.

When I whirled around Stone was there shirtless and grinning, already back on his feet.

"About time you showed up," he announced before opening the fridge and removing the block of cheese I'd rejected a moment ago.

"Some of us work," I said pointedly.

He tossed the cheese from one hand to another. "I work."

"Hustling isn't working."

He stopped tossing the cheese and threw me a look. "You come by that little slice of piety from Mom or from Erin?"

I ignored the question. "You're not gonna eat that."

"Sure I am."

"Bad idea."

He held the cheese up, considering. "Why?"

"It's got more mold than the Gnome's toe jam."

Stone cracked up. The Gnome was once the mayor of Emblem and he was one of many local jokes. Stone tossed the decrepit cheese into the garbage pail.

"Seems like a waste," he clucked. "There are starving people on Main Street."

“There are starving people in this kitchen.”

My brother yawned and sank into a chair. “Well damn it then. Go get cleaned up and let’s hunt down some dinner.”

I felt pretty good as I showered off. It was Friday night and it was summer. That right there was reason enough to feel good. Hopefully late tonight I’d get some alone time with Erin. I’d been aching extra hard ever since that night under the bridge, the night of the blackout when we’d *almost* given in. After the lights blasted back on I was glad we hadn’t and I knew Erin was glad too. But still, the ache was there.

My good feeling went away a little when I returned to the kitchen and found my mother standing there with her hands on her hips and a scowl on her face. It seemed like she got a little bit more unhappy every day. She was unhappy with the messy house, she was unhappy with her job, she was unhappy with whatever shithead she was hooking up with at the Dirty Cactus and bringing home to bed. But above all she was unhappy about putting up with us.

She barely took a breath between declaring, “This place is disgusting,” and “Stonewall you haven’t done a damn thing today,” and “Conway I thought I told you to keep your distance from that sneaky little girl next door,” and “My god would you look at that yard,” and “Never thought I’d have two sons who acted like good-for-nothing Gentry trash,” and on and on and on.

Stone gave me an eye roll and flapped his right hand a few times to mimic her running mouth. She stopped mid-rant and glared at him but said nothing. It was me she turned to next. My mother crossed her arms and gave me a frank once over

that dripped with contempt. Even though Stone's constant antics had a long history of giving her more heartburn, I was actually her least favorite. We all knew it.

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop smoking in my damn house?"

I glanced down at my empty hands. "I'm not smoking in your damn house."

"Don't lie to me. I can even smell it in here now."

"That was me," Stone declared cheerfully. He linked his hands behind his neck, a bemused smile on his face. "I've sitting in the living room all afternoon chain smoking and binge watching porn on pay-per-view."

My mother pretended he hadn't spoken. "I saw you, Con."

She was lying. There was no point in jumping on that merry go round though. She was forever plucking one thing or another out of thin air and deciding to get pissed about it. She'd always had one of those hair trigger personalities, as easy to strike as a match, but she hadn't always been this sour toward us. Elijah's slow slide toward death had exhausted her and left a mean-spirited shell that had little use for motherhood.

"Sorry," I told her even though I wasn't because I hadn't done anything.

Her nostrils flared and her mouth puckered. She was trying to come up with another bullet to fire. Once again Stone spoke up.

"I drank your last beer too," he announced, propping his bare feet up on the kitchen table in a way that was bound to

drive her nuts. “And I broke the washing machine.”

That got her attention. “You broke the washing machine?”

“Yup.”

“How?”

“I needed to clean a hammer.”

She chewed her lip, probably trying to decide if he was serious or not. With Stone, the answer was usually not, but tossing a hammer in the washing machine seemed like the kind of thing he might do just to be perverse.

I stifled a laugh. It didn't quite work. A sound like a gasping bird escaped my mouth and my mother refocused, glaring. All at once though she seemed to grow tired of interacting with us. She shouldered her purse and started to push past me out of the room.

“What's for dinner?” Stone called.

“Get a job and buy your own dinner,” she snapped but she reached into her beach bag-sized purse, withdrew a twenty-dollar bill and slapped it on the table. “Bleeding me dry,” she muttered.

Stone grabbed the money and raised an eyebrow at me. “Mom, can I please borrow your car?” he asked in a voice of pure innocence.

“Don't push me, Stone,” she grumbled. She was already gone from the kitchen but then she suddenly doubled back and wagged a finger at me.

“Let me tell you something, Conway. You get that crazy little slut knocked up, don't come crying to me to bail you out

of it.”

I tensed. She could say whatever she wanted to about me but I wasn't going to stay quiet while she talked about Erin like that. I didn't know what the hell she had against Erin, other than the fact that Erin was my girlfriend and my mother probably figured any girl who liked me had to have a few screws loose.

“Don't worry, Ma,” Stone said airily. “I'm sure I'll make you a grandma long before he does.”

“I don't wanna be a grandma,” she howled. Then she left once and for all, muttering about ‘ungrateful brats’ all the way down the hall before slamming the door to her bedroom.

“You ever get the feeling she's counting the days until we're history?” Stone asked.

“That's nothing new. But what the hell was up with that last line?”

Stone was rolling the twenty into a tight tube. “What?”

“You got some bad news you want to share?”

His blue eyes found mine. People often commented how much we looked alike. We did, but no more than any other brothers. Just about every girl in town and a fair number of the women blushed and licked their lips when we walked by so I didn't have any doubts that they all liked what they saw.

Stone snorted. “I was just messing with her.”

“Good. You better be careful.”

“Come on,” he scoffed. “You think I don't know any better than to cover my head when it's pouring?”

“Every time?”

“Every time.” Stone’s face broke into a mischievous smile.
“What about you?”

“What about me?”

Stone looked pointedly out the window toward Erin’s house. Then he looked back at me.

“None of your business,” I growled.

“Still? Seriously? You guys have been together forever. I could string together every non-relationship I’ve ever been involved in and it wouldn’t come close to the time you’ve sunk into Erin.”

“Let’s go eat,” I said, a little grumpy.

“Wait a minute.”

“No. Not discussing this with you.”

“Okay. But can I ask you one more thing?”

“As long as it has nothing to do with where I put my dick.”

Stone looked thoughtfully out the window. His voice grew quiet, almost wistful. “What’s it like?”

I knew what he meant. But it took me a minute to think of an answer. Over the years, Stone had a long string of girls, but never a girlfriend. Some of them he’d liked more than others but even the best of them could only hope for being kept at arm’s length for a short while until he moved on. Erin told me what the girls all said about Stone, as if I didn’t already know. They said he was a shark, a pimp, a player, not that it stopped any of them from chasing. Yet despite his chronic sarcasm, somewhere inside of Stone, in a place that was nearly

unreachable, lived a tender heart. I was probably the only one on earth who ever saw that side of him. Earlier, when he chimed in and interfered with my mother's tirade it hadn't been done solely to irritate her, although he probably considered that a convenient benefit. These last few years she'd made it a habit to swoop in on me out of nowhere and when she did he always did his best to take the heat off. Stone would go to the mat for me. Of that I never had a doubt. He was a good brother. Even if he could be a fucking jackass sometimes.

"It's nice," I told him and he seemed satisfied with the answer, inadequate as it was. It *was* nice, being wrapped up in someone and knowing she was every bit as much into you, maybe more. I would wish the same thing for him too, that he'd learn how to open his heart to people other than me.

Stone stopped me when I started to head next door to Erin's. He said he was hungry enough to eat a Gila monster and didn't want to get stuck in a tornado of girl activity that would mean another two hours would go by before we got to eat. Usually I would have balked and dragged him over there anyway but I was starving. Plus I felt a touch of guilt because Stone didn't ask me for favors very often. So I texted Erin that I'd be back in an hour and then we could all figure out how to pass the summer night in this great metropolis.

It was only a little over a mile to Main Street but the heat slowed the journey down. I was wishing I'd brought some water along when Stone seemed to read my mind and took a sharp right into a quiet yard with a garden hose hanging from the rusty bib on the side of the house. He switched the water on without a pause and watched the stream flow for a good

minute before bending his head to take a drink. Every kid who ever grew up in a hot climate knows that you never touch the first gallon of water to spill out of the hose. A few years ago some boy who'd just moved from the crisp Rocky Mountain air of Colorado took a dare and burned his lips to blistering. That's what happened if you weren't careful.

Stone handed the hose to me silently. The water was warm and tasted somewhat like metal but it felt good going down my throat. Some boyish remnant inside of me felt ridiculously happy, sharing a stolen drink with my brother in a yard that didn't belong to us and wiping my mouth on the back of my wrist. It was the dance of a thousand childhood days that had come before.

We took a shortcut through an alley that ran along the backside of one of the town's most prosperous streets with its courtyards and swimming pools and small orchards full of well-tended citrus trees. The occasional gecko or ground squirrel darted in front of us before disappearing into unseen holes beneath the block fence. As we reached the end of the alley, a decent-sized chuckwalla turned around and stared at us boldly rather than scurry into the shadows. I stared back. Stone, a few steps ahead, let out a low whistle.

"What are you doing?" I asked uneasily as I left the lizard behind and noted the way my brother was staring with interest through the open window of an expensive car.

Stone made a tsk-tsk sound. "Left the keys in the ignition. Dipshit."

It was parked discreetly around the corner beside a sprawling Santa Fe home that occupied on acre on what

passed for prime real estate around here. I knew who the house belonged to. I knew who the car belonged to. I knew what that gleam in my brother's eye meant. I didn't like any these things.

“Come on,” Stone urged. “Fifteen minutes. He'll never know it was gone.”

I let out an exasperated breath. “Is getting arrested on your bucket list?”

Stone drummed his fingers on the hood of the Cadillac and broke into a slow smile. “Nobody's getting arrested, son. The Gnome is probably asleep in his coffin up there in the big house. He'll never know. We'll just ride through the Burgerville drive thru and bring it right back.”

“Why?”

“Because we can. Because I'm tired of walking. Because the fucker is tempting fate by leaving his shiny cock compensation tool out here with the keys inside.”

I paused. “Keys are really inside?”

Stone reached through the window and seconds later the silver keys came hurtling through the air. I caught them easily and stared at the innocent way they laid inside my palm.

“Well?” Stone prompted and when I looked at him I understood the game. I knew that boy better than he knew himself. It was all a grand old play. He expected me to say the hell with it and toss the keys back through the window. We would continue on our merry way and go stuff our faces full of greasy fast food. We would laugh at dumb shit and insult each other and be glad when the sun sank below the

horizon. We would pass another uneventful summer evening bullshitting with friends and non-friends beside the banks of the canal or in the shadows of the old train bridge or at the base of the butte. There weren't a lot of options to choose from when it came to Emblem nightlife. Then we would stumble home in the darkness, fall into our sloppy beds and let the day end without a single thing out of the ordinary happening.

“Okay.” I shrugged nonchalantly. “Let's go.”

Stone's face changed as I twirled the key ring around my finger. I kept my eye on him as I closed the distance to the car and opened up the driver's side. A twinge of doubt crossed his face. He hadn't been serious. He'd been expecting me to scoff and stalk away. He would have followed with laughter and plenty of teasing all the way to Burgerville and beyond. But now that I'd accepted the challenge there was no backing down, not for Stonewall Tiberius Gentry.

“I'll drive,” he said coolly but he shot an uneasy glance around our quiet surroundings. The sprawling house beyond the gate watched impassively, a stucco giant that wouldn't have any reason to get excited over car thieves. Overhead a carrion bird circled, a bad omen. I watched as he noticed, took a step back, then set his jaw.

“Nope,” I told him, jumping into the driver's seat and feeling a dangerous thrill. The car was hot and smelled of leather and money. With a flick of my wrist the engine purred to life and I cranked up the air conditioning.

Stone climbed into the passenger side and shut the door quietly. I only knew he was uneasy because I understood him so well, always had. He was older than me by ten months but

that head start had always seemed irrelevant. We enrolled in the same kindergarten class and hit just about every landmark of experience together. People were always forgetting that we weren't twins and sometimes even I forgot. Stone had always been right there with me and it was unlikely he remembered that brief breath of time before I'd been around. So we weren't twins. But we weren't like the other brothers we knew either.

Stone flashed me the cocky grin that drove all the girls to weak-kneed idiocy. I grinned back at him.

Suddenly his smile dropped a notch. "Fifteen minutes," he warned with a raised eyebrow.

I shifted to drive and eased the car down the street, feeling bad and feeling damn good at the same time, like I always did when we were doing something we shouldn't, from scribbling on our bedroom wall with magic markers to tossing the principal's chair into the town pool. It was an ancient feeling as old as my memory. It had always been this way.

We didn't make it to Burgerville. As we closed in on Main Street it occurred to me, rather belatedly, that we weren't invisible. In fact we were attracting a fair amount of attention cruising around in the former mayor's luxury sedan. Emblem wasn't a tiny town but it wasn't a huge one either and probability dictated there were a few people who recognized the Gentry brothers and wondered why they were sitting in the Gnome's Cadillac.

No cops though. No cops anywhere in sight. Stone shifted in the seat beside me when we stopped at the light on Main and Terrace. He was facing forward with a passive

expression. Beyond him I caught a glimpsed of slack-jawed Mrs. Perry behind the wheel of the Honda stopped beside us. She owned the only flower shop in town. She was a friend of our mother's. All at once the shittiness of this whole escapade struck me. If I had any sense I would just haul ass back to that fancy street before someone more important than Mrs. Perry took notice of us.

“Hey, look at that.” Stone pointed over my left shoulder. “We've got company.”

A horn blasted and I turned away from Mrs. Perry's wide eyes to see Tony Cortez laughing in his prehistoric Camaro. The thing looked like it was one gearshift away from disintegrating but I was in auto shop with Tony and knew the car's insides looked a whole lot better than its outsides.

Tony nodded his head and gunned the engine. Stone flipped him off but it was all in good fun. Tony was all right most of the time but just at that second in time his smug grin annoyed me. He figured I didn't have any nerve at all. I gunned the Cadillac in answer.

“Con,” said Stone firmly but the light had already turned green and we were already off in a squeal of tires and speed.

Main Street wasn't too long as main drags go but we had a nice stretch of straight road before we hit the next light. I heard Stone hiss out a curse but I had no plans to stop. Tony's front bumper was right there in the corner of my eye and I'd be damned if I let him get ahead. Scattered pedestrians ogled from the sidewalk, a senior citizen in leather hung over his bike handlebars and silently watched behind sunglasses-covered eyes.

All this occurred in mere speed-filled seconds that seemed like hours. Then the waning sun glinted off every metal surface in Emblem and conspired to blind me. When it cleared we were nearly at the next light and the intersection loomed ahead, no other cars in sight, totally empty except for a single black cat that stood its ground right there in the center of the road. He was ugly; hair raised, claws ready, a long-tailed rodent in his jaws. He made no move to jump to safety. The endless seconds were stretching longer and longer. Another one and he would be beneath the tires. I cut the wheel before I even understood what I was doing. Stone grabbed the dashboard and cursed wildly. We'd lurched beyond the retail segment of Main Street and jumped the crumbling curb into a field choked with wildflowers and tumbleweeds. The ground was a gritty powder that slid beneath the tires as I cut the wheel again, trying to stop the terrible momentum as my foot slammed down on the brakes.

The back tires spun in one direction and the front tires in a separate one. There weren't any people or buildings or animals in front of us but my stomach dropped when I saw what did lay only a few unprotected feet away.

A wide network of canals runs through this part of state all the way up to the Phoenix valley. For much of the year they are dry or lined with shallow puddles. But during the summer storm season it's not unusual to see several feet of water in there.

The Cadillac teetered over the concrete lip of the canal for half a terrible second before falling into the dirty water. We landed with a colossal thud that made a small tidal wave.

Immediately the floor began taking in water that soaked our legs to the knee.

My brother and I locked eyes in that small space. We were in no danger, not really. The water wasn't deep enough to drown in. But we were damn fucked just the same.

Stone swallowed and the act seemed painful for him. "Let's get out of here," he said and started to climb out the window.

I sat there. I stared at the rising water and dimly wondered what had become of Tony Cortez. I thought about how less than fifteen minutes earlier I'd just been kidding around with my brother as we looked forward to yet another dull, incredible, boring, irreplaceable summer night.

"That pause between heartbeats can change everything. Everything."

Who'd said that? Erin. Erin had said that. She'd said it in the middle of one of her quiet moods, a cold day in the season that passed for winter here. It was the anniversary of a terrible thing that had happened in her life, something she didn't like to talk about. But I clearly remembered those words and I remembered that day and I remembered the way a sudden coarse wind had lifted the ends of her dark hair and slapped me in the face with it.

"Conway!"

Stone had already scrambled up the side of the canal. I could see his legs, could see him hunkering down, ready to crawl back down and drag me out of the car. I hauled myself

out of the driver's side window and Stone sighed with relief as he pulled me up to stand beside him.

"I was driving," he told me, nodding.

I didn't understand. My ears were ringing for some reason. I rubbed at my right ear irritably. "What?"

Then I saw the lights. The police car. The ringing had been a siren. We wouldn't be needing an ambulance. We weren't hurt. We were in a hell of a lot of trouble though.

Officer Driscoll, a silly sort of Keystone cop if ever there was one, was heading our way. I would have laughed out loud at the grim expression on his face if there'd been anything funny about any of this. Officer Driscoll, who went by the nickname Gaps, surveyed the scene, frowned when we waved away the paramedics, then arrested us. I could feel eyes from everywhere as we were escorted back to the police cruiser for the short ride back to Emblem's jail.

Stone was stricken. All the tough guy armor was gone. The sorrow and regret on his face made him look young and old at the same time. Every bit of that sad remorse was fixed on me.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry, Con-man."

I stared at him. Stone closed his eyes for a second and looked just about as miserable as I'd ever seen him. He wasn't torn up about the fact that he was getting shoved in the back of a police car, although I doubt he was thrilled about it. What was killing him was the fact that I was right there with him. All the dumb crap we'd ever done hadn't added up to nearly this much trouble and Stone was blaming himself for a bad

idea. Yes, he was blaming himself for taking me along for the ride even though I'd been the one to start the engine.

"I'm sorry too," I told him.

After all, we were both equal idiots and this was more my fault than it was his. For the first time a real sense of fear started pounding in my head. This was outside my box of life experience. I didn't know what would happen from here. I had my doubts my mother would come running downtown to bring us home and I couldn't think of anyone else who would be willing or able to post bail. Our hands were locked in cuffs behind our backs but I had the urge to reach for my brother in a way I hadn't done since we were little and afraid of all the imaginary things that kids worry about.

Instead I nudged his knee with mine. That was the best I could do right now. He nudged back.

CHAPTER FIVE

ERIN

“Stop squirming.”

“God, Roe. I look like a clown.”

“Only because you keep moving and screwing up my lines. Now sit still, *ma chère*.”

I obeyed my best friend and settled into the creaky desk chair so she could finish my makeup. Roe’s makeup bag was bigger than my school backpack and held the kind of quality, expensive stuff that I would never be able to afford. So far she’d given me about half her stash and would have pushed more at me if I hadn’t gotten embarrassed and refused. Roe was cool like that.

“There,” she finally said in triumph as she backed away and squinted at her handiwork. She was pleased enough to break into a wide smile. Roe was gorgeous with long auburn curls and a dancer’s body. I was sorry to hear that she’d given up ballet this past year.

I looked in the square vanity mirror.

“Not terrible,” I admitted.

I never wore much makeup. Roe insisted my smooth olive complexion didn’t really need it but she wanted to do something nice for me and she knew all about this stuff. Makeup. Fashion. Men. If you didn’t know Roe at all, if you were just judging her based on her cool beauty and

sophisticated tastes, you'd think she was a girl who had the world at her feet. The kind of girl who didn't even know what problems looked like. Maybe the reason we got along so well was because we both knew that the picture we chose to show the world didn't mean a thing. It was the story inside, full of broken complications, that told the truth.

“Gorgeous,” she corrected and then with lightning speed and a pair of bobby pins twisted my hair up into a loose French twist. “A vision,” she declared with a theatrical bow and a French accent. “*Mademoiselle* can have any conquest she desires.”

I blushed. I knew I wasn't ugly. But I wasn't Roe-quality hot.

“Come on.” She pushed me out of the chair. “Let's go find that boy of yours and get his hormones raging.”

I snorted. “Con's hormones are fine without any help.”

“Really?” She dropped to my bed and prissily crossed her long legs like she was settling in to hear some good gossip. “Elaborate please. I've been wondering how long you two were going to hold out.”

“Oh. We didn't,” I stammered. “I mean, we almost did. A lot. But we didn't.”

Roe blinked and then nodded thoughtfully. “He's all right, that Conway Gentry.”

“Because he hasn't screwed me?”

She smiled gently. “Because he doesn't push you. He loves you, E. I see it in the way he looks at you. He'd wait

forever if he had to. That kind of guy doesn't come along everyday. The kind who will love you just as you are."

"He doesn't know who I am," I muttered.

Roe was startled. "Erin. That's ridiculous."

The tears were there. Hot and sudden. They hovered behind my eyes and threatened to spill. Roe had seen me cry before, with the suddenness of a tsunami. I felt free to cry in front of her. She knew things I hid from everyone else. She knew what really happened the day my mother died. I suppose a lot of other people also knew but out of respect for my father and our family they must have decided long ago to keep their mouths shut.

"Are you still doing it?" my friend asked me with quiet pain. She swallowed with a grimace. "You promised. You promised you wouldn't anymore."

"Not as much," I said defensively.

"You need to stop, Erin."

I wrapped my arms around my chest. "I know."

"What about that number I gave you? The help line?"

"I called it," I lied. "It was helpful."

Roe gave me a vague smile. She knew when to believe me and when not to. "You should talk to your dad."

I thought about my father. So tired and bewildered. "No."

"I could be there with you."

"No!" I hadn't meant to shout. I drew my knees up to my chest. "One more year until I graduate and get out of here."

Everything will be much better then.”

Roe chewed her lip and then sighed. “The thing is, it’s not so easy to escape the things you hate about yourself.”

“I don’t hate myself.”

My friend reached over and took my arm. I let her run her finger over a long faded scar on the underside of my elbow. “You don’t love yourself either. And you should.”

“I’ll stop,” I said and this time I meant it. But then I always meant it. “I swear.”

She dropped my arm and suddenly clapped her hands together. “It’s going to be so great, Erin. You and me, up at ASU together. We’ll be roommates of course.”

“Of course.”

“And I’ll even make myself scarce when Con drives up on weekends.”

“Well, maybe he’ll wind up being a lot closer. I’ve been trying to get him to take school more seriously. If he brings his grades up he has a chance at squeaking through admissions.”

Roe raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t he and his brother kind of joined at the hip? Stone doesn’t seem like college material to me.”

“Stone doesn’t own Conway,” I shot back, suddenly irritable. “Con will do what’s right for him and Stone can hang back here and keep being his own worst problem.”

“All right, all right.” Roe held up her hands. “Damn, I forgot how much you couldn’t stand Stone.”

I didn't want to talk about Stone Gentry anymore. "It doesn't matter," I said quickly. "It's fine."

Roe nodded. "Con thinks I don't like him, huh?"

I hesitated. Con thought Roe was stuck up and indifferent. He didn't know her like I did. "Nah. Not at all. He was just worried you weren't having a good time when we were all hanging out last night."

"Sorry," she said sheepishly. "I guess when I come to town I'm kind of the proverbial third wheel."

"You are not."

She grinned teasingly. "I'll be on my way soon and then you and Con can return to your carnal pursuits."

"I told you we haven't done it. But what about you?"

She started putting away tubes of lipstick. "What about me?"

"All the guys were staring at you last night, drool collecting at their feet, as they prayed you'd throw them a bone."

"I've already done too much," she said and the frown that crossed her face reminded me that Roe had a few secrets of her own. She'd disappeared from social media ever since that teacher scandal. I never got the whole story about that, but I didn't need it. She was still Roe. I was social and polite to many of the local Emblem girls. However, I still considered Roe to be my only true friend. Aside from Conway of course.

"Did you like your present?" I asked her in order to change the subject to something more cheerful.

A smile lit her face and she immediately reached over and pulled the small box from her overnight bag. She'd already opened it earlier but now she again opened the lid carefully and touched the object sitting atop a cotton bed. Her seventeenth birthday had been several weeks ago and I'd been waiting to give her the hanging crystal prism. It wasn't much, just a token I'd picked up at a tourist trap a few miles outside town, the kind of place where you buy flimsy cowboy hats, magnets in the shape of the state, scorpion paper weights. The small crystal was attached to a string of fake turquoise beads. It was meant to be hung in a window frame to catch the light. I hadn't been hunting for a gift when I saw it, but immediately it reminded me of a really old movie Roe and I had watched together years ago. In the movie a pair of outcast children befriended an elderly hermit. There was memorable scene where the three of them hung dozens of crystals in a huge window in such a way to create a rainbow of light when the sun hit. For some reason that scene had always stuck with me. I wasn't sure she would remember but from the look on her face yesterday when she opened the box I knew that she did.

"I love it," she said with quiet awe, holding it in her manicured fingers like it was a rare diamond. That was why I loved Roe so much. She had everything money could buy but she was still the kind of girl who treasured an eight-dollar sentimental gift from her best friend.

We were interrupted by a loud knock on the door and a spray of giggles.

Roe opened the door and my two sisters spilled into the room. Penny stalked in primly with all the worldly arrogance

of a newly minted teenager. Katie followed, full of nine-year-old laughter that didn't require anything specific.

"What are you guys doing?" Katie asked, poking around in Roe's overnight bag.

"Plotting a global takeover," I answered.

My sister wrinkled her nose. "Huh?"

"You're wearing a ton of makeup," sniffed Penny with disapproval. "Wait until Dad sees."

"Dad won't care. And anyway you'll have to get used to it because it's been tattooed on."

"Well, you look like a clown."

"Penny?" ventured Roe. "Would you like to try some makeup?"

"I would!" shouted Katie with her hand in the air.

"I guess," said Penny with an eye roll. "Just don't make me look like a circus clown."

Roe sat down and went about the serious work of applying makeup to my little sisters. Katie was delighted with the pink lip gloss and blush. Penny tried hard not to look too pleased over the way Roe was able to highlight her cheekbones and added a hint of color to her lips.

"Thanks," she said almost too softly to hear as she stared wistfully at her own reflection. Then she blinked and turned to me with full-blown sour adolescence. "Dad wants to know what you have planned for dinner."

"There's a tuna casserole in the fridge. All you need to do is heat it up at three fifty for twenty minutes."

“And where are you going?” Penny asked as she paused in the doorway.

“Out,” I shrugged, glancing at my phone and wondering why Con hadn’t called yet. He was done with work over an hour ago and I thought he’d be here as soon as he ran home to shower and change.

“I saw your boyfriend leave,” announced Katie as if she’d read my mind. She turned to Roe. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Noooo. I’m too young to have a boyfriend,” answered Roe with wide-eyed mock innocence. She winked at me.

I tried to get my sister’s attention. “Katie, you saw Con? He was here?”

My sister combed her hair with her fingers. “Nope.”

Penny was listening at the door and decided to join the conversation. “He and his brother ran off together a little while ago, probably to go snort paint in a ditch somewhere.” She nodded at Roe. “Are you staying here again tonight?”

Roe shook her head. “I wish. But I promised my dad I’d be home by eight.”

Katie suddenly hugged Roe around the waist. Roe looked startled for a moment but pleased as she patted the little girl’s back. It made me feel guilty, seeing my kid sister searching for affection. She’d gotten a raw deal, having only been in kindergarten when our mother died. Our dad tried his best but he spent too many hours a day working double shifts at the prison in order to make ends meet. He felt guilty for depending too much on me. He felt guilty because he couldn’t

help my mother when she was alive, and can't deal with her at all now that she's dead. I felt guilty because I'm a crappy substitute for a real mother. And then I felt even more guilty about counting down the months until I could get out of here. Too much guilt, all around.

We found my father dozing off on the couch. He must have only just gotten home. He still wore the white polyester shirt and blue trousers of his prison uniform. He woke up abruptly when Katie jumped on his legs.

"Stinker," he joked, tickling her while she squealed. Then he looked at us and blinked his bloodshot eyes. "Hey there, girls."

"Hi Dad. I think Penny's in the kitchen heating up the casserole I made yesterday. There will be enough for leftovers tomorrow."

He grinned. Now balding, overweight, and chronically tired, he'd once been a handsome man. I'd seen the pictures.

"Thanks, princess. Always my hero."

My dad said things like that all the time. He meant them too, always trying to let me know how much he appreciated my help. He was a good guy.

"You're welcome," I told him and rubbed my arms. They were covered with long sleeves despite the summer heat. Roe caught me doing it and gave me a sharp look that turned to pained sadness. I stopped. No one else noticed. Even if they had they wouldn't have thought anything of it. I was proud of that in a way, sick as it was. It was a terrible talent, being able to hide awful things from the people who loved you.

Con still wasn't answering his phone. Roe hung around until the light started growing soft, then reluctantly packed up her car. For all the luxury that awaited her, Roe was never excited to go home. Before she climbed behind the wheel she turned to me and opened her arms.

"Better days are coming," she said in my ear as she hugged me tight.

I hugged her back. "For both of us," I promised.

She pulled away and looked straight into my eyes. "You know, if there's ever anything you don't want to handle alone, I'd drop everything and get here."

Roe didn't say things like that just to say them. The biggest bank account on earth couldn't buy that kind of loyal friendship.

"I know," I said. "But I'm fine. I swear."

She glanced over at the empty silence of Con's house. "Be careful among those Gentry boys," she warned with a wink as she ducked into her car.

I waved and then stuck my hands on my hips. "Maybe they should be careful around me."

"Thanks again for my crystal."

"You need to hang it in your bedroom window. Remember the legend; if you catch a rainbow in your palm all your dreams will come true."

"Love you, sis!" she shouted as she pulled away. Roe didn't have any blood sisters and had decided at least a decade ago that she would adopt me into the role.

I was still standing by the curb when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I whipped it out with a smile, expecting Conway, but instead it was a text from Courtney Galicki. She pretended to be more of an airhead than she really was and was always too quick to gossip, but she was okay. She'd been hooking up with Stone on and off for a while now and that made me feel a little sorry for her because she obviously liked him more than it was healthy to like Stone Gentry.

I stared at the words on my screen but they didn't make sense to me. Actually, they *did* make sense, but it was a bad kind of sense. I didn't have the patience to be texting back and forth about something like this so I called Courtney directly. I listened to the breathless story she told me.

By the time I hung up I was silently cursing the boy next door.

CHAPTER SIX

CONWAY

We were quite a pair of lucky bastards.

Gaps made sure we knew it. I could tell he felt bad even as he was hauling us in. About a year ago he started coming around the house, spending a lot of time with our mother. She used him for an ego boost and some fancy restaurant dinners before dropping him like bad meat. But Gaps wasn't the sort to hold a grudge and he always nodded in our direction when he saw us around town.

Apparently the family connection went deeper than a short affair with our mother. He stopped by our cell, explaining in hushed whispers how he was still buddies with the legendary Deck Gentry and had promised to keep an eye on us.

Stone raised an eyebrow at that and we'd glanced at each other with an unspoken acknowledgement. It was another piece of evidence that we were fathered by one of those wild desert Gentrys instead of the steadfast Elijah. This wasn't the time to start musing over that possibility though. Not when we were behind bars, our stomachs growling and our pulses racing.

Gaps told us a little small town nepotism could come in handy sometimes. He had a relative who was a judge and Deck was owed a lot of favors for things I couldn't begin to guess. All that added up to a break for us, as long as someone

showed up at the Emblem jail with a stack of green paper. I almost despaired over hearing that because even if my mother had the money I doubted she would part with it for our sake.

It turned out she wouldn't need to. Even though Gaps hadn't been able to reach Deck, he'd talked to Cordero, one of the triplet cousins I barely remembered. They'd lived way out in the desolate hinterlands of outer Emblem, where most of the Gentrys had squatted and lived and died for generations. There were still some left; chronic troublemakers who had made our last name a local curse. Cord and his brothers, Chase and Creed, had famously run out of town the first chance they got but their parents remained. I saw them sometimes – ruined Maggie and violent Benton. If rumors of our parentage had ever reached Benton's ears he never showed it, thank god. Everything I'd ever heard about him pointed to a brutal man I'd rather not know.

Stone and I practically leapt out of the cage as soon as Gaps unlocked the door. He told us to keep quiet and ushered us out the back way, where there were no curious staff or visitors to wonder why we deserved such a quick, unofficial release.

They were waiting for us. The triplets. I remembered them as being larger than life; three rowdy teens who didn't give a shit about rules or reason. The men who waited for us now were serious and almost parental. They checked us out, raised eyebrows at each other, and smirked. After all these years I felt something like awe, being face to face with them again.

“Shit,” I blurted out, “it's the famous triplets.” I moved in to shake their hands even as Stone stood silently back. “How the hell are ya?”

The one who was covered in tattoos and had already confirmed that he was Cordero thought I was funny.

“Famous,” he exclaimed. “Hey guys, did you know we were famous?”

I couldn't help it. The hero worship was setting in. When Stone and I were little we used to pretend we *were* the Gentry triplets. We were forever rotating which one and it never seemed to occur to us that we were one brother short of the trifecta. I poked Stone in the side to shake him into remembering but he just scowled at me and jerked his head like he did when he was showing off that he didn't care about a fucking thing.

“It's true,” I told them. “You're legends in the stuffy halls of Emblem High, even after all these years.”

Chasyn, the last one to shake my hand, snorted over that. “All these years. Such ancient history. Predates electricity.”

I couldn't tell if he was really offended or not.

“Yeah,” I finally said, just because I felt like I needed to say something.

Creedence, the big guy, snapped his fingers at us. He was the one who seemed the least excited to be here. No wonder. I knew they lived somewhere up in the valley outside Phoenix and they probably had far better things to do with their Friday night than drive all the way down here for the sake of two kids they hadn't seen in a decade.

“Let's move out,” he said with all the militant command of a drill sergeant. He stepped aside to say a few words to Gaps,

who glanced at a fat envelope in his chubby hands and nodded before clearing his throat and looking our way.

“Don’t do this shit again,” he warned, and even though I didn’t have anything against Gaps I couldn’t help but feel laughter bubbling up. Some men were born with the aura of authority and the rest weren’t. Gaps wasn’t. But I tried to be serious when I answered.

“Of course not, Officer. We’re sorry. I don’t know what we were thinking. Stone, do you know what we were thinking?”

“Sure,” said Stone easily. “I was thinking about how much hot ass I was gonna get out of this.”

I shot him a look. No good would come out of mouthing off right now. “He didn’t mean that.”

My stupid brother kept right on going. “Yeah I meant it. When girls get close to trouble they just can’t seem to keep their tits contained. Hell of an incentive.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I hissed with a quick glance at Gaps, but Gaps was shaking with silent laughter.

“Gentrys,” he chuckled, then told our cousins they were free to do with us as they pleased.

Stone, the perennial moron, shook free of Creed’s firm grip and decided to get a parting shot in at Gaps by lying that our mother was hoping he’d start coming around again. Gaps looked all sadly hopeful for a painful moment before Stone started laughing.

“That was fucked up,” I told him.

Stone grabbed me around the neck. He was too damn strong. “Did I hear you tell me to shut up in there, you little puke?”

I’d had about enough of my brother’s cynical company so I answered by head butting him against the side of the jail.

“Fucker,” Stone howled, trying to get under my armpits so he could throw me off.

“Dick breath,” I growled and took aim again.

Creedence lost his patience and tore us apart. He’d make a much more effective cop than Gaps. I was secretly pleased when the guys insisted on driving us home. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to them yet. Chase even got his way over cranky Creedence and arranged for us to stop and get some of those gut-busting cheeseburger hot dogs always on the heater at the gas station.

Cordero was quiet and mild-mannered. He was friendly but didn’t seem to know what to do with us. Creed made it clear he was just going to grumble all the livelong day. But Chase was cool. He asked us questions and listened to the answers. A high school teacher with a beautiful longtime girlfriend he adored, he was funny as hell and didn’t seem put out at all by hanging around with us.

Creed pulled into the station beside a gas pump and Cord hung back with his brother while Chase followed us inside the tiny convenience store attached to the gas station. He bought us whatever we wanted and we all staggered out the door loaded with junk food and soda.

“Hey, it’s the Jailbird Gentrys!”

“How was that *hard* time, boys?”

“Looks like they’re having some trouble walking.”

There was a crowd of them. The Cortez brothers were hamming it up with a gross pantomime of prison rape. Courtney and her idiot gal pals were squealing and waving. Then Erin came running out of the darkness. I pushed my food on Stone and held my arms out, feeling bad that I hadn’t had a chance to let her know what was going on. Obviously someone had though. She wouldn’t have been hanging out with that crowd otherwise. Erin didn’t have much tolerance for our pranks and that had always widened the rift between her and Stone. But as she ran toward me, her long hair swinging behind her, there was nothing in her face but relief and happiness.

She jumped into my arms and wrapped herself around me. “I missed you so much,” she whispered breathlessly. We hadn’t seen each other since last night and since she lived right next door it wasn’t often that we went a full twenty four hours without a kiss.

“I missed you too, baby,” I told her, now pissed at myself for doing something so stupid that I’d risked causing her a moment of worry. I found her lips and made them mine, blocking out all noise and light as I kissed her with all the passion I could spare. Let Stone and the others laugh and scoff. I knew everything about this girl and she knew everything about me. More than anything, I knew what was real and what wasn’t. Erin was real.

She was shy when I introduced her to my cousins. She would have heard of them since I wasn’t lying when I said the

Gentry triplets were legendary. But I doubted she'd ever met them before they left Emblem. I caught Stone's questioning look when Erin mentioned that she was trying to get me to go with her to Arizona State next year. We hadn't really talked about it, and sometimes I didn't know if I was the type who was really cut out for college. But if it meant making Erin happy then I would at least try.

Stone recovered right away and made a crack about joining us in the world of higher education. Erin snapped back at him and then the two of them had a few harsh words for each other until Stone narrowed his eyes and started advancing.

"I don't *drag* Con into jack shit, sweetheart. Your golden boy can manage his own life, no matter how much time you waste trying to convince him otherwise."

That got me riled up enough to interfere.

"Hey," I warned, glaring. "Knock it off, Stone. You don't mean it."

Stone cocked his head and gazed at me flatly. "I don't mean it," he shrugged.

The triplets dropped us off at our house. There were no lights on, which was a relief. The last thing I was in the mood to deal with was a lengthy tongue lashing by our loving mother. I knew I deserved it. I just wasn't in the mood for it.

Stone jumped out of the truck first and said something to the triplets that I didn't catch before he ambled over to the sidewalk and waited.

I held Erin's hand as I walked over to the side of the truck. I wanted to let the brothers know how much we appreciated

the fact that they came down here for us. I also wanted to let them know that I wouldn't mind seeing them again. I cleared my throat, feeling weirdly nervous. "My brother's not really good at gratitude but believe me, we're both glad you showed up."

"Not a problem, man," said Cord.

"You get those grades up," Chase called from the backseat. "Next thing I want to hear about you is that you're heading up to Tempe."

I grinned. "I will."

And maybe I would. You never know what the future could hold.

Creed leaned out of his window suddenly. "Stay out of trouble," he said gravely. "Don't do anything you can't undo." He jerked his head at Stone. "That goes for you too. I know you heard me."

"I heard you," Stone answered.

As soon as the brothers pulled away a light came on at Erin's house. Mr. Rielo's tired figure filled the doorway.

"Erin," he called with a trace of irritation. "Say goodnight now."

Erin's little sister Katie appeared in a pink princess nightgown. She giggled and waved.

Erin kissed me quickly on the lips, looking embarrassed. She would hate this, being responsible for making her father worry and wait up for her. I hated it too. If I hadn't been so hell bent on proving I could be a bigger badass than my

brother then the night would have been a lot more peaceful for everyone.

“Good night, Erin,” Stone called with mock sincerity. I scowled at him. He needed to stop doing that, putting such a sarcastic show. It wasn’t a crime to care about people’s feelings.

Erin whirled around, glared at him for a long, silent moment, then followed her father and sister into the house.

Stone chuckled and prodded me toward the front door. “You have your key? I didn’t leave the window open.”

“No.” I kneeled on the bed of river rocks underneath the kitchen window and started turning over their smooth egg shapes until I found what I was looking for. Stone was right there, swiping the key as soon as I had it in my hand.

“At least we won’t have any unhappy middle aged people waiting up for us,” he said lightly.

No one besides me would have caught the edge beneath his words. Stone had a tough skin but he could be hurt. I knew that. I remembered the look of grief in his eyes as he watched the cuffs circle my wrists and the way he’d reached for me in the back of the police cruiser. A big brother, trying to comfort his little brother. I clapped a hand on his shoulder, feeling affectionate.

“At least there’s that,” I agreed.

We were both wrong though. The kitchen lights were dark but the room wasn’t empty.

“Welcome home,” she snapped and flipped a switch.

I rubbed my eyes, briefly blinded by the glare and when my vision cleared my mother was giving me her best impression of a fire-breathing dragon. She'd probably been sitting at the table for a while, judging by the nearly empty bottle of red wine in front of her.

"Hey, ma," Stone answered gleefully and kissed her dry cheek before heading out of the room.

My mother slammed a palm on the table. The bottle of wine fell over.

"Get back here, Stonewall!" She was breathing fast, like she'd just run a fifty yard sprint. Anger could do that I guess, take your breath away. And this was about as angry as I'd ever seen her. No matter how big a guy gets there's something uniquely cringe-worthy about standing underneath the cloud of your mother's fury and waiting for the storm to break.

She waited until Stone had quietly rejoined my side. No one noticed when I reached out and righted the fallen wine bottle. A red puddle bled off the edge of the table and dripped silently on the floor.

"I've had it," my mother hissed with venomous finality. She pushed herself to standing position and even though she was nearly a foot shorter than either of us it seemed she was ten feet tall as she said terrible things. "You know what it's like for me? To break my back every day keeping a roof over your heads, trying just to get through another fucking shift at the pharmacy so I can go back tomorrow and do the same thing? There I was tonight, feet aching, head throbbing, watching the clock and praying it moves just a little fast when Ginny Brant comes running in to tell me that my sons, *my*

sons, have been arrested for stealing a car, racing it like maniacs and then crashing into a canal.” A string of saliva shot out from her lips and collected on her chin. She wiped it away angrily before continuing. When she did she practically choked on her own words. “You’re no good, either of you. The worst of the Gentry blood is too thick. No effort to give you a decent life is going to change that. I tried. Elijah tried.” She shook her head miserably. “I should have known better.”

Stone sighed with exasperation. “For god’s sake ma, it’s not like we’re serial killers. We do dumb shit sometimes and we’re sorry.”

My mother sniffed. “You don’t care who you hurt.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly and her eyes snapped sharply to me.

“You especially,” she whispered. “There’s nothing worse than what you come from.”

“We come from *here!*” Stone yelled. “We come from *you!*” He raked a hand through his hair, muttered a curse and then slumped against the counter. The tears in my eyes were unfamiliar. I cried about as often as I played chess. In other words, just about never. But even that was more emotion than Stone was ever willing to part with. It hurt, seeing him on the verge of breaking down, and knowing it was all my fault.

There’s nothing worse than what you come from.

“We’re not bad,” I said, hearing the quaver in my voice. “As for tonight, I’m real sorry, okay? It was my fault and I’m sorry. I’ll do whatever it takes to make it up to everyone.”

“Not enough,” she said flatly. “Not enough.”

“What the hell do you want?” Stone asked wearily. “Blood from the sand?”

“No.” She shook her head. “No.” She sighed loudly and started to leave the room. She said the last words with her back to us. “I’m done. You stay out of trouble and you can live here until you finish school. Anymore of this shit and you’ll find the locks changed and your crap in the street. Both of you.”

My brother and I listened to our mother shuffle away to her bedroom. We stared at each other as her door slammed, both of us feeling the same bleak symbolism in the gesture.

“It’s not true,” Stone said grabbing my shoulder and looking me straight in the eye. “It’s not true, Con.”

“I think she meant it all right.”

His jaw clenched. “I don’t give a shit what she meant. She was always going to find an excuse to slam the door. It’s not true what she said, that we’re no good.” He smirked vaguely. “Well, maybe it’s true of me. But not you, Con. You’re the best guy I know. And if she can’t see that then she’s as fucking blind as she is stupid.”

I flinched when my brother grabbed me by the back of the neck. Stone tipped his head close to my mine until our foreheads touched. Dimly I remembered how we used to stand this way when we were kids. Little kids. When the world was big and we’d wander carelessly past our boundaries, often getting lost, we’d stand together just like this and whisper, “strength in brothers,” to keep the panic away. It

was from a movie about a Roman gladiator. The slogan in the movie was actually ‘strength *and* honor’ but we thought it was ‘strength *in* honor’. We changed it to ‘strength in brothers’ and everyone at school started repeating it even though they didn’t know why or what the hell it meant. There was strength that came from having someone to go through life with. But all these years later we still had a lot to learn about how to survive in the world. We’d squandered our opportunities at school, maybe past the point of no return. We’d gotten on the wrong side of far too many people, and now our own mother was ready to throw us to the wolves.

“Strength in brothers,” I whispered.

Stone smiled. “Strength in brothers,” he answered and gave my neck an affectionate squeeze.

We weren’t alone. We never had been. We never would be.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ERIN

Awful. I felt awful.

I felt awful when I saw that my father had been tiredly waiting up for me. I felt awful when I saw that he'd tried to call my phone at least nine times in the last two hours because he'd heard about Stone and Con's Excellent Adventure and wanted to make sure I was okay. I felt awful when I caught his relieved sigh as soon as I was safely inside the house again. It would almost have been better if he'd yelled or grounded me or taken my phone away. But he just told me to put Katie to bed and get some sleep. I knew I wouldn't hear anything more about it from him.

I fell asleep with a sour taste in my mouth that was still around when I opened my eyes in the morning. I used half a bottle of mouthwash and it tasted like sawdust as I swished it around and spat.

My head felt heavy with pressure.

Not real pressure.

The pressure I'd invented during the hours I spent worrying about Con and running around Emblem all evening, desperate for information about what would happen to him.

The pressure of anger towards that arrogant brother of his who acted like the whole ordeal had just been created for his amusement.

The pressure that came from the fact that I was a vital piece of this family puzzle, bound together by mutual loss and limping through the days. I couldn't imagine how they'd survive without me here to mix casseroles and take action when Penny outgrew her gym shoes for the third time this year.

I pressed my fingers to my temples, rubbing, trying to ease the weight within. I knew a more effective way to ease it but Roe's voice reached me as clearly as if she was in the room.

"You can't be all things to all people, Erin."

She's said it with love. She'd said it when I reluctantly showed her the fading scars and explained why they were there. I knew other people did it too. All of them surely had their own reasons and no two reasons were likely to be identical. Roe was trying to let me know that it was okay to climb down when the mountain got too steep. My mountain was steep indeed. If I tried to take another step I'd surely fall.

Erin Rielo: Daughter. Sister. Cook. Maid. Stand-in Mother. Girlfriend.

I slowly rolled up my sleeve and looked at my bare arm, feeling shame, guilt. Roe was right. I was too many things. Somewhere in all those things I'd lost track of myself.

My fist closed and the muscles in my arm flexed. Roe had been begging me to tell my father for a while, even threatening to tell him herself if I didn't stop. But it was an empty threat and we both knew it. I didn't tell him because I couldn't give him another moment of agony. I just couldn't. And this would be agony for him. He would think I was headed down

the same twisted road of forked tongues and sharp thorns that had claimed my mother. Sometimes I was afraid of that too.

The only thing that might be worse than my father knowing would be Conway knowing. All this time he'd thought he knew everything about me. As it turned out, he only knew the parts that I allowed him to know.

Slowly I opened the keyboard tray to my desk. The object I was looking for was all the way in the back. It made a harsh scraping sound as I withdrew it. Holding my breath, I stared at the thing. Such a harmless everyday object, small and utilitarian. I hated the sight of it, but I liked holding it in my hand. I exhaled, feeling a dirty kind of relief as I pushed the sharp edge against my skin. I was used to the war that raged inside of me as the point broke my skin and left a trail of red in its wake. The pain was good and it was terrible.

But the pain was *mine*. I controlled it absolutely. I summoned it to replace the hateful pressure building between my ears. There were names for people who did this. I'd heard them before, just never admitting out loud that they applied to me. I gritted my teeth as the sting of the cut radiated. A sick feeling started bubbling in my gut. This would be the last time. I needed to keep my own promise to make sure it really was the last time....

“Morning, butterfly.”

I gasped at the sound of his voice and frantically shoved something underneath the copy of Anna Karenina that was lying on my desk. I pushed my sleeve down and weakly said a silent prayer to whoever was listening to please please please

work this out in a way that Conway wouldn't realize what I'd been doing.

“What are you doing here so early?” I'd spoken sharply. I hadn't meant to. This was my fault for leaving the window open.

Conway, crouched in the window frame like an over grown Peter Pan, stared at me. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing. Guests don't usually climb through the window at the crack of dawn.”

Something like hurt flashed in his blue eyes. “It's mid morning and I didn't think I was a usual guest, Erin.”

“You're not.” I sank down into my pink rolling desk chair. I felt like a bitch. “I'm sorry. It's just, with my sisters always barging in I get kind of protective about my privacy.”

“Oh,” Con said quietly. He made no move to climb out of the window. He looked down at the peeling laminate floor that my father was always meaning to replace.

“Come in,” I told him.

A vague smile touched his lips. “Don't think your dad would like it.”

“Give me a break. You're halfway inside the room anyway.”

Con shrugged and hopped down to the floor. He sat on the corner edge of my bed and gazed around the room as if he was seeing everything in it for the very first time. He looked tired, unshaven, all together a little off. He was probably still rattled by the hours he'd spent behind bars. Remembering it

conjured fresh feelings of fury toward Stone. Con had denied that yesterday's turn of events was Stone's fault, but I've known those two my entire life. If Conway found trouble it was usually because Stone pushed him into it.

"You okay?" I asked, holding my hand out. He took it. He kissed my palm and gave me the same grin that had been stopping my heart for more years than he knew.

"I'm fine. Stone's snoring kept me awake but even if it hadn't been for that I would have been staring up at the ceiling for hours, wondering what the hell we're going to do next year because our mother let us know we're wearing out our welcome at home."

"She's kicking you out?"

Conway released my hand and rubbed his palms on his jeans, a troubled look on his face. "More or less. She says we're no good and she's tired of dealing with us. On the bright side, we can stay until graduation as long as we keep our noses clean."

My dislike for Con's mother instantly doubled. "That sucks."

He looked at the floor. "Yup."

I wanted to go to him. Hold him. Kiss him. Give him everything it took to put a smile back on his face. But I felt the tickle of a drop of blood traveling down my arm. It stopped me. I glanced down quickly, relieved that my sweatshirt was a dark color and would hide the evidence as long as I didn't take it off. I rubbed my hands together and tried to become cheerful.

“You know,” I said brightly. “If you study hard this summer and take the college entrance exams in September you’ll have a great shot at getting into Arizona State.”

Con threw me a baleful look. “You know it takes more than that. I won’t be able to get my grades up enough to make it in there for next year. And even if I did, Stone would never get in. I can’t just leave him behind.”

“Why not?” I blurted out. Conway looked at me in surprise. I tried to stop the tumble of words but they just kept coming. “Stone would never even try. It’s a joke to him. Everything is. Don’t you see that? He is his own biggest problem and he’s just going to drag down anyone unlucky enough to be in his orbit.”

Con’s face reddened. I wanted to snatch my words back. Whatever misgivings I had about Stone I had no right to dump them all over Con. They were brothers. Their mother was a nasty head case, their father was dead and other than the cousins who’d shown up last night, no other family on the Gentry side had taken the slightest interest in them. They needed each other.

Con waited a full minute before answering. When he finally did his words were slow and tense, filled with undercurrents of emotion. “Stone is *my family*, Erin.”

“I know.” My hands twisted in my lap. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Conway still looked pained. He swallowed. “Stone talks tough but he’s not as bad as you think. He’s really not. He’s got a good heart.”

“Con, I’m really sorry.”

He nodded vaguely, then looked out the window. Coincidentally, Stone was outside, phone to his ear. He looked irritated with whoever was on the other end. He kept shaking his head, then finally gave up on the conversation and tossed the phone onto a cracked plastic patio table.

Con smiled and relaxed. He smacked a hand on his knee. “Let’s go swimming.”

I was startled. “What?”

“Pool is open.” He jumped up and held out his hand. “Come on. Grab your suit. Your sisters can even tag along if they want. Vending machine refreshments will be on me.”

I looked quickly down at my covered arm. The cut had been careless and far too long. I wouldn’t be able to cover it with a band aid. And there was no good explanation for a deliberate red line that ran from my elbow halfway to my wrist.

“We don’t have a ride,” I argued, feeling cowardly.

Con shrugged. “We’ll walk. It’s early, won’t be that hot yet. With shortcuts through the citrus groves we can make it to Main Street in twenty minutes.”

I folded my hands in my lap. “No, I can’t right now. But you go ahead. I’ll see you later.”

Conway wouldn’t accept that. “Come on, babe. Let’s go, it’ll be fun. You can admire my graceful diving.”

“They took the diving board out, remember? Really Con, I can’t.”

Con was quiet. When I looked at his face he seemed embarrassed. “Oh,” he said softly. “Sorry. I didn’t realize it was that time of the month.”

“I don’t have my goddamn period,” I snapped. “I just don’t want to fucking go swimming.”

He blinked. “Okay. Fine.”

“I don’t mind if you go.”

“Good. Because I’d like to think I still have some personal freedom to choose where the fuck I will and will not go.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

Con exhaled noisily and rubbed the back of his neck. “Look,” he said, moving over to the window. “We’re both in shitty moods right now so why don’t we catch up later?”

“Maybe,” I said darkly. “You go have fun at the pool.”

“I will. And you have fun sitting in your room by your lonely self.”

He jumped out of the window without another word and headed toward Stone, who was pacing moodily in the yard. He said something to his brother and Stone shook his head before lighting a cigarette. Conway seemed annoyed by their conversation and stalked through the Gentrys’ front yard, kicking the rocks as he went.

When he was out of sight I realized I couldn’t remember the last time we’d fought.

Or the last time he’d walked away without kissing me goodbye.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONWAY

There wasn't much in life I hated as much as I hated arguing with Erin. We didn't fight often. She wasn't like the other girls at school, always finding a reason to wallow in stupid drama games that no one could win.

I'd startled her when I came through the window. I could tell that right away. She shoved something into her desk drawer before turning on me all wide-eyed and guilty. No guy had a right to know everything about his girlfriend, but I wasn't used to feeling like Erin might be hiding something from me. Even though I had shrugged it off right away, now that I was walking alone through the dusty streets of Emblem it bothered me. Maybe whatever she'd shoved into that drawer had something to do with why she was so irritable.

Or, maybe after having a night to sleep on it, she'd talked herself into being angry at me for yesterday. I had to admit I felt guilty for what I must have put her through. If she was sore about wandering around Emblem for hours, worrying over my fate, then she had every right. But then when we found each other in the parking lot of Dino Gas everything seemed all right. Erin had run to me full of kisses and love and relief. The only sore point was that she refused to believe that the whole mess had been my fault and not Stone's.

Stone had been equally cranky this morning. He was that way even before Courtney, his non-girlfriend, called and lit into him for not paying enough attention to her, which was

kind of an eye-rolling complaint all around. After all, she already knew what kind of a jerk Stone was when it came to girls so I don't know what she was expecting when they hooked up. I'd never seen Stone go nuts over a girl, never afflicted with the kind of heart-singing passion that got a guy's pulse racing and his mind fuzzy. He'd never felt the way about anyone that I felt about Erin. I really hoped someday he would.

I couldn't help but grin to myself over the thought of Stone getting knocked over by a grand old-fashioned case of love sickness. It would take some kind of exceptional girl to manage him but with all the billions of females in the world there had to be at least one who could manage the job.

When I set out for the pool I'd been in a crappy mood and I'd planned badly. No water, no towel, no swimming trunks. Just me stomping through the streets of Emblem in my flip-flops and getting thirsty. I could get away with the gym shorts as a swimsuit and in this dry heat towels weren't a necessity. But it would be nice to have a way to clear the dust out of my throat. Around here kids got used to toting around their own water bottles by the time they hit kindergarten.

Reaching into my pocket, I was pleased to discover three rolled up singles. It would be enough to let me duck into Dino Gas and grab a couple of waters before heading to the pool.

Main Street loomed just ahead. Lately I'd been looking at it with more cynical eyes. I'd grown up thinking that the center of Emblem was quaint and homey and familiar as the back of my hand. Now it just looked demoralized. Shabby. Here was the rickety Dirty Cactus where the local bikers

strutted their badass selves before peeling out in a blur of noise and leather. Over there was the squat structure of Earnshaw's Drugstore where there was always a bowl of stale lollipops on the back counter. Carson's Garage was beyond my line of sight all the way at the north end but I figured it looked how it always looked, greasy and run-down. Other than a smattering of eateries, a hardware store, and a beauty shop, plus the police station and jail, there wasn't much that would make visitors take a second look. Besides being home to the state's largest prison, Emblem's only claim to fame was a brief status as the territorial capitol sometime between the Civil War and the decade when people started driving cars around. In honor of the town's semi-historic past, a shuttered bank had been repurposed into a pathetic museum that showcased curled newspapers behind dingy Plexiglas. It was always manned by curator Mrs. Albomerit, who was roughly two hundred years old and smelled like that chemical shit my mom poured on her head whenever she treated herself to a home perm.

That was about all there was to Emblem. Yet, for all its shortcomings it was still home. The idea of moving up to the more exciting scenery of college town Tempe had its appeal. But no matter where I went or what happened Emblem would always be in the back of my mind.

Ebbie Crack was behind the register in Dino Mart. That was her real name. Once I asked her if she was ever going to change it and she'd stared at me all puzzled and bewildered as if I'd started serenading her in Russian. She was somewhere in her mid twenties and was probably born to be an Emblem lifer, not that there was a thing wrong with that. Emblem was

full of more good people than shit people, even if it was easy to forget sometimes.

I nodded a greeting as I set the water bottles on the counter and handed over my money.

“You know the Gentry triplets?” she asked as she painfully counted out my change, all in nickels. “Saw you hanging around with them last night.”

“Sure,” I smiled proudly. “They’re my cousins.”

Ebbie frowned. She dropped the nickels into my palm. They felt sticky. “Thought they were fucking kings in high school,” she muttered as her lazy eye roamed the potato chip display.

“Oh,” I said. It was a rather useless syllable but there was really nowhere else to go from there. I started to pocket the nickels, then changed my mind and dropped them into one of those plastic collection boxes that promise to cure childhood diseases. Then I grabbed my water bottles and left as Ebbie Crack stared in several directions at once and flared her nostrils.

Once I was outside I downed a bottle of water in about six seconds. A pair of girls, babyish freshman types, passed me and tittered.

“Hi, Conway,” one of them giggled.

“Hi,” I answered. I was pretty sure I’d never noticed either of them in my life.

The Emblem pool was right next to the high school, which was one of the few good looking buildings in Emblem. It was all brick with white trim, an architecture utterly mismatched to

the southwestern stucco and adobe of the rest of the town. I could get to the pool in five minutes by crossing to the other side of Main Street right here and cutting through the back parking lots. But in order to do that I'd have to pass by Earnshaw's Drugstore, where my mother worked. It wasn't like I thought she'd come running out to screech at me on the street, but the idea that she would be glaring at me from somewhere within as I passed the wall of glass windows was just too much to take. Instead I stayed on this side of Main Street and waited to cross at the single traffic light.

There's nothing worse than what you come from.

My fists clenched. I wished there was a way to safely remove certain moments from your memory. That one would haunt me, of that I had no doubt. Still, it was the closest Tracy Gentry had ever come to admitting out loud that the question of my paternity, and Stone's, was up for grabs. I wondered if my cousins had ever heard the rumors that we might be more than cousins. Maybe one day I would get around to asking them about it.

The pool was crowded already. Somewhere along the way I'd kind of lost my enthusiasm for swimming. Plus now that my head was cooler I regretted snapping at Erin. She'd apologized for her comments about Stone and when Erin said she was sorry she meant it. I shouldn't have gotten all irritated that she didn't want to tag along to the pool today. The girl had a right to keep some time to herself without explaining it to me.

Anyway, at this point I didn't much feel like hanging out with the belly floppers and the doggie paddlers and the sun

bathing attention seekers, but hell, I'd walked all the way down here. And it was hot. Might as well take a dip and cool off.

I quickly shed my shirt and shoes and dove into the deep end, shooting like a torpedo beneath kicking legs and flailing arms as I traveled near the floor of the pool. By the time I reached the concrete wall on the other side my lungs were bursting so I moved to a shallow area to catch my breath. I relaxed and closed my eyes. I liked being here. The pool was in need of a lot of expensive repairs but I felt happy here. This was almost the exact spot I'd been hanging out in two years ago when the girl next door strode casually into the water and got my attention. She'd kept it ever since.

Thinking of Erin and about the pool led to thoughts of Erin *in* the pool. That led to thoughts of Erin in a bikini. Which led to thoughts of Erin *without* a bikini. Which of course led straight to a stiff boner.

I flattened my back against the concrete wall of the pool and crouched in the water, trying to tame my own mind and body. Some little kid in green goggles and a duck-shaped donut float paddled by and I felt like a high-ranking pervert, cowering in the Emblem public pool with my dick at full salute.

I managed to shove away thoughts of my naked girlfriend. It wasn't hard, mostly because I'd never actually seen her naked. Erin was shy. To me, it was part of her charm. In fact I couldn't even remember the last time I'd seen her in a bikini. Generally if she came swimming she kept her t-shirt on, complaining that the sun was too strong.

I had just managed to tamp down the fire in my shorts and was hanging out there minding my own business when Kasey Kean sidled up to me.

“Hi, Con-man,” she said with a head tilt and a brilliant smile that she probably practiced in front of a mirror at least four hundred times a day.

“Hey, Kase,” I said, friendly but not overly enthusiastic, careful to keep my eyes away from the bobbing boobs that were barely contained by her American flag string bikini top. I’d known Kasey since kindergarten. She was okay but since I’d also hooked up with her in a major way before I got together with Erin I made a habit of keeping my distance from her.

Kasey, on the other hand, seemed determined to close that distance. Right now.

“Erin not here today?” she asked with fake honeyed sweetness as she glanced around and floated to my side.

“Nope,” I shook my head, staring at the water, at my own feet, anywhere but at the display of supple, suntanned skin that was only inches away. “Not today.”

“You guys have a fight?”

Goddamn, girls were fucking supernatural sometimes. I felt myself flinch at the question. No, Erin and I hadn’t fought. Not exactly. But I didn’t like how we’d left things. We weren’t one of *those* couples, the ones who barked at each other and sulked and endured epic break up soap operas. We weren’t one of them because what we had was better than what the rest of them had.

“No fight,” I said, keeping my voice even. “She was tired and I had some time to kill.”

I could feel Kasey nodding. “That’s good.” She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. “God, it’s so hot.”

“It’s Arizona. In the summer.”

“Yeah.” Kasey started doing something with her top. She was fussing with the straps and had gotten close enough that her arm brushed mine as she examined herself.

“I hate tan lines,” she pouted as she pulled the strap over her left breast away and left it barely (BARELY!) covered.

I tried not to look. I tried.

Fuck.

Failure.

I looked. And just like that there was a party in my shorts once more.

“I hate them too,” I said even though tan lines were one of the last things I gave a shit about, right down there in the bowels of my concern list with stuff like knitting. And cat memes.

Kasey smiled at me, all dimples and sex. Mostly I wanted to jump right out of that pool and run like hell away from the hot girl. But from somewhere deep and primal another part of me ordered me to stay where I was.

That part *liked* looking at the hot girl with all the nice skin.

It *liked* the dirty ideas that Kasey’s smile promised.

It *liked* the hand that was touching my-

Wait a fucking minute.

There was a hand on my dick.

There was a hand on my dick that didn't belong to me.

The hand on my dick certainly didn't belong to my girlfriend either, the girlfriend I loved and who wouldn't appreciate someone else's hand doing what it was currently doing.

"Remember this?" Kasey purred.

"I gotta go," I said, shoving away the hand with a splash and hauling myself up and out of the pool. I didn't look back, grabbing my pile of shirt and shoes on the way out. I didn't even pause to put my flip-flops on until I stepped on a sharp rock in the parking lot and cursed in pain.

"Nice going, asshole," I said to myself and it could have applied to anything I'd done in the last twenty-four hours. A nearby old lady who was power walking down the sidewalk in purple active wear gave me a stern look.

There's nothing worse than what you come from.

As I pulled my cotton t-shirt over my head I had a bad taste in my mouth. For the rest of my life I would remember those words. I would remember that my own mother had said them and meant them.

I needed to go home. Now. I didn't mean home to my mother's house, where it was clear I was only grudgingly welcome at this point. But Erin was home to me. Stone was home to me. I needed to be where they were.

In the thickest heat of a summer afternoon in these parts it's possible to fry an egg on the ground. It's also possible for the rubber soles of thin shoes to melt. I didn't hang around in one spot long enough to test out if this was that kind of day. I hurried past the streets and landmarks at full speed.

Maybe I could still salvage something out of the day before I had to be at work at Carson's Garage. I was sure I could at least get Stone interested in digging up some spare change and getting lunch somewhere. If I went to Erin with my arms out I knew we could get past our earlier argument. And one of these days the two of them would learn to stop rolling their eyes every time the name of the other came up and put aside their differences. They'd do it for my sake. Now that it was on my mind, the idea of spending a few peaceful hours in the company of the two people I loved best made me feel more cheerful.

It even made me sort of forget about the Mystery of Kasey Kean and the Groping Hand.

When I banged on my front door Stone didn't come out to answer. I'd forgotten to bring a key earlier but the spare had been returned to its rightful place beneath the flat rock in the front yard. The house smelled of cigarettes so Stone must have been lighting up a few earlier as an act of defiance.

As for Stone himself, there was no sign of him. I reached for my phone to text him but then remembered something. As I was being fingerprinted at the Emblem police station last night I had realized my phone was not in my pocket. Instead, it had almost certainly had gone to a watery grave with the Gnome's Cadillac. So far I'd managed to avoid mentioning

that to my mother. Anyway, all it meant was that I was phone free for the foreseeable future.

Since I didn't have any idea when Stone would return I didn't see any point in hanging around an empty house. I was smiling on my way out the door. Erin would be glad to see me. I was sure of that, even though we'd ended on tense terms this morning.

As I jogged through her front yard I paused over a sound. It was laughter, high and sweet. It was Erin's laugh, although I knew from years of practice that it took a lot to get her to laugh like that, with such joyful abandon. It never stopped me from trying though.

I felt a stab of irrational jealousy that someone, somehow, had made her laugh like that today when earlier she'd seemed like the last thing she was about to do was laugh. Probably one of her sisters had done something funny. I was ready to laugh along with whatever the joke was by the time I reached the side door that opened right into the Rielos' kitchen. I opened it without knocking because it was exactly what I'd done countless other times.

The sun's brilliance contrasted with the dull green color of Erin's kitchen and my eyes couldn't adjust right away. I blinked. Several times. I saw them.

My girlfriend and my brother - two people who mostly didn't even bother to fake politeness to each other - were sitting at the kitchen table, laughing at some private joke like they were brand new BFF's.

They stopped laughing when I walked in. Just like that. As if someone had flipped a switch.

“Hey,” I said, casually leaning against the counter like it was totally natural to find the two of them gossiping over glasses of lemonade. I felt their eyes on me.

There are certain snaps of time that seem much longer than they are. One of them happened yesterday, during a slow eternity when I lost control of a stolen car.

This was another one.

It was probably only a split second that passed as the three of us looked at each other, as I noticed how Erin’s smile fell from her face as soon as she saw me, how for the first time ever it seemed like they were a team and I was the outsider. I didn’t like any of it. I didn’t like it at all.

“Hey,” my brother finally answered. He tipped his half empty glass of lemonade in my direction. He kept his eyes on me as he gulped it down.

CHAPTER NINE

ERIN

Two things I really didn't like were walking and heat.

Yet because my head was all cluttered from the fight with Conway (and because I was a little afraid of what I would do if I just sat in my bedroom alone) I decided to go for a walk in this wretched, skin-searing heat.

I had a break from summer babysitting for the next few weeks because my dad had signed Penny and Katie up for some day camp thing that was going on at the library. The camp had been organized by my English teacher, Mrs. Consuelo, and she'd tried to get me to sign on as a counselor. Even though I could have used the money I turned her down because I wanted some relief from looking after other people more than I wanted extra cash. But now that the empty hours stretched ahead I wished I had a way to fill them. Roe was busy packing for the Caribbean cruise her father and stepmother were dragging her to. She'd sent me a picture of the tiny crystal prism I'd given her, which had already been hung carefully in her bedroom window. It made me smile.

Beyond the cinder block fences of my street was a narrow alley and beyond that was a wide wash filled with rocks and sand and the debris of the desert. During the summer storms the wash often overflowed and all the local backyards would be miniature lakes for a day or two. I was glad I'd thought to wear sturdy tennis shoes because the ground was rough and the threat of scorpions always loomed.

Just as I made my way beyond the alley, a startled quail family ran for cover on the other side of the wash. I watched them, a panicked line of birds that quickly disappeared into a greasewood bush. Then there was silence. I knew that despite the barren look of the desert there was life everywhere; lizards and birds and tiny pinch-faced rodents who made their homes underground. I'd learned their names and their habits from my mother.

I walked west along the dry bank of the wash. It stretched for miles. If I walked for long enough I would eventually find myself in the next county. When I was little my dad used to caution me against strolling close to the wash. Even now he wouldn't be thrilled that I was wandering around beside it.

"Bad people hang around out there," he would always warn. "Drug dealers, perverts, men just looking for a quiet place to commit violence. Not to mention how thick the rattlesnake population becomes the farther you go from the road. Stay away."

I kept a wary eye out for perverts and drug dealers. I figured if I saw one I would sprint back toward home. I was a fast runner when I wanted to be.

But the strong arms that grabbed me out of nowhere did not give me time to do anything. My upper body was pinned from behind by an iron grip and I was too shocked to even cry out. In that instant every terrible story I'd ever heard that featured a careless young girl galloped through my mind.

Stranger. Danger. STRANGER. DANGER.

I opened my mouth to scream and only yelped like a kitten.

“Erin! It’s me. It’s Stone.”

“Stone!” Relief flooded through me. Then annoyance.
“Let me go for god’s sake.”

“Okay, but don’t take one step. There’s a monster diamondback hanging out just underneath that mesquite tree.”

Stone eased his hold on me and took my right elbow, very slowly leading me backward. I squinted at the sprawling mesquite that was a mere fifteen feet away. Sure enough, coiled at the shady base like a conquering king, was the longest, thickest rattlesnake I’d ever seen. I gulped, unable to take my eyes off of it. The snake lifted its head and moved it from side to side, flicking a tongue out briefly.

“Easy,” Stone whispered, continuing to lead me backward. I stumbled over his foot and he circled an arm around my waist, steadying me.

“You can let go now,” I said when we were safely out of range and the rattler had relaxed once more.

Stone took his hands away. “You should be more careful,” he scolded, glaring. “Don’t you know where we live, Erin?”

“Well, you didn’t have to grab me. You could have just acted like a normal person and said something like, ‘Hey, look out!’”

He sighed. “You would have ignored me.”

“I would not.”

“You would if you’d seen it was me. Then you would have kept right on stomping through the brush without a care

because somehow you never learned that it's not a good idea to parade through rattlesnake territory like you own it."

I tossed my hair and crossed my arms. "I'd appreciate it if you'd stop mansplaining to me like I'm five."

Stone crossed his arms, mimicking my posture. "Then stop acting like you're five." He looked me up and down, frowning over what he saw. "Why the hell are you all bundled up in a black sweatshirt when it's over a hundred degrees out?"

"I thought it might snow," I grumbled. "Anyway, look at you. You're running around out here half naked. Who do you think you are? Some kind of Sonoran desert version of Tarzan?"

Stone glanced down at his bare chest and cutoff shorts. "You've really got to get out of the habit of checking me out."

"I'm not!"

Stone smiled. I wanted to slap him. My fists clenched at my sides, fingernails digging into my palms so hard it hurt.

Stone casually ran a hand through his hair. Like his brother, his dark sandy hair turned lighter in the summertime. "Erin, can't you just say 'Thank you'?" Like 'Gosh, thank you Stone for saving my life.'"

My fists unclenched. I was being childish.

"I would have been fine," I informed him coolly.

"Really?" Stone raised his eyebrows and zeroed in with a penetrating stare. "I'm not sure you're ever fine, kid."

That comment, casually tossed out of his mouth like it was nothing, knocked the wind out of me. Stone Gentry had just accidentally summed me up in one thoughtless sentence. I wasn't someone who walked around with an arsenal of witty comebacks ready to use. I had no answer for him. So I put my head down and started to walk back in the direction I'd come from.

“Erin.”

I could hear him, right behind me, his stride much longer than mine. I quickened my pace.

“Erin, come on.”

He caught my elbow but I wrenched out of his grip and started to climb up the embankment. I'd chosen badly; it was a particularly steep spot. A layer of parched sand gave way beneath my weight and the rubber soles of my sneakers were not enough to keep me from slipping. My left knee scraped against jagged rock and I probably would have toppled the last several feet and landed in a messy heap of humiliation if Stone didn't have quick reflexes. He caught me around the waist and helped me down gently, backing off when I scrambled away, brushing the dust off my clothes.

“You okay?” he asked and for once his voice wasn't dripping with mocking arrogance. For some reason this sent me to the verge of tears. If Stone Gentry was going to change direction and be all sincere and nice I just couldn't handle that right now. I took several deep breaths and noted that my scraped knee was bleeding slightly. Just a trickle. Barely more than nothing. But the sight of the blood went straight to

my stomach. I bent over and promptly dry heaved into a bed of smooth river rock.

Stone was at my side instantly, pushing a bottle of water in my face. “Drink it,” he ordered.

My first instinct was to argue but in the last few minutes my instincts had not proved particularly helpful. I drank. The water was warm and tasted vaguely of tobacco.

“Thanks,” I said weakly, handing the bottle over. “I didn’t eat breakfast.”

“Just as well,” Stone said, rather good-naturedly. “You would have made a much bigger mess if you had.”

“True.” My hair was sticking to my neck. Impatiently I twisted it into a long black rope and piled it atop my head, securing the knot with an elastic band I’d absently left around my wrist. I’d been meaning to get it cut; the length was a nuisance. Conway loved my long hair though. He loved to comb it through his fingers and gather it into his fists when he gently pulled me toward him for a kiss.

Stone had left my side, either bored with dealing me or at a loss for more conversation. He stood apart, staring at a distant horizon ringed by mountains that were much farther away than they seemed.

“Thanks,” I called to him.

He didn’t turn around. “You said that already.”

“I thanked you for the water. But you were right. I should have thanked you for looking out for me when I was about to get an ankle full of snake fang.”

“Well, I have my faults, but generally I don’t enjoy watching young girls get eaten by snakes.”

I kicked a rock. “Aren’t you tired of this, Stone?”

He turned around then, eyeballing me warily. “Tired of what?”

“This back and forth, an incessant tug of war over the one thing we have in common.”

Stone said nothing. He seemed to be waiting for me to continue. So I took a deep breath and did exactly that.

“He loves both of us and we both love him. That should be enough to get us to figure out how to get along. You don’t have to like me. I’m not sure I like much about you either. But it’s not fair. It’s not fair to Conway to keep forcing him to defend one of us to the other.” My hair had come loose from its knot. I shook it out with irritation and then pushed it behind my ears. “Look, Conway told me last night wasn’t your fault with the car-“

“It *was* my fault,” he interrupted with a devilish grin. “Of course it was my fault. You know what I’m like, Erin. Everyone knows.”

I shook my head, feeling suddenly weary and rather miserable. “No. Actually I hardly know you at all.” This conversation had veered off into an uncomfortable place. I braced myself for a volley of Stone Gentry’s trademark sarcasm.

Instead, as his eyes searched my face, something softened in him. He looked down and nodded.

“You’re right,” he said quietly.

“Oh.” I almost fell over from shock. I really hadn’t expected mature agreement. “Really?”

“Really.” He broke into a grin. It had a sheepish quality. “I can be a dick. I know that. But you make Con happy and I’m happy he has you.”

“Oh,” I said and swallowed hard, lowering my head. A tiny gecko scurried across the rocks and then disappeared into a dusty crevice.

“Erin?” Stone prompted.

“Do I?” I asked, snapping my head up and looking him in the eye.

Stone was confused. “Do you what?”

“Do I make Con happy?”

He gave me a funny look. Then he shifted position and stared out into the distance again. “That’s a bullshit question. You know you make him happy.”

I did. Mostly I did. It wasn’t hard to recall the countless times Conway Gentry had looked at me with tender love in his eyes. Girls threw themselves at him all the time and he never gave them the time of day. If Con was tired of me he wouldn’t have stuck around for two years. I should know all this without being told. But it still meant the world to hear it from the guy who wouldn’t blow sunshine up my ass to spare my feelings. Not when it came to his brother. Stone, for all his flaws, cared about Conway very much.

“I do know,” I said and smiled. Stone relaxed and smiled back.

“Well,” I said, clasping my hands together, “in the spirit of this new semi-friendship, can I offer you a glass of fresh homemade lemonade? It should be cold by now.”

Stone considered. “You made it yourself?”

“Yup. Measured the mix and everything.”

He laughed. “Well then, you’ve got a taker. I’m a sucker for over sweetened beverages.”

We walked slowly, almost leisurely, back to my house. Now that Stone had let his cocky façade slide a bit he opened up a little. Mostly he talked about Conway and all the trouble they got into when they were kids. Many of those incidents I knew about, some of them I didn’t. It had always seemed like the earliest sounds of my childhood included Tracy Gentry screaming their names at the top of her lungs as she hunted the neighborhood to make them answer for something or other they had done.

A half forgotten memory suddenly bubbled to the surface and I nudged Stone. “Remember when my mother found you guys hiding in our pantry? You couldn’t have been more than four or five. She opened up the door to grab some cake mix and you both popped out, howling like wolves. She screamed, fell over backward into a kitchen chair, and laughed until she could hardly breathe.”

“I remember that,” Stone chuckled. “Our hands were all filthy because we’d attacked our parents’ new Egyptian silk sheets with magic marker and we were hiding because we knew there’d be hell to pay. Your mom was always cool whenever we showed up, although that time she did make us dunk our hands in a sink of soapy water to get all the ink off.

Then she sat us down at the table with you and gave us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Finally our dad came by to haul us back home.”

At the end his voice kind of fell away and he sighed. A strange shiver rolled up my spine and we walked for a moment in silence, the mood turned grim over the mention of lost parents.

“You look like her,” Stone finally said. “Your mom.”

“I know.”

No one needed to tell me that. I had pictures. I had memories.

“I don’t talk about her much,” I said slowly. “My dad certainly isn’t up for daily trips down memory lane. I can’t blame him. And I never know what to say to my sisters to make it all not as bad as it really is.”

Stone was silent for a minute and then exhaled loudly. “A shitty deal for all of you. I mean, with her accident and all,” he added quickly.

An accident. That was what everyone called it, at least to my face. I was tired of pretending. “It wasn’t an accident, Stone. You know that.”

He didn’t argue with me. I had to give him credit for that. By this time we’d climbed beyond the wash and had nearly reached my house. It should have felt strange, having Stone by my side as I unlocked the side door. And for a moment I did suffer a twinge of shyness. But then as I poured the lemonade Stone started talking about Conway and boasting

with pride about how good his brother was when it came to fixing cars.

“He’s good at everything,” Stone bragged. “Smartest guy I know.”

The teachers at Emblem High had long ago thrown in the towel where the Gentry boys were concerned. Their mother certainly never offered much in the way of encouragement. Conway usually shrugged it off whenever I told him he could do much better. Maybe he didn’t believe me because no one else in his life understood how wonderful he was. But now, listening to Stone, I had to admit it was a warm relief to hear someone else appreciate Con’s potential.

When the rusty hinges of the screen door howled open I figured it was Penny, escaping from day camp like she’d been threatening to do every day. I was in the middle of a laugh and had managed to snort lemonade through my nose when Con appeared. From the look on his face, it seemed he would have been less surprised to walk into my kitchen and discover a pair of basset hounds making pancakes.

“Hey,” he said, looking at me and then at Stone and then back at me. The guilt that pricked at my conscience was illogical. There was absolutely nothing to feel guilty about. Maybe I was just feeling out of sorts because of that rare argument this morning right before Con stormed off. But he was here now so everything must be all right. Yet somehow I couldn’t make my mouth cooperate with words.

“Hey.” Stone waved at his brother casually.

I’d seen Conway Gentry every day ever since I could remember. We’d been in a relationship for two years and I’d

loved him far longer than that. I could translate his moods more easily than I understood my own. But as he walked into my kitchen and we coolly locked eyes there was nothing familiar about his flat expression. His thoughts, his feelings, were suddenly all beyond my reach.

He was, for once, a mystery.

CHAPTER TEN

CONWAY

“Where the hell did you get all that?” I asked Stone when I emerged from the shower and found him counting a pile of green bills and loose change on his bed.

“Robbed a bank,” he said, not pausing in his counting.

“Banks don’t deal in dimes.”

“Robbed an ice cream truck.”

“You mean the one that parks over by the high school and does equal business in bubble gum and crystal meth?”

Stone grinned. “That’s the one.”

I dropped my wet towel in favor of boxers. “Really, what’s going on? You turned your nose up at Carson again when he offered you a job at the garage.”

“Janitor,” Stone snorted. “Washing out garbage cans and scrubbing the staff toilet. And he only made the gesture because you kept pestering him.” Stone abandoned his counting and swept all the money into a large mason jar. “Professional gambling is more lucrative.”

“No way did you score all that from Saturday’s poker game.”

“Indeed.” Stone shook the jar and held it up to the light. “Looks impressive, huh? Actually there’s only about fifty

bucks here. Most of those guys had more tissues in their pockets than cash.”

Caleb Marist, who graduated last year and happened to be a distant cousin on our mother’s side, hosted the game in the paneled, shag carpet living room of the house he still occupied with his grandmother. It might have been better if I’d just stayed for the game instead of taking off with Erin because we ended up having one of those ‘Why are you mad? I’m not mad, why are you mad?’ pointless fights that most couples typically suffer through at least once a week.

Finally, Erin complained of a headache and said she just wanted to go home so I walked her to her front door and then took a solitary night hike along the wash. That turned out to be a bad idea because my bladder was full. I’d just started to piss on the rocks when a light shined in my face and a man’s voice shouted at me in Spanish. Since I didn’t want to know what it was I’d stumbled into, I took off running and managed to leak piss all over my underwear. Things got even better when my dick got caught in a zipper as I tried, en route, to shove everything back where it was supposed to go. Like I said, I should have just stayed at the poker game.

“What are you up to tonight?” Stone asked as he searched through his side of the closet. Funny thing about Stone; he took excellent care of his clothes. He hated when I borrowed his stuff, complaining that I always looked like I’d fished something out of the bottom of the hamper no matter what I wore.

“Taking Erin out to eat at the diner and then whatever. I don’t know. She’s been in kind of a funky mood lately.

Maybe we'll find something to watch with her Netflix subscription." I threw a pillow. "You even listening?"

"Sorry." Stone yawned and then started buttoning a short sleeve blue shirt. "I nodded off during that rousing description of your wild evening."

"Fuck you. That shirt makes you look like you work in an electronics store."

Stone smoothed his hair and winked at his reflection in a small mirror that hung over the dresser. "Eat your heart out, baby brother."

I didn't laugh. I didn't toss back some witty insult. Vaguely I heard Stone's voice calling me and realized I'd started staring out the window in one of those waking trances.

"What's with you?" he asked. "You've been all spacey and shit for the last week. Gaps said not to worry about the charges. We'll end up with community service or something."

"Yeah, about that. You need to back me up when I tell them that you lied about driving the car."

Stone smirked. "Can't do that. "

"Why the hell not? It's the truth."

"Don't matter. Fuck with my rep."

"This isn't a movie, you jerk. I'm not letting you take the blame for something I did."

"I could give a shit about the blame. I'm just interested in the reward."

I couldn't imagine what he was talking about. "What reward?"

"Kasey Kean is practically panting for a reason to strip and spread."

"What about Courtney?"

"Who?"

"Never mind," I grumbled. I hadn't said anything to Stone about my poolside molestation at the hands of Kasey Kean. Usually I wouldn't have hesitated to share a story like that but Stone would have guessed at the guilty truth, that a part of me had wanted to stay there and let her keep stroking whatever she wanted to stroke. No way in fuck was I going to risk having Erin find that out so it was better not to admit it out loud, not even to my brother.

Stone was watching me curiously. "What's wrong with you now?"

"When you and Erin hung out last week--"

"I already told you we weren't exactly hanging out. I saved her from a rattlesnake and she gave me lemonade and we talked about you the whole time."

"Fine, whatever. What did she say about me?"

"Huh? I don't remember. A bunch of googly-eyed girly things."

"You guys seemed like you were having a pretty deep talk."

"I was nice to her and she was nice back." He gave me a hard look. "You think I'd cross over into your territory or

something?”

“No.” I shook my head “I don’t think that. It’s just that we’ve been kind of clashing lately and I was just wondering if she’d told you anything I needed to hear.”

Stone didn’t blink. He was in a rare serious mood. “Conway, if your girlfriend had said even the smallest thing I thought you needed to know, I wouldn’t hesitate to repeat it.”

“I know.” It was a stupid thought.

“I’m your brother for fuck’s sake.”

“I know.”

“Blood before bitches.”

“Erin’s not a bitch.”

“She’s not,” Stone agreed. Then he turned back to lavish some more awe on his own reflection. “Look Con, it’ll be all right. Girls get moody and Erin’s no exception but you guys will turn it around.”

I watched my brother watching himself. “You’re right.”

“Always am.”

“Can I borrow your black polo?”

“Fuck no.”

The only clean shirt I could find had the Carson’s Garage logo on it. Erin didn’t seem to mind. She smiled and leaned in for a kiss when I picked her up. As I stepped back from her lips I noticed a middle-aged, chubby guy glaring at me from an overstuffed armchair.

“Hi, Mr. Rielo.” I waved energetically. He looked at me like I was sidewalk gum. He’d been doing that a lot lately.

“Hi, Con,” he finally muttered. His voice turned much more gentle when he addressed his daughter. “Not too late, Erin.”

“I’ll be home by ten, Dad. I promise.”

Emblem wasn’t a exactly a hotbed of choice eateries but the diner in the middle of town wasn’t bad. Erin looked cute in a denim skirt and a pink long-sleeved cardigan over a matching tank top. We held hands on the walk and she started talking about the college application essay she was struggling with.

“How come you’re worrying about that now?” I asked. “You won’t be applying anywhere for months.”

She gave me an arch look. “Doesn’t hurt to be prepared, Con. You can’t always live for the day and refuse to think about tomorrow.”

I rolled my eyes. I didn’t mean to. I just didn’t understand why she had to take every comment so damn seriously. “You also can’t live *only* for tomorrow because it might not ever come.”

She dropped my hand and stopped walking, staring at me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Crap, I didn’t want to start anything. I just wanted to take my girlfriend out for a decent dinner and hopefully fool around for a while later on.

“Nothing,” I said. “It’s just not healthy to obsess about whatever might happen in the future. Not everything can be controlled.”

She bristled. “So why even try, right?” Her voice was rising with every word and her fists were clenched. “Just blissfully disregard everyone else and do whatever you want. Why not? What do you care who gets clobbered by your selfishness?”

I was getting annoyed but couldn't help feeling like I was missing something vital. “Erin, what the hell are you talking about? Is this about the accident last week? Yeah, I did a shitty, stupid, selfish thing. I regret it. But I'm kind of shaking my head over the idea that *you* were so terribly hurt.”

She exhaled. She chewed her thumbnail and looked away. “Never mind,” she finally said. “I'm sorry. I wasn't talking about you anyway.”

“Oh. Who were you talking about?”

“Never mind that either.” She took my hand again. “Let's just have a nice night.”

A brittle politeness ensued. It followed us throughout dinner. Every moment was more awkward than the last. We weren't fighting, not exactly. It was kind of like being on a first date with someone you weren't yet sure you liked. As soon as the thought occurred to me I rejected it guiltily. This wasn't some random girl. This was Erin. My Erin. We'd known each other since we were toddlers. We were in love.

She picked at her food. She smiled whenever I made a small joke although I could tell the difference between a true Erin smile and a pretend Erin smile. It wasn't all her fault. I couldn't relax. Everything that came out of my mouth felt forced. It was just an off night all around.

We held hands on the walk home through the soft twilight and didn't talk much. The temperature still hovered around a hundred degrees even though the sun was on its way down. I remember reading once about Emblem's early residents and how they would set their beds outside along Main Street during the summer nights when it was just too damn hot to sleep indoors. They would wrap themselves in wet sheets, wave good night to their neighbors and try to get comfortable for at least a few hours until the sunrise made it impossible.

I was still thinking about this when Erin squeezed my hand and rested her cheek on my shoulder. I stopped walking, took her soft face in my hands and kissed her deeply. She melted against me, slipping her arms around my shoulders and letting my tongue slide into her mouth. I knew exactly how she liked to be kissed. Soft and tender to start, teasing the passion to a crescendo. She starting kissing more hungrily and I heard the moan in the back of my throat as I pulled her against me, wanting her, needing her.

HONK!

HONKHONKHONKHONK!!

Asshole Stone and his asshole date were paused at the corner stop sign and leaning on the horn so much it sounded like an air raid. Stone was driving a beat up black Civic that I assumed belong to Kasey Kean, who giggled in the seat beside him.

My brother leaned out the window and waved. "Sorry about that. Carry on, kids."

Then he slammed on the accelerator and burned rubber toward Main Street, daring Emblem's law enforcement to

notice.

“Stone’s with Kasey now?” Erin asked with a frown.

“Uh, yeah. I guess.” I still felt a little off balance catching a glimpse of Kasey. Maybe I should have told Erin what happened at the pool last week, but if I said anything now she would wonder why I hadn’t said anything in the first place.

“What about Courtney?”

“Stone isn’t known for monogamy.”

Erin sighed. “I know.”

Even after they’d sped out of sight the intimate moment was hopelessly broken. We went back to holding hands and being quiet until we reached Erin’s door.

“You know,” I said. “It’s not quite eight o’clock. I think my mom’s working late at the pharmacy and I doubt Stone will show up anytime soon. You could come over for a while.”

Erin glanced over at my house. She seemed to be thinking about it but then suddenly shook her head. “Thanks, but I’m not feeling so hot so I think I’m just going to go to bed.”

I raised a suggestive eyebrow. “You could lie down in my bed for a little while. I’ll just sit on the other side of the room and watch you sleep, kind of like that vampire creep all the girls go wild over.”

She smiled over that. “Tempting.” She kissed my cheek. “Another time.”

“See you tomorrow?”

“Of course. Thanks for dinner.” Her hand was on the knob and she was starting to walk through the door so there wasn’t any reason for me to stick around.

I was halfway across her front yard when she called me back.

“Conway! I love you!”

My heart jumped. “I love you too.”

Since I didn’t feel like messing with the front door lock I hopped through my unlocked bedroom window, feeling rather cheerful. Erin and I were due for the standard bumps and bruises that all other relationships endured. That’s all. We were Conway and Erin. We would be fine.

My bedroom was messy and smelled like feet. It was probably a good thing Erin hadn’t taken me up on my offer to hang out. Whistling a Beatles song I’d heard in the diner earlier, I headed to the empty living room and sprawled on the ratty sofa. I didn’t realize I was tired until my eyelids closed. From there I slipped easily into oblivion and didn’t know anything else until some basic instinct jolted me awake. I knew right away I wasn’t alone in the room, even before she said a word.

“Piece of fucking garbage,” my mother slurred as she slumped in the armchair five feet away. She’d probably topped off her workday with a visit to the Dirty Cactus and put away a few shots. She did that sometimes but she didn’t often get shit-faced enough to chatter nonsense.

I sat up, my neck cramped from an awkward sleeping pose.

“Hey ma,” I greeted her, rubbing my sore muscles.

“Just like him,” she answered and even though it was dark I could see her shaking her head from side to side, the ends of her frosted hair catching the light of the street lamps outside.

The same instinct that jarred me out of my nap told me to just get up and leave the room. It argued that nothing was going to happen here that I’d want to remember later.

“You’re just like him!” She stood up, swaying, howling at the ceiling. “Just like that asshole. I see it every time I look at you.” A desperate sob escaped her and she sank down to the floor, legs splayed, hands crossed over her stomach. I leaned down and took her arm, trying to help her back up but she twisted away from me.

“Mom,” I said firmly, snapping my fingers to get her attention as I hunkered down at her side. She only cried.

“I tried,” she babbled, rocking back and forth, gulping between heaving sobs. “I thought if I just raised you decent that the bad blood wouldn’t matter. Elijah said it didn’t matter, said you were still his blood in a way even if not directly. He forgave every shitty thing I ever did and loved you both anyway. Loved you even though I told him from the beginning where you came from.”

“Mom.” My head felt strange. My throat felt dry. I wanted her to stop talking. I wanted to jump up and run out the door and never hear whatever jumble of words were coming.

“Chrome,” she said in a moan and covered her eyes. “Him I loved. Always loved him. I let him use me how he wanted because it was as close as I could get. But he was barely a father to the kid he had and didn’t want any more. I thought

when he saw Stone he would change his mind but he didn't." She curled tighter into a ball and whimpered like a little girl. "I didn't want to start up with Benton. I understood what Benton was. Mean and violent to the core. Only reason I let that fucker in was because everybody knew how the Gentry boys were, always competing for the same attention. I thought lying down with Benton would give me Chrome back." Her voice caught on something that was both a sob and a hiccup and dropped to a whisper. "Instead all it gave me was you."

She raised her head then. I couldn't see her eyes. Her face was a yawning hole in the darkness. All these years. All the rumors and the gossip and the sad guilt of being raised by a man who tried to shield us from all of it.

They might be lies. But lies don't usually happen on dirty living room floors under the shelter of darkness. No, that's when the truth shakes loose.

Chrome Gentry.

Benton Gentry.

Two brothers who were legends in their prime. Chrome was Deck's father, dead at least a half dozen years now. Traffic accident or something. Benton was alive though, still somewhere out there in the barren wilderness of outer Emblem. I'd see him now and again, lurching around Main Street with a pot belly and a mean attitude, such a foul-tempered waste of a man that his own sons didn't even talk to him.

His sons. The triplets. My half brothers.

And, if alcohol was really a truth serum and Tracy Gentry had just made the confession of a lifetime, then Stone was Deck's half brother.

My mother had started crying harder. Her beige work skirt had ridden up over her thighs and I could see enough to be embarrassed as hell, even as I was still reeling over the things she's just said.

"Come on, Mom," I said, gently trying to lift her. I wouldn't be human if I wasn't hurt and angry for having all this shit dumped in my lap. But she was my mother and she was terrible in some ways yet I still felt sorry for her. At least some mysteries had been answered, like why she'd always preferred Stone and why she seemed more bitter with each passing year as she was slowly poisoned inside by the burden of secrets.

Instead of accepting my help she slapped me away. "No!" she shouted with flailing arms that knocked over a blue hobnail vase that long ago had been a gift from some dead Gentry relation. "You'll never touch me again!" she screamed.

"I'm trying to help you," I explained as I dodged sharp fingernails.

"Don't want you. DON'T WANT YOU! NEVER FUCKING WANTED YOU!"

I backed away as she crawled toward the hallway on all fours. She'd stopped screaming but the low, grief-stricken moaning was worse. It carried words. I heard, "Elijah" and I heard "Sorry".

Time passed as I crouched there in the darkness. There was no more moaning and crying, only the sound of thick snoring from somewhere down the hall. She might not remember any of this tomorrow. I would remember it forever. I would also need to tell my brother.

Suddenly, desperately, I needed Stone. I needed his mix of cocky arrogance and affection to sort through this mess.

I needed Erin too. I needed to hold her in my arms and hear that I can be loved, that I'm more than just the unwanted reminder of a terrible man.

There was no telling where Stone was at this hour but he would be home eventually. And Erin would be asleep next door right now. If I crawled under her window and rapped on the glass for long enough she would wake up. I just wanted to look at her. Just for a minute. And I wanted her to look at me with that special light that lived only in her eyes. Then maybe I'd be able to sleep tonight.

As I stepped out the front door I realized I wasn't wearing shoes but the hell with it. I wouldn't be going far. Anyway, the less noise I made the better, since I wasn't sure what kind of hours Mr. Rielo kept.

I crept along the side of the house, pausing when I heard a small animal or reptile scamper away with alarm. There were no lights on at my house but Erin's window was open and her light was on. If it hadn't been I wouldn't have seen them.

They were sitting side by side on the ground underneath the open window. They weren't kissing. They weren't touching. They were just sitting there, my brother and my girlfriend. There was a hot wind blowing in the wrong direction so I

couldn't hear their words. I could only hear the muted blend of their voices, so deep in conversation with one another that they had no reason to look up and notice that someone stood nearby, just watching them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ERIN

We'd ended the night with "I love you" and somehow I was still unhappy.

There had been a few tense moments during the evening but Conway had done his best to be sweet. I found myself staring at him over dinner, memorizing small details like the cute furrow between his eyebrows as he scraped the mustard from his hamburger and the hint of a dimple that only ever appeared on his left cheek. I loved everything about him.

I was still watching him walk slowly back to his house when I started wishing I'd said yes to him. I wished I'd gone back to his bedroom and burrowed against his body while confessing the things I never dared to talk about.

Things I hardly dared to even *think* about.

Things like how when a woman who had battled her own mind for her entire life stuck her head in an oven and turned on the gas it wasn't an 'accident'.

Things like the origin of the faint scars in private places on my own body.

Things like my terror that I'll lose myself in the same abyss of depression that swallowed my mother.

Instead I just walked tiredly through my front door and dropped my purse on the couch. Unfortunately, my dad

happened to be napping there. My ten pound support system of tampons, cosmetics, pens and books hit him in the head.

“Ow,” he complained, sitting heavily upright and rubbing his skull.

“Sorry,” I said, leaning over to haul away the offending handbag. “You weren’t waiting up for me were you?”

My father yawned and rubbed his eyes. “Never. Why would a father be waiting up for his teenage daughter to walk through the door?” He took note of the time. “It’s early.”

“Yeah. I was tired.” I looked around, noticing that the house was unusually quiet. “Where are the girls?”

“Your Aunt Bonnie came by and took them to her place to spend a few nights there. She was disappointed you weren’t around.”

Bonnie was my dad’s older sister. She’d never married or had children and worked as the head nurse at the prison. Bonnie meant well and had always done whatever she could for us, especially after our mother died, but she had a stern, no nonsense kind of personality that was a little tough to take sometimes. Hanging out with Aunt Bonnie was like being subjected to a non-fun Mary Poppins.

“I’ll call her next week or something,” I said, feeling bad for having unfriendly Aunt Bonnie thoughts.

My father was staring at me in that parental way; half love and half anxiety.

“Sit down, Erin.”

I sat. I crossed my arms. I uncrossed them. “What’s up?”

My father's knees popped and creaked when he leaned forward. He grimaced. "How are you and young Mr. Gentry getting along these days?"

"We're good. Con's going to apply to ASU next year."

"Really?" His eyebrows shot up. "I would think an arrest record would interfere with college plans."

"It was a mistake, Dad."

"A mistake," he muttered. "Erin, a mistake is forgetting to buy milk at the grocery store. Not committing grand theft auto, drag racing and destroying both public and private property."

I couldn't argue with him there. In truth I was having trouble with the idea that Con and I had reached something of a fork in the road. I wanted to go one way and something pulled him in the other direction. Adults who thought they were being helpful would just shrug and say that this was just part of growing up. They would say most girls did not get to live forever with the first boy they kissed.

"Erin?"

My father was peering down at me worriedly. It must be hard, I thought, to bring people into the world and watch them evolve into something completely separate from you.

"You okay?" he pressed.

"I'm fine, Dad," I said, trying to keep the waver out of my voice.

He still stared at me. "Don't feel guilty," he finally said.

"About what?"

“Anything. Don’t feel guilty about making plans or leaving people behind.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Look, I know it’s on your mind, worrying about what will happen to all of us when you go away to school. You can’t worry about that, honey. I’ll tell you something I learned a long time ago. It’s that none of us can stop the universe from spinning. All we can do is stand in the light for as long as the sun shines.”

I swallowed painfully. I was thinking of my mother. I had never had the guts to ask him why she did it. Instead I’d asked Aunt Bonnie. Her face had dropped into uncharacteristic grief as she pulled me awkwardly into her arms. She told me that my mother loved me and that she had fought a battle every day, a battle with herself. Then she lost one. And that was all there was.

A tear, unwelcome, squeezed its way out of my eye and fell down my cheek. “What happens when the light burns out?” I whispered.

My father kissed the top of my head. “That’s the thing,” he said. “Some lights never really go out.”

Before I headed off to bed I told my father not to fall asleep again on the couch. His back bothered him whenever he did. He waved me away with a yawn and told me I didn’t need to worry about him.

When Con had dropped me off I thought I was tired but now I was far too awake. I reached for my phone to call Roe but then remembered she was floating around somewhere in international waters with poor cell reception. So all I did was

send her a picture of a brilliantly illustrated rainbow with a heart imbedded in the arch. She would receive it eventually.

I opened my window and gazed at the house next door. It was dark so either Con had gone to sleep or else he'd gone out again. There was a slight breeze blowing. Not a storm wind, just enough movement of air to ease the nighttime heat. I leaned out and breathed deeply as the soft wind lifted strands of my hair and played with the flyaway ends. Again I wished I had gone with Conway. The only peace I knew lived inside his arms.

When I took the old scissors from their hiding place it wasn't because I was feeling the itch again. There was no relief in holding it, only a vague sense of disgust. I pushed the sleeve of my sweater up over my elbow and examined the damaged part of my arm. A week had passed since the last cut but that tender skin between wrist and elbow was slow to heal. I touched the tip of the blade to the scabbed red line. I wasn't even trying to recall why it should feel good. I was just trying to understand how I could have ever thought it had.

What have I done to myself? What am I doing?

I didn't hear a sound. Or see a movement. There was no reason to look up but when I did there was an outline of a person bathed in the light from my bedroom window. He was standing on his side of the property line, smoking a cigarette. He looked just like his brother and for a split second my heart seized.

It wasn't Conway though. It was Stone.

My desk lamp was a sixty watt bulb, almost a spot light in the darkness. He had to have seen. He would shake his head

with revulsion and walk away. He would tell his brother that I was a whacked out nutcase who mutilated herself. He would casually lay bare my secret shame.

In a panic, I dropped the scissors and took a clumsy leap to the window. I needed to shut it. Somehow I figured if I could only block Stone Gentry out within the next few seconds then it would undo what he had seen.

The frame often stuck and I wasn't strong. I've heard that times of distress can uncover a magical strength but it was always the opposite for me. I heard my own gasping curses as my noodle-like arms fumbled with the window. Underneath that was the roaring in my head.

“Erin.”

He moved absurdly fast, a stealth shadow in the night. He was already at the window.

“Erin.”

He reached a hand out and grabbed my wrist as I yanked on the window frame.

“Stop,” he ordered.

I wilted. I stopped. I slid down to the floor and tucked my knees up to my chest like a little girl. Maybe Stone wasn't heartless. Maybe if I begged the right way he would keep this to himself.

“Don't tell him,” I choked out. “Please.”

I heard his thick exhale, either pity or exasperation. “Come outside,” he said, rather gently, and extended a hand to help me through the window.

I felt better once I was out of my room and covered by the darkness. Along the side of my house was the cracked remnant of an old paver path that had been there since before my parents bought the house. Stone sat down and waited silently for me to join him.

He was facing away, looking at the empty street. “Why were you trying to do?” he asked softly.

My face burned with humiliation. How could I explain the weird mechanics of my mind to the rough and tumble Stone Gentry? I couldn’t even really explain it to myself.

“I’m not like my mother,” I said defiantly.

“I didn’t say you were.”

“I mean, I wasn’t trying to kill myself or anything.”

He lit another cigarette. “Okay.”

I hugged my knees to my chest again. Stone continued to stare at the street and let his cigarette burn without putting it to his lips.

When he didn’t say anything for a moment I relaxed my knees, tucking them into a more comfortable position. ‘Crisscross applesauce’ was what the teachers called it in elementary school.

Then, in halting words that sounded inadequate even to me, I tried to explain how sometimes I felt like running in seventy directions at once. My head would become too cluttered to deal with all the noise and I just needed to release some of the pain before I choked on it. And despite the vague shame, for a few minutes after I felt the sting of the blade I always felt better.

Stone listened silently. When I was done talking he ground his cigarette underneath his shoe. “Con keeps telling me I need to quit,” he said wryly. “It’s a bad habit that won’t ever do me any good.”

“Con’s right.”

“He doesn’t know, does he? He doesn’t know about the ah...”

“Cutting,” I finished for him. “You might as well say it. No, I’ve managed to keep him from finding out and if he’s ever suspected he’s never said so.” I almost didn’t dare ask the next question. “Are you going to tell him?”

“You should get help, Erin.”

“I know. That’s what Roe says. But like I told her, I don’t really *need* to do it. And I wouldn’t really hurt myself. I can stop anytime I want.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

Stone opened his pack of cigarettes. At first I couldn’t tell what he was doing but then realized that he was extracting them one at a time and breaking them in half. He then stuffed the ruined pieces back into the package.

“I won’t tell him,” he finally said.

Maybe I should have felt guilty for asking Stone to keep an important secret from his only brother but all I felt was a wave of gratitude. I just couldn’t handle it, the look of hurt and bewilderment in Conway’s face when he realized I was more messed up than he ever guessed. So as cowardly as it might

be, I would gladly take Stone's help in keeping it quiet until I found a better way to deal with the problem. This time I knew I had to deal with it. Despite my bravado I couldn't solve this on my own. I'd already tried.

"Thank you," I breathed weakly.

I expected Stone would just make some embarrassed exit and go about his night but instead he hung around and talked for a while about things like his love of the desert and how he and Conway planned on hiking to the bottom of the Grand Canyon someday. The wind was picking up and made it tough to hear his words at times but I understood he was just going on and on to make me feel a little better. I didn't say much and he didn't seem to expect me to, which was nice. It was nice to just sit there and listen without being required to speak.

Eventually I started yawning but as I got to my feet and waved good night to Stone I felt more peaceful than I had in a while. There were a lot of people in my life who I counted as acquaintances, but other than Roe and Con, none of them I really thought of as friends. As I climbed carefully through my bedroom window I realized that Stone had shown me more friendship than I ever thought him capable of. I was glad to have another friend.

Tomorrow I would keep my promises to Roe and to Stone. And to myself. If I couldn't stop this self-destructive addiction on my own then I'd get help. But tonight I just need to sleep. Everything would be better tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CONWAY

Stone always snored like a motherfucker. Sometimes smacking him in the face with a pillow would jolt him into changing positions, snuffing out the noise.

I'd slept like shit last night, although when I heard him come in I pretended to be sound asleep already. I sensed that he was standing over me and having some deep thoughts (or guilt) but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of opening an eye. Of course when I finally dozed off he started making as much racket as a saw mill as if even his subconscious was hell bent on taunting me.

Instead of hitting him with a bag of feathers I walked calmly over to his bed, grabbed the far side of the rumped quilt he was sleeping on top of, and yanked blankets, brother and all to the floor. Stone landed with a thud and began flailing around while sputtering seventy creative variations of the word 'fuck'.

I stepped over him on my way to the shower. I took my time in there and let the hot water continue to run even after I was done. By the time I was dressed and spitting toothpaste into the sink the room looked like a sauna.

Stone was waiting for me when I got back. I expected it so I kept my elbows out, ready to throw some weight around, but

he only sat on the edge of the bed, glaring balefully and complaining, “What the fuck?”

My Carson’s Garage shirt was damp and dirty but I threw it on anyway. I was scheduled to work all day but a pristine appearance wasn’t exactly part of the corporate culture over there.

“Conway!” Stone bellowed.

“What?”

“What do you mean what? What crawled up your ass and died overnight?”

I tucked my shirt in even though Stone always laughed that I looked like an old snowbird when I did. Whenever I had briefly lapsed into sleep last night I’d been haunted by muddled nightmares. In one of them my mother and Erin were skipping arm in arm on the far side of a deep canal while laughing “You can’t play!” in teasing unison. In another I was in a deep, dark place and shouting up at the light. My brother appeared and stood there for a somber moment, looking down. Then Benton Gentry showed up with a wide length of plywood and covered the hole, trapping me in the darkness. There was one more. It was vague, just a passing image, not even a whole dream unto itself. But it was the most vivid of all. Erin, wearing Kasey Kean’s American flag bikini, was straddling Stone on his bed as they kissed, ignoring my screams of anguish from across the room.

“What’s wrong?” my brother asked and now his voice sounded strange. Less furious, more worried.

I looked at him. Stonewall Gentry, named for some reckless, wild great uncle who died before we were born. There'd never been a day that I was alive where he wasn't my brother. And even though he'd had ten Conway-free months before I came along, I knew it was impossible for him to remember them. We'd always shared a home, a family, even a bedroom. We'd always been together.

"What'd you do last night?" I blurted out.

And there it was. Just for a split second. A flicker of something in his blue eyes before he looked away. Stone didn't feel guilty about much so it wasn't too often that a day came along where he couldn't look me in the eye.

"Hung out at the bridge, got sucked off and came home."

"That's it?"

Slowly his eyes returned to my face. This time he was utterly impassive. "That's it."

"And you wouldn't lie to your brother."

Stone leaned back a few inches, like he needed a little bit of distance in order to see me better. His eyes narrowed. "What are you getting at, Con?"

"Not a thing. Just wondering when I missed the news that you and my girlfriend are now best buddies. Yeah, that's right. I saw you guys all cozy and conversational out there. Not the first time in the last few weeks I've caught the two of you looking awful fucking close all of a sudden. So tell me *brother*, just who belonged to the pair of lips that sucked your dick last night?"

He was angry. His face was red and his hands were clenched. But that wasn't what was sinking my heart. If there hadn't been a kernel of truth to those words then he would have jumped up in a fury and tackled me before I finished talking.

“Goddammit Conway, it wasn't like that. We were just-“

“Just *what?*”

“Just talking for fuck's sake.”

“Bullshit. You spend as much time listening to what any girl has to say as you spend cleaning the toilet.”

He stood up then. I thought there was half a chance he was going to take a swing at me but he merely crossed his arms and glared. “You don't think I would touch your girlfriend. There's no fucking way you can think that. Conway, I could have an ice pick to my balls and I still wouldn't take a step in that direction. Never!”

I almost wavered. But then I flashed back to last night's feelings of despair.

There's nothing worse than what you come from.

In my lowest moment, when I'd just been fed a heaping plate of sordid surprises from my own mother, I stumbled through the darkness looking for comfort. The only thing I found was my brother and my girlfriend huddled together, talking earnestly about something that obviously didn't include me. It wasn't the kind of visual trauma that included naked skin and entwined limbs, but at that moment it was just about the loneliest thing I could have faced.

“Conway?” Stone asked and there was a note of pleading in his voice.

I wanted to hit him so badly. “So you were talking. I bet you guys had a lot to discuss one on one late at night. So were you discussing politics? Shakespeare? Enlighten me.”

He shook his head and looked miserable. “No. It wasn’t anything important. We talked about you, about school.”

“You hate school.”

He frowned. He reached for the pack of cigarettes sitting on the nightstand, but when he removed one it was broken. Stone shook his head ruefully and tossed the pack in the garbage before sighing. “I swear, there wasn’t anything weird going on. You’re just going to have to take my word for it.”

I pushed my wallet in my back pocket. “I’ve got to get to work.”

“Con.”

“No. Fuck you, Stone. Let me know when the truth feels like coming out of your mouth.”

He threw something at the door after I slammed it. Good. Let him be pissed. I was tired of being the only one who was pissed off.

I only stopped in the kitchen to grab whatever could stand in as breakfast. My mother was pacing around in there with the phone stuck to her ear and lots of “Oh my gods” coming out of her mouth. But she said it in a way that I knew she was more amused than bothered about whatever the subject was. She scowled at me as I grabbed a few slices of stale white bread. There wasn’t much more than exhaustion and the usual

contempt in her expression though so I wasn't sure she even remembered the terrible things she'd said last night.

Then she turned her back, heaved a giant sigh and dripped with self-righteous fakery as she cooed, "Lord rest her soul, poor Maggie. Got to say though I figured she'd fall to Benton's fury a long time before this."

No, she definitely didn't remember last night. She wouldn't have uttered Benton's name so casually this morning if she did. I knew who Maggie was too. Benton's wife, and the triplets' junkie mother. She hadn't been seen around town much in years and most of the time I'd half forgotten she wasn't already dead. As I stepped out the door I felt a twinge of sympathy for Cord, Creed and Chase. The news had to hurt them. I figured you didn't have to be close to your mother to feel pain over her death.

The screen door was open and I could hear my own mother was still carrying on in the kitchen about 'poor Maggie' even though all her words sounded more like gossip than grief.

"Con!" Erin waved from her bedroom window. Her long dark hair was loose on her shoulders and she wore an oversized yellow t-shirt with an unzipped white hoodie. She looked like sunshine and candy. I almost went running to her until I remembered. Then my stomach dropped and I felt sick with the burden of what I might know. She continued to call my name as I ran away.

The garage was busy and that was good because it kept my mind off things. There was some talk going back and forth about Maggie Gentry's death until Benji Carson rolled out of his office and told everyone to knock it off. He patted my

shoulder apologetically as he passed, and I felt rather guilty for not being more busted up about a relative passing out on her bathroom floor and choking to death on her own vomit. But hell, I had my own problems to deal with.

It was after lunch and I was underneath a rusty Pontiac when a shadow fell and a soft voice made me bang my head on the undercarriage before I pushed out from beneath the car.

“There you are,” Erin said with happy shyness as she waited for me to sit upright.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, wiping my oily hands on my jeans.

Confusion crossed her face. She didn’t usually stop by the garage since it wasn’t a short walk and Carson didn’t really approve of high school girlfriends showing up. But I also wasn’t usually this cold to her. In fact I never was.

“I just wanted to see you.” She held out a paper bag. “Chocolate chip cookies. Made them this morning.”

“Thanks.” I took the bag and tossed it on the nearest counter. She followed me as I headed outside. The guys looked Erin over curiously and a few of them outright leered, which ordinarily would have driven me up a wall. But today I just didn’t have it in me to care.

She was biting her thumbnail and looking a little nervous by the time we got to the parking lot.

“Con, what’s wrong?”

I shrugged. “You and Stone must have talked it all through already.”

She was startled. Her thumb dropped out of her mouth.
“What? I didn’t talk to Stone at all today.”

“Yeah?” I said coldly. “What about yesterday?”

“I don’t get it.”

I crossed my arms. “*What,*” I demanded, enunciating each word with obnoxious precision, “*did you and my brother talk about late last night?*”

“Jeez, nothing important. We just happened to be outside at the same time.”

“You both thought I was a fucking idiot, huh?”

She was at a loss. She swallowed and held her arms behind her back.

“My god, Conway. That sounds like an accusation.”

“It’s a question. One that deserves an answer.”

“Really? What do you want to know?”

“I want to know why you and my brother look like you get just a little more cozy every time my back is turned these days.”

Her eyes grew really wide. Her mouth fell open. “You think,” she managed to gasp, “that I’ve been messing around with, with *Stone?*”

I didn’t answer. I just stared. Now that someone had uttered the words out loud they actually did sound ridiculous. Stone and Erin had never even liked each other. And up until now I wouldn’t have hesitated to trust either one of them with my life. But today everything felt confused and fucked up. Or maybe it was just me that was fucked up.

“Conway,” she whispered as her lower lip trembled. “I can’t believe you.”

“Then deny it.”

She shook her head miserably. I could have reached for her. I wanted to. The tears in her eyes were acid to my heart and something deep inside my soul screamed that I was making a fatal error and I shouldn’t say another word until I managed to screw my head back on straight. But Erin didn’t wait around for me to find my sensible side. She turned and ran away. And instead of running after her I just watched her go.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ERIN

I ran for probably a mile before my legs started to cramp and my lungs shrieked from the abuse.

There, beside the gutter of one of the nicest streets in Emblem I bent over and tried to breathe, all the while thinking grimly that this was how people wound up in the hospital with heat exhaustion. Since I was standing in direct sunlight any sweat that tried to escape dried up almost instantly. As I'd skidded to a stop in front of a sprawling Santa Fe-style mini mansion I'd also managed to roll my ankle. It wasn't too bad but it hurt to walk. At least I was only a few blocks from home. If I could just manage to get there I could burrow underneath my bed covers and scream for a while until my throat gave out.

A shiver overcame me as I limped down the empty street. It wasn't a shiver of cold. More like sickness. The look in Conway's eyes kept coming back to me. It was one of agony. I'd managed to cause him pain. It was the last thing I'd ever meant to do. This sick realization was quickly followed by anger.

Conway had made his suspicions clear. I didn't know where the hell he'd come by them but the fact that they'd crossed his mind was enough to get my blood moving.

How could he think, even for a split second, that I'd betray him with his own brother?

How could he believe I'd ever betray him with *anyone*?

The thought had never even occurred to me, not seriously.

The ground beneath my slow-moving feet was covered with a carpet of yellow; decaying flowers shed from the palo verde trees that stretched overhead. Light and feathery, they would turn brown and dance briefly in the summer storm winds until they came apart. I kicked them savagely aside as I trudged toward home, trying to somehow make sense of this impossible day.

Only one explanation seemed to fit. Stone must have said something to Conway, something awful enough to make Con think we'd been running around behind his back.

But...why??

Lately Stone had proven himself to be a friend when I badly needed one. And I'd always assumed he was loyal to his brother. Yet I'd known Stone Gentry for enough years to recognize that he was also a player, even a liar, when it suited him.

What did you say to him, you bastard?

It simply didn't make sense that Stone would have covered for my cutting addiction by telling a lie that was a thousand times worse. But maybe all wasn't as it appeared between the Gentry brothers. Maybe taunting Conway so cruelly was some tool of vengeance that I didn't understand. No matter how many different ways I examined things, they all came back to Stone.

Still, something else sat heavy on my heart.

Nothing Stone could have said should make Conway believe that I'd cheat on him. He should know better. What the hell had happened to make him forget that?

My ankle was hurting bad. I probably looked like an adolescent female Frankenstein limping down the residential streets of Emblem. Once a car pulled over and I recognized Mrs. Avery, one of my father's coworkers at the prison. She was concerned and asked me if I needed a ride. I managed to force my dry lips into a smile and told her no thank you.

Mrs. Gentry was getting into her car just as I made it home. She must have been on her way to work at the pharmacy because she was wearing her white lab coat. It sported a prominent coffee stain near her left breast. When she saw me she wrinkled her nose like an animal does when it smells something bad. She didn't like me. Actually it was possible she didn't like anyone, including her own sons. She seemed to tolerate Stone a little more easily than Conway though, for whatever reason. She didn't offer any greeting before she climbed into her Toyota and turned on the ignition. The car must have been hot as an oven sitting there in the driveway with the afternoon sun pouring in. She cracked the window and started to back out of the driveway.

"Is Stone home?" I shouted.

Her gray eyes shot to my face and she hit the brakes. "Now it's Stone you're into?" she snapped.

"No," I replied, trying to keep my temper. "I just asked if he was home."

“Go find out for yourself.” She closed the window, backed into the street and took off with a squeal of tires.

Stone came to the door before I had a chance to even knock. He wasn't wearing a shirt and he looked unhappy. He nodded to me. “You look like shit.”

“Why don't you file that away in the drawer filled with things you should never say to any girl?”

His lips twitched. “I was just heading out for a walk.” Then he got a good look at my face and frowned. “What's wrong?”

The world started to turn strange colors. A handful of ink blots appeared, melted together, and grew. The muscles that kept my legs standing up decided they were tired of working. I would have collapsed completely if Stone hadn't been quick enough to grab me. I heard him shouting my name with alarm as I floated over to the Gentrys' ugly orange couch. Once I was there I realized Stone had carried me. He peered down with worry all over his face. Then he disappeared. When he reappeared he was holding a glass of water.

“I'm fine,” I muttered weakly as I tried to sit up. “Just got too much sun.”

Stone put a cool palm to my forehead as I drank the glass of water. “Do you have a headache?”

“No.”

“Do you need to vomit?”

“What? No.”

He sighed and took his hand away. “I was trying to remember the symptoms of sun stroke.”

I handed the empty glass back to him. “I don’t have sun stroke.”

“You might. Maybe I should call your dad.”

“Don’t you dare!”

“Sun stroke and heat exhaustion aren’t things to fuck around with, Erin.”

“For the love of god, Stone, shut up about the sun stroke! Sun stroke isn’t what’s wrong with me!”

“Well, what *is* wrong then?”

I sat up and perched on the edge of the couch, my hands clenched in my lap. Stone sat beside me. I could feel him watching me but I couldn’t meet his eyes when I said the words. “Con said...”

He tensed. “You talked to Con?”

“Yeah. He ran away from me this morning and looked upset so I walked down to Carson’s to see him at work.”

“And did you see him?”

“Yes.” I winced, remembering the sheer awfulness of that encounter. “Stone, I need to know. Did something happen between you and Con?”

He coughed. “We had a fight.”

“About what?”

“I really don’t know.”

“Yes you do,” I whispered.

He exhaled heavily, painfully. I glanced over at him and saw his eyes were tightly shut as he ran a hand through his hair.

“Con thinks...” Stone said haltingly. “He thinks that we’re, ah....I mean that you and me...”

“Fucked around,” I finished.

Stone opened his eyes and looked at me apologetically. “I swear I don’t know why he thinks that. Something’s going on with him. I don’t know what it is and it might not even have to do with us. But seeing us hanging out together is messing with his head somehow.”

I took a deep breath, trying not to cry. “I saw his face, Stone. It was like we didn’t even know each other anymore. Just like that. I hear about all these couples that grow apart and shit but that can’t happen to us. I love him so much.”

Stone’s face was full of pity. “I know you do. And I know that he loves you too. It’s not like this is the end for you guys. Contrary to his behavior today, Conway isn’t an asshole. We’ll get this straightened out, Erin.” He patted my back awkwardly. “I know my brother.”

“I thought I knew him too.”

“You do,” Stone said with finality.

The knock on the door made us both jump. Stone got to his feet and went to the window, pulling the curtain back.

“Oh,” he said with surprise, “I think that’s my cousin’s truck.”

I shrugged, not caring much about his cousin or his cousin's truck. For the first time I realized Stone was probably not far off when he mentioned that I looked like shit. Plus there was a rising tide of panic swelling in my head. With every breath I tried to surf above it but I wasn't succeeding. I was drowning.

Stone held up one finger and moved to the door as I slumped back onto the couch. With a sense of detachment I saw that the snap on his jeans was undone, for whatever male-centered reason that I didn't care to dwell on. Maybe he'd been jerking off before he answered the door. I didn't give a damn.

There was more than one person at the door. I heard voices, all deep, all male. Stone's voice was mixed in there. If he was going to invite company inside they might be startled to discover a girl lying on the couch looking like she'd just had either a very good time or a very bad one.

"What am I doing here?" I asked the empty room. The dark wood wall paneling had no answer. I shouldn't be just sitting in Conway's living room. I needed to find him. I needed to make Stone come with me and right this wrong or else that terrible swelling tide would overtake me and I'd need to do *something* to let the pain out.

Stone might have been right to worry about my health because when I stood up the room swayed in an unhealthy, watery kind of way. I heard Stone bidding farewell to someone as I lurched toward the door.

Stone was standing there alone as a pickup truck drove away from the curb.

“We need to go,” I said, my heart pounding in my ears as I tucked my shirt in. “We need to find him.”

“Erin, wait-“

“No!” I shouted. “Now. I need to find him. I need him.”

For a second my tangled thoughts screamed that Stone Gentry was deliberately standing in my way. It seemed he was the reason I wasn’t able to get to Conway. I struck out a blind fist, which he easily caught and forced down.

“Erin!” he yelled, “Knock it off.”

The ink blots were back and they were furious. Stone’s face disappeared behind a particularly fat one and as my shoulder hit the doorframe I realized I was probably going to fall down. Once again Stone caught me, although the spell passed nearly as soon as it started. Still, I let him hold me up and felt his chest underneath my cheek as I leaned on him.

“I can walk,” I muttered when it seemed like he was planning on carrying me again. He kept his arm around my waist as he led me back to the couch.

“I think you need a doctor,” he warned.

“No. I don’t need a doctor.”

He put a hand to my forehead again. “You’re still hot. How long were you out there running around without water in hundred and ten degree weather?”

“I was a little distracted since my boyfriend had just accused me of fucking his brother.”

Stone sighed and tugged on my sweater. “Take this off.”

I was disgusted. “Seriously?”

He let out a short laugh and rolled his eyes. “I just mean that you need to cool your body down. Believe me, whatever you have, I’ve seen better.”

“Hey Stone, you should also add that to your list of ‘Things never to say to girls’.”

He chuckled. “Stay here. I’ll crank up the air conditioning and get you some more water.”

After he paused to adjust the thermostat Stone disappeared into the kitchen. Reluctantly I shrugged out of my sweatshirt. Then, slowly, I pulled my long t-shirt over my head, leaving me sitting there on the Gentry’s couch in the middle of the afternoon in only my white tank top. It shouldn’t have been such a big deal but to me it was almost the same as sitting there naked. Still, I had to admit that Stone was correct and I started to feel better without all those layers.

Stone returned with another glass of water and an ice compress made out of a yellow dishtowel. He waited while I drank and then ordered me to lie back as he leaned over and covered my forehead with the crude ice pack. I didn’t miss the way his eyes lingered on my body and he swallowed hard.

“Hideous, isn’t it?” I asked.

He was startled. “What?”

I held out my arms, displaying the scars; most faint, some not so faint. “These.”

“Oh.” He shook his head, smiling. “I wasn’t looking at those. I was looking at something else. Two things actually.”

“Stone!”

He shrugged. “What do you expect? I’ve got an eighteen-year-old dick. It makes me look at things like pretty tits even if I’m not allowed to touch them.”

I laughed, long and hard. “You’re impossible.”

Stone cocked his head and watched me for a moment. “And you’re okay, Erin,” he said softly. “You’ll be okay.”

I knew he wasn’t just talking about today. “You think so?”

“I do.” He pulled the ice pack away and lightly pressed his lips to my forehead before gently putting the ice pack back. It was actually sweet, a gesture of friendship and caring. In the context of the moment it didn’t seem sexual or even inappropriate. But it happened at the worst possible time.

Conway must have come in through the side door that leads to the kitchen. We didn’t hear him at all. We didn’t see him until he was standing right in front us, wild-eyed, and grief-stricken. Stone looked at me and I felt the panic that I saw in his face.

After all, what would any reasonable person think of this view? I was lying down with only a flimsy tank top covering my breasts. Stone hovered over me with his shirt off and the button on his jeans still loose.

Of course it wasn’t what at all what it looked like. But how many guilty parties had made the exact same claim?

Conway was broken, utterly crushed. “Damn you,” he sobbed as he backed away from us. “Damn you both to hell.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CONWAY

“Fucking nuts,” I muttered to the mirror. It only answered by continuing to spit back my weary reflection. I’d been in here for too long, ever since I watched Erin run away, right after I accused her of betraying me with my brother.

A fist thundered against the bathroom door. “Get outta there, Gentry!”

I splashed some cold water on my face and shoved the ratty baseball cap back on my head. What had I done? What was wrong with me? I rubbed my eyes, trying to erase the image of Stone’s hurt face from this morning. And then there was Erin’s devastated one from less than an hour ago. These were the two people who meant more to me than anyone. These were the two people who loved me the most in return.

The thought of them together...it was ridiculous. It was absurd. It was a product of my paranoid imagination. It *was* fucking nuts.

“Gentry!” The complaint on the other side of the door returned, along with another volley of battering knocks. When I opened up I saw Booster standing there, hopping from foot to foot with a pained expression.

“Go home and do that shit in your mother’s pillowcase,” he snarled before pushing me out of the way. As soon as he shut the door I heard a colossal fart and a loud groan.

Benji Carson had his head buried in the guts of a classic Mustang. He looked up when I cleared my throat.

“You okay, kid?” he asked.

I could have made something up, a stomachache or other personal issue. But I hated to lie to Mr. Carson. I’d already burned too much karma lately with the people in my life.

“I’ve got something I really need to take care of,” I said. “I swear I’ll be back in an hour.”

Mr. Carson mulled it over. “You’re off the clock while you’re gone.”

“I know.”

He shrugged and turned back to the car. “Have at it then. One hour?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

If I’d had my phone I would have called them both with an apology but my phone was still somewhere on the sludgy floor of the Main Street canal. Anyway, I owed both Erin and Stone face-to-face apologies. Plus I hadn’t yet told Stone about our mother’s confession and he deserved to know. It seemed like once I told him it would somehow take the weight off of knowing it myself.

As I jogged through the back shortcuts toward home I felt better already. The echo of my mother’s poisonous words did not sting as much.

She thought I was shit.

So what?

I wasn't shit. After all, the triplets had grown up knowing they were Benton's sons and they'd managed to evolve into good men. I could do that too. I could be just like them someday; self-reliant and honest. And just like them I could keep my brother as my best friend and go home to my lady every night. There couldn't be a girl other than Erin in that role. I didn't care that we were young or that it was impractical. I was ready to promise to spend forever with her.

It took me almost twenty minutes to make it back to my street. I'd have to hurry this along if I was going to keep my promise to Carson. Stone would be easy. An apology and an awkward man hug would put us back on track.

Since I'd forgotten my keys back at the garage I headed for the side door, figuring it was more likely to be unlocked than the front door. The outer screen usually let out a rusty screech but it was propped open, leaving only the interior door, which didn't make a sound.

The kitchen was empty. My mother would be at work but Stone should be around. I didn't get more than two steps before I heard voices. I stopped. There was a burst of female giggling.

"Stone!" Erin laughed.

I couldn't hear what came next. Soft murmurs. I followed them, my mouth dry, my heart pounding. I didn't want to see what was in the living room. My feet took me there anyway.

She was on her back. Her sweatshirt had been discarded on the floor and Erin, the epitome of modesty, was lounging on my living room couch wearing only a white tank top with no apparent bra. Stone, bare-chested and disheveled, was leaning

over her. He gently kissed her forehead and the world exploded. If they'd been totally naked and humping their ever-loving brains out it probably would have hurt a little less. But seeing them so close, so intimate, in a way that was much more than lust, was a fucking dagger straight through the center of my soul.

“Damn you,” I choked out and two shocked faces turned on me. “Damn you both to hell!”

Erin let out a cry of anguish as Stone jumped to his feet. He came to me with his arms out, saying my name over and over but I kept backing out the way I had come. I couldn't be near him. Or her. There were no thoughts of violence in my head, no desire for revenge. There was only the cruel grip of betrayal squeezing my heart.

“Conway!” Erin screamed. “Come back!”

I didn't come back. I ran, breaking the kitchen door from its hinges as I tore it open to get away. I had to. I *had* to get away. I ran all the way back to Carson's garage and promptly vomited into the break room sink.

Later, much later, when I could stand the thought, I would wonder how different things would have been if I just would have stayed, if I just would have faced them instead of running. I would have screamed in their faces. They would have been full of denial or apology. We all would have cried and maybe wounded one another even more as we shouted and begged and accused and threw things. It would have been the hour of the rawest hurt of my nightmares. Instead I ran because right then I couldn't bear to do anything else.

So that's my crime. That's my cowardly role in this terrible heartbreak.

But how could I have known what would happen next?

No, never once did I imagine how close we stood to a perilous ledge.

It never occurred to me that we were *all* about to fall.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ERIN

Stone looked at me. I looked at him. There was no room for tears, or even words. I knew my face must be a mirror of the grief I saw in Stone's.

Conway thought we had betrayed him.

He thought he'd caught us in the act and who could blame him? The way he'd looked at us...such agony. I'd never seen him so shattered.

There was noise in the room. It hurt to listen to it. I covered my ears because it was hurting me. It wasn't until Stone came to my side and pulled my hands away that I realized the noise was a long, wailing moan that came from my own throat.

Stone scooped my sweatshirt off the floor. "This can be fixed," he was saying as he draped the sweatshirt gently over my shoulders. "This can be fixed."

"How?" I whispered. Right now Conway wouldn't have any reason to believe a word we said. "We need to find him," I choked out. "We need to explain, to make this okay somehow."

"We will."

"We have to find him."

"We will!"

“Now, Stone! We’re just sitting here and Conway’s alone. He can’t be alone out there, running around in that kind of pain and thinking that we...OH GOD! It’s got to be now. *Right now.* Tomorrow will be too late.”

I was babbling, rocking back forth. I didn’t know why I was so sure that tomorrow would be too late (*too late for what?*) but I knew that it was.

Stone disappeared down the hall. When he returned he was pulling a blue t-shirt over his head. He took his phone out of his back pocket and then threw it down, probably realizing that there was no chance he could get in touch in Con that way since Con had lost his phone in the accident last week.

“Fuck!” he shouted. He started pacing back and forth and breathing in gasps.

Somehow the sight of Stone losing it calmed me down a little. I pushed my arms through the sleeves of the sweater and stood up.

“Where would he go?” I asked calmly.

Stone stopped pacing. He looked around wildly. “I don’t know.”

“Back to Carson’s Garage maybe?”

He shook his head. “Doubt it. He’s probably run off somewhere to be alone. That’s what I’d do, if I were him. I wouldn’t be able to stomach the company of other people.”

“Well.” I clasped my hands in front of me. My mind was working quickly. “Emblem isn’t that huge. Your mom’s at the pharmacy, right? Any chance she would lend you her car?”

Stone snorted. “Are you kidding? My mother wouldn’t give me a glass of water at this point.”

“Wait for me,” I said and walked out the door.

Stone followed. “Where are you going?”

“Home. I’ll be back.”

My house was silent but my father’s car was in the driveway. I was glad my sisters weren’t home because I couldn’t handle explaining anything at the moment.

I found my father on the couch again, asleep, still in his uniform. He’d probably fallen asleep there a thousand times since the bleak day of my mother’s suicide. I watched him breathe and allowed myself to think about a terrible time I’d been mentally running from since it happened.

It had been all over by the time I got home from school. A neighbor had walked his dog past our house and smelled gas so he called the fire department. They found her there in the kitchen, the same kitchen where we’d made cookies and laughed through family dinners. The coroner’s report said she’d died around eleven a.m. When I found that out it seemed important to remember where I’d been at the moment she gave up. I’d been in gym, standing out in left field with my softball glove and hoping no one hit a ball out that way. Eleven a.m. I only knew that because I’d heard my father talking to Aunt Bonnie. To us girls he didn’t say much, just trying to make it from day to day the best he could. He called it an ‘accident’. I understood. I never corrected him. The man just wanted to go on with the business of healing and bypass the chore of grief. I couldn’t blame him for that.

My father snored lightly, looking younger in sleep than he ever did when he was awake. I took the soft afghan from the reclining chair and covered him gently with it.

“I love you, Daddy,” I whispered and felt a surge of tenderness and he smiled briefly in his sleep. Then I pocketed the car keys that were sitting on the coffee table.

Stone waited on his front stoop. He was hunched down with his head bowed. It was the first time in a long time he seemed like a boy. He looked up when he heard me approach.

I held up the keys. “Let’s go find him.”

“Whose are those?”

“My dad’s. Can you drive? I don’t feel well.”

He nodded and went straight to the silver Camry in my driveway. We didn’t have much to say to each other as we drove through the streets of Emblem. For once we were both united with the same purpose.

Find Conway. Make him understand the truth.

Stone thought there was a chance Con was at the old bridge but he wasn’t. When we stopped by the pool we saw a few kids from school and asked if they’d seen him but they all shook their heads.

“Think he’d climb the butte?” I asked. The butte was a tiny mountain that sat right outside town. There was crypt at the top in the shape of a pyramid. It was a place people went to hang out, or drink, or fuck, or just ponder the miserable state of the world.

Stone considered. “Maybe. I’ll turn around when we get to the end of Main Street and we can swing by there.”

“Okay,” I said. I was tired, so tired. But there wouldn’t be any rest until we’d found Conway. I wouldn’t sleep until I’d extinguished that agonized look in his eyes.

Just last year the town installed a new park just west of Main Street. It was little more than a wilting patch of grass with a few lonely swings. As we passed by it was empty. The only movement came from the sprinklers, which simultaneously rose from the ground and sprayed the grass with a fine mist of water. The harsh sunlight was softening. It would disappear soon. But the lingering rays dallied in the Main Street park, playing in the gentle spray of water. Together they formed small rainbows.

Stone glanced at me curiously when I opened the window and extended my hand. Silly though it was, I reached for those rainbows. I unbuckled my seat belt so that I could reach further. Roe had told me that if I ever had a chance to catch a rainbow then I should. As my hand closed I imagined I succeeded and a feeling of utter peace washed over me as I shut my eyes.

“Ah, shit,” Stone cursed as he sped up.

“What’s wrong?”

“Can’t shake this fucker.” He pointed to the old Chevy that surged beside us.

Benny Cortez’s goofy face was behind the wheel. He was a year younger than us, the brother of Tony Cortez. “C’mon Gentry,” he shouted cheerfully. “Let’s race.”

“Fuck off!” Stone yelled.

“First one to the light ain’t a chicken shit!”

“Not tonight, man.”

Benny didn’t hear or wasn’t listening. He gunned the engine and sped up, cutting us off. Stone cursed and slammed on the brakes, narrowly avoiding slamming into the Chevy. Benny switched lanes, fell back beside us. He laughed as Stone shouted a slew of curses and cut the wheel sharply to the right.

Looking down, I noticed my hand was still closed in a fist. I slowly opened my fingers, staring. A light, a brilliant light, came from the center of my open palm and it gave me such joy because I had done the impossible. I had captured a rainbow. I couldn’t wait to tell Roe.

Then there was a terrible sound, unnatural, like a tree screaming.

Then a voice, Stone’s voice, saying my name again and again.

Then...nothing.

FOUR MONTHS LATER...

EPILOGUE

CONWAY

If love looked anything like smoke then I would have easily choked to death in this wall to wall parade of the shit.

As soon as the thought crossed my mind I scolded myself for such nasty feelings. Feelings like that had no place here. There was love everywhere at Chase and Stephanie's wedding reception. Cord was standing on one side with his wife Saylor and their two little daughters. Creed was on the other side with his wife Truly and their newly adopted baby son. Chase couldn't stop kissing his pregnant bride. And then Deck and his girl Jenny danced in each other's arms even though there was no music that I could hear.

I sat alone. Chase had offered a spot for the date of my choice but I didn't want to clog up his wedding guest list with some dumb girl I didn't give a shit about. Deck had made me transfer to the local high school since I was living with him and his fiancé. I didn't put up a fight because I would have been an ungrateful ass not to act like I was doing at least the bare minimum when they were good enough to take me in. But my heart wasn't in it. Funny thing about school though; the more I tried to make myself invisible the more girls draped themselves across me like static cling. Mostly I gave them what they wanted and earned a few minutes of ecstasy that blotted out the pain. But when it was over I could barely look

at whatever girl I'd just fucked. Whoever she was, she didn't matter to me.

The only girl who'd ever mattered was underneath some dirt in the Emblem Memorial Cemetery.

I didn't go to Erin's funeral. I never visited her grave. It seemed there was less and less of her every day as I rejected all memories, good and bad. I didn't hold her responsible. But I had no place to put all the love that was attached to her so I let it die.

Cord's little daughters - my nieces, though no one knew it - ran past with shrieks and flowers. The sight of their linked hands made me smile. Two joyful little spirits, born to be best friends. My smile fell away. I hoped to god that life wouldn't take them from each other.

Deck was watching me. He did that a lot. He hovered, like a dad, like he knew that was what I needed even though I usually brushed him off. I gave him a slight wave with my index finger to let him know I was all right. He nodded but still looked anxious. Pretty soon he and Jenny would probably come back to the table and urge me to eat, try to get me to smile. I loved them for that, for trying. I'd do my best to cooperate, even if was just for show. I owed the whole Gentry family at least that much.

Usually I managed to avoid reflecting on the terrible events that had brought me to where I was. But tonight, in the middle of all this agonizing family tenderness, I couldn't help but think about it.

The triplets had been the ones to find me on Main Street the night of the accident. They said I'd been screaming. They

said I'd punched a light pole. I knew it was true because I'd worn a cast on my hand for six weeks and it still hurt to make a fist.

That was the night that took Erin from me forever.

That was the night my mother washed her hands of her sons for good.

That was the night Stone was hauled away in a police car because the law said he had to pay for what he'd done.

I had to take everyone else's word for the way things had gone down because I didn't remember much. Everything about those last few weeks in Emblem, the last few weeks of childhood and of happiness, now has a hazy quality. If I squinted I might be able to see a little more clearly but I didn't want to. The agony was already bad enough as it was.

The judge who'd sentenced Stone was unusually harsh because he'd lost a niece to a street racing crash. Stone wouldn't be offered parole for at least four years.

Deck hadn't been surprised when I told him that Stone was really his half brother. I only told him because I thought for sure that if he knew he'd go out of his way even more to keep Stone alive down there in that prison. I'd never gotten around to telling Stone about the things our mother said. Knowing about it now wouldn't do him much good where he was. But if Deck really had the kind of connections that everyone said he did then he also had the power to make sure Stone didn't get hurt while he was locked up down there with all the murderers and the freaks. I didn't tell Deck that was the reason. And even though Deck had asked me if there were any other secrets he ought to know about I wouldn't say a

word about Benton. Not to him, not to the triplets who still thought they were just my cousins. I didn't even react when I heard my real father, Benton Gentry, had died a few weeks ago. Everything I'd ever heard about him told the story of a terrible man I was lucky to never know.

“Thought you looked like you could use a bite to eat.” The voice was cheerful and very southern.

I looked up to see two beautiful Gentry women – Truly and Saylor – offering me a plate of cake and sympathetic smiles.

“Thanks,” I said gratefully and managed to smile back.

“How are you doing, Con?” Saylor asked as her hand brushed my shoulder in a maternal way.

“Can't complain,” I answered breezily but it didn't fool either of them. Truly and Saylor exchanged a sad look and then grew artificially cheerful as they started talking, mostly to each other, about how I should stay at Saylor and Cord's house for fall break in a few weeks. I played with my fork and bobbed my head as if I agreed it was a good idea.

“Cord could show you the ropes in the shop if you want,” Saylor suggested. She was trying to be nice, so even though learning about tattoos at Cord's shop didn't interest me at all I pretended it did.

Truly Gentry, Creed's wife, was staring at me. Without warning she reached over and gently lifted my chin. “Hold your head up,” she said tenderly. “There's no telling what beautiful things wait for you tomorrow, sweet boy.”

Once they were back on the other side of the room with their husbands and their children I reached down to cup my

hand over my left pocket ever so briefly. It was still there. Stone's latest letter. I still hadn't read it. Of the first seventeen years of my life I'd never spent a day away from my brother. Now it had been four endless months since I'd heard his voice. Chase tried to get me to ride down to Emblem for visits but I just couldn't. It's not that I hated Stone. That wasn't even possible. But I couldn't forgive him either. Every night before I closed my eyes I thought maybe the next time I opened them I'd have the guts to face my grief. And my brother. But that day hadn't come yet. Maybe it never would.

One night when I'd only been living in Deck's house for about a week, he found me on the back patio, staring up at the moonless sky as a cigarette burned between my lips. I didn't know what kind of urge had led me to walk to the corner convenience store and buy a pack. I wasn't a smoker. Stone was the smoker. I hated the taste and the smell.

Deck was an intimidating sight, even strutting around in boxers at midnight. With all his muscles and tattoos he had the look of a man who was anything but gentle. He just stood at my side and waited while I puffed on the cancer stick without inhaling before giving up and snuffing it out on the concrete. Deck might look scary but he had the kindest voice when he wanted to use it. He used it then. I'd often thought of the words he said to me that night in the dark, even though I couldn't quite make sense of them yet.

"I *know*," he'd said earnestly, "I really do. When you lose love you can't imagine you'll ever remember how to love again. You don't even want to. But that will change,

Conway. It will. And you'll find yourself looking for that love even though you may not even realize you're looking."

I couldn't remember what I said in return. Probably nothing. Deck was a wise man. But he wasn't able to tell me how to get through all the days in the middle so that I could finally come out on the other side at least halfway healed. Maybe there was no advice for that. In any case I suspected my healing moment was still a very long way off.

No one else can put me back together. I don't even know if I can do it. But even in my darkest moments I have to hope that someday I'll be whole again.

I have to hope that someday I'll have the courage to see my brother again.

I have to hope that someday I can figure out how to love again.

Because as I sit here at this wedding and watch these people with all their happy perfect imperfections I understand something I'd never realized before. Love and hope are the glue that holds us together, body and soul. We need the people we love as much as we need to breathe. Without them, we just drift. If we're lucky we don't drift forever.

That might have been what Deck was trying to tell me, that I wouldn't be drifting forever.

I hoped to hell he was right.

(NOT) THE END

BECAUSE...

THE BOYS WILL BE BACK!!

WALK: A Gentry Boys Story

(Coming May 18)

You know that if you had any honor you wouldn't take her.

But honor is something you lost a long time ago....

1513

The number of single lines you carefully scratched on a piece of college ruled notebook paper at each sunrise.

1513

The number of days you passed in a locked cage, surrounded by fierce men who did things even worse than what you did.

1513

The number of nights spent staring at the ceiling praying for just five minutes of freedom to talk to your brother. The brother you love more than anyone on earth.

The brother who hates you even more than he hates himself.

1

The number of moments it took for a tragedy to unfold and change lives, end lives, destroy lives.

1

The number that represents isolation, a loneliness worse than any prison sentence.

1

The number of girls who show up in your life and try to crack through the iron shield you've built around your heart these past four years.

One girl and her name is Evie. Beautiful. Stubborn.
Passionate.

You know that if you had any honor you wouldn't take her.
But honor is something you lost a long time ago.

Add to your Goodreads TBR:

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/28671552-walk>

EDGE : A Gentry Boys Story

(Coming July 26)

You live fast, you crash hard.

I've seen it happen.

I expect someday it'll happen to me.

My brother insists I have a death wish. He thinks if he tries hard enough, loves me well enough, he can save me from myself. But doesn't understand me anymore, doesn't recognize that I don't have any wishes left.

I only wake up in the morning to greet the rush.

Sex. Speed. Danger.

All part of the same endless appetite.

At first Roslyn didn't seem like the type that would satisfy me. Snobby, boringly mainstream, and part of a past I'd kill to forget, I should have just tapped that tight package and called it a day.

Instead I'm going to take her on the ride of her life. She just doesn't know it yet.

Add to your Goodreads TBR:

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/28671553-edge>

[AMAZON AUTHOR PAGE](#)

Gentry Boys Series

[DRAW](#)

[RISK](#)

[GAME](#)

[FALL](#)

[HOLD](#)

CROSS: A Novella (May 2016)

WALK (May 2016)

EDGE (July 2016)

Savage Series

[Born Savage](#)

Book #2 (Fall 2016)

Book #3 (Fall 2016)

Defiant MC Series

[Know Me](#)

Promise Me
Remember Me

Stand Alones

Unruly.
Reckless Point

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