

ONE: The Skoolhouse

“The marriage is over and done... its back's broken and its dead in the water, Page... and what's more, I'm getting the hell out the hock starting right now!” Eden retorted as they walked into the bar and she headed for an empty tall stool at its far corner. “Hey mister bartender,” she shouted banging hard on top of the counter. “Can we get some water of life over here sir...? I'm celebrating being a single woman again. Amelia, what's your poison honey?”

“Oh, come on now, don't be saying stupid things like that,” Page squawked feeling her feathers ruffled as Eden blatantly blanked her sister and waited for Amelia's reply.

“I'll be taking a big ass beer, Eden, because I'm looking for some hot girl fun tonight.” She quipped in her Harlan county twang, concentrating hard into a cosmetic mirror and glossing her gills with fire-engine red lipstick and swishing her long black locks out of the way.

“Hey, have you cut your hair short to look like me Page?”

“Your hair's long Amelia... whatever do you mean?” She sniffed, completely puzzled but still looking at Eden.

“If I gave your ass a motorcycle, you'd look straight outta dykes on bikes,” she grinned.

Page blatantly ignored Amelia's sarcasm and continued to look at her younger sister secretly jealous of her slim figure and natural way. “You can save your marriage Eden, it's not as if he's slept with every woman in Kentucky.... and I don't want fighting-talk whiskey, and you shouldn't either. You know it boils your blood, and you're a roomful of angry as it is. Get me a Merlot or Pinot Grigio, if they got such a thing, in this second-rate dive,” she stuffily replied looking down her nose at the room decor and its working-class folk, as if she was somewhat higher class.

“Oh... a Merlot or a Grigio.... oh, how simply divine darling? Pah! I should have guessed, how darn typical... you two-buck wine snob. You got champagne tastes on lemonade money,” she implied shaking her head. “You got your nose so high in the air, you'd drown in a rainstorm,” Eden replied in a high-faluted mocking tone, pretentiously throwing her head into the air to mimic her older sister. She flicked her hand through her long curly red locks and grabbed the barman's attention fully. “Hi honey, do me a double whiskey and water, a white, smarty-pants wine, whatever you lay your hands on,” she whispered. “And a cold beer sir. But make mine a nice sweet double malt with ice, I wanna treat me bad, and that's allowed since I ain't been out for over ten God-damn months,” she confirmed loudly for her sister's benefit, charging him into action.

“Hey, angry heads, stop being so damn nasty! We’re supposed to be having a good time tonight,” Amelia claimed, puckering her lips and finishing off her lipstick duties.

“Halleluiah to that Em, I guess at least somebody’s listening to me for once,” she agreed to her friend and then, glared at her sister again. “Shoot! You just don’t have a clue, Page, I just don’t get you’re stupid thinking sometimes. Now you just go ahead and stop for a second and listen to your crap. You’re my older kin, and I’m supposed to look up to you and follow your lead. Learn by your example and you gotta look out for me... steer me from the bad stuff, you get it...?” She paused. “I thought we were tight... I thought we were so much closer. You ain’t never got my back and hell, I told you so many times he’s hit me. You were my first port of call... my one confidant. If I’d told Mom or Pop ‘bout all of Kyle’s crap, he’d have had him hung, drawn and castrated.

“I think you should have told them way back Eden,” Amelia chipped in.

“Mom would just kill him straight out. You’re taking his side yet again, just like you always have Mark’s. Kyle’s a whoring liar and hell if he can hit a woman, he ain’t even a man, and that goes for Mark too,” she fumed.

“I’m not taking sides, Eden, all I’m saying is ask yourself do you still love him and if so, is it worth another chance? And as for watching out for you, you’re a grown woman not a little girl no more,” she maintained in her fake refined tone, fiddling incessantly in her bag as the barman placed the drinks in front of them.

“Right, that’s it... time ladies, enough already!” Amelia interrupted. “You’d better stop this damn bitching and bickering and start getting your cracked heads together before I get back,” she derided. “Cos I ain’t sitting here, bored outta ma tree all the night long, listening to you two a-holes, some ways tearing strips from each other. Now you just listen to me really well,” she rasped anxiously standing up and wiggling her voluptuous chest and frowning similar to an angry dog left in a car. “I’m going for a cigarette and to powder my bits... and there ain’t no law about that either Page Buckley... I mean all my bits, cos I’m looking for getting some lady-eeeeee action tonight, and no amount of your BS fighting is gonna stop me,” she crowed, openly pulling down on her tight top and re-positioning her ridden black pencil skirt back into place as Eden watched openly smiling.

“I’m glad you pulled them things down honey, we could see clear through to the promised land and your religion,” she teased.

“Oh, shut up Eden... don’t make me self-conscious... I know my clothes are too small. Fact is, I’m just getting a far too fat ass for my liking,” she conceded, yanking hard at her red blouse that was leaving nothing to the imagination then frantically shaking her shoulders making her huge gold earrings smack against her cheeks. “I’m too damn chubby. Now you listen to auntie Em, baby doll,” she whispered flicking her long black hair over her shoulders and leaning forward on Eden’s arm. “You know I wasn’t Kyle’s biggest fan when you gone and gotten hitched honey. That isn’t

that I'm advocating him or his ways, or any other God damn SOB man's either," she said pointing her index finger at Eden. "Cos as far as this pretty lady is concerned, all of their asses are a whole space of waste. I can get a full engine service and my suds bubbled just fine without their kind," she brassily retorted to Eden's laughter. "Oh, and as for you Page, I'm disappointed with your crabby hashing," she claimed loudly crossing her arms and leaning backwards as a few of the patrons tried to secretly zero in on her words. "You stick with your sister's heart and her decision, whatever it may be. That's a given girl," she encouraged, slamming her stiletto heel hard against the wooden floor. "Are you hearing me...? That's just what you're supposed to do... so you just go right on down and do it, girl. You're both unbelievable," she proclaimed. "It's incredible!" She clamped her hands tightly on her hips and swayed back on her heels. "He's got you both at each other's throats and he isn't even here? He'd be loving' every spoonful of this badness if he knew, that's for sure," she lectured, standing head and shoulders tall and shaking her head. She looked around, clenched her jaw then leaned forward to get close between their ears, and then put a hand on each of them making her big backside stick out to greet the quiet, amalgamated, and whispering heads. "Now when I get back, I want this arguing crap put to bed or I'm gone. As for you baby doll... stop actin' all hissy fit with a tail end on," she motioned to silent Eden. Page and her sister continued to look daggers at each other but sat deathly silent, as they watched Amelia animatedly walk away. Obstreperously flaunting all her wares for all and sundry. The barman disappeared and the sisters automatically clogged up another gear.

"Well, that's what it feels like to me, Page. You're all for him and dead against me," she raged. "And as for do I LOVE him? I HATE him! He is not the same man any more. He's not the good man I married. Maybe he was never good to start with," she explained pulling her long red hair into place. "Perhaps it was all part of the big show he put on for everyone's benefit. Maybe he's always been bad inside," she theorized. "All I know is, he changed for the worse. He's a twisted chameleon and a leopard that'll never change its spots," she surmised sipping on her whiskey as the barman walked past again. "He's a hurtful son of a bitch that dines with the Devil. Do you know he's put a claim on the house? Our house," she badgered waiting for a reaction from her sister as Page's eyes widened. She unfolded her arms, then pulled her white blouse down over her burgeoning stomach as her eyes rolled at the startling news.

"Yeah Page, that's right... our house. The one given to us by Pape," she said waiting again for any kind of reply. "The same house Langdon Dainty's trying get his hands on with Eminent Domain law. So, I got two evil asses trying to take away the place I made my home. The damn coal company might even be on Dainty's side too. It was their land after all. Shucks... as if they haven't done enough damage over the years. Mercy me!"

"Who the hell is Langdon Stanley Dainty, Eden?" Page asked in confusion.

“Who is Dainty? God Damn it! That question tells me exactly how much you listen to me,” she decried shaking her head. “I told you all about the fat son of a bitch on the phone over two weeks ago. He wants all the houses on Coal Cut lane flattened to build the highway 1-75 link road.”

“Oh erm, I was under the weather when you told me,” Page inferred looking for the easiest excuse.

“Under the weather my ass. It's your house as much as it's mine. Kyle's name ain't even on the deeds, its Pape's name, and yours and mine. The crazy fool is pissing in the breeze with that but hey, that isn't the damn point. It just shows what he's capable of the low down... aargh!” She took a deep breath and sighed to calm herself down. “He would sooner see his son homeless just to feed his drinking and womanizing ways. He makes me so mad. So mad, that I made sure he was served with the divorce papers two weeks ago. So, as I said, the marriage is over and there's nothing you or he, or anyone else can do about it. D.I.V.O.R.C.E just like sweet old Tammy Wynette said,” she explained singing the tune of the song as her sister worked out a reply.

“Wait a minute, Eden! Just think about what you're saying, please. And think about it properly. You have little Jamie to consider here,” she advised still not thinking it out thoroughly.

“What did I just tell you, Page? You still haven't listened to a damn word, have you? It's too late, and it's all over,” she retorted narrowing her eyes as she picked up her glass and slugged hard at her whiskey. “And don't you dare bring my son into this either? Jamie's the reason I'm doing it.”

“People change Eden, everything changes. Kyle could change. You gotta change with them and make allowances. Do you remember your vows; for better or for worse?”

“Allowances? Allowances my ass! Oh, my, oh my... you'd sure make a damn good politician, Page,” she said nodding and clapping her hands to mock her sister. “That statement makes about as much sense as tits on a bull!” she fumed. “You're talking crap, and you know it. And don't you dare make right what he's done or try using the Lord's words against me? I knew my vows and I understood their virtue when I said them. They were sacred to me, and now they're nothing but tainted with him with his man-on-the-make drinking ways and beating me badly. Yes, he beat me black and blue, Page. Even when I was pregnant. Those vows mean nothing to me. You hear me, Page... nothing!” She cursed, sighing to herself and hanging her head as she paused to take a breath. “They mean nothing next to diddly squat,” she raged glugging hard at her whiskey as her rant got more and more Harlan county sounding the angrier, she raged.

“They didn't mean for better or worse, or for blacker or bluer, Page. For bitcher or whorer?” She asked at, Page's face, taking another swig of whiskey. “Pah, what a bad joke. They are not the words I spoke. How about; in sickness from the belts... is that good... huh Page? Does that fit the bill better?” She shouted throwing a 'hate-you' face at her sister's shocked eyes. “You know what, Page, dollars to doughnuts, I swear they were the vows you took with Mark. But they sure weren't mine,” she snarled.

“No! Now, that's just horrible,” Page protested, clearing her throat and biting her fingernails then quickly glancing around the room as if every person in the bar's eyes were attuned to Eden's voice.

“None of that is true, Eden. You're acting like a poor me.”

“Huh? Acting like a poor me? Is that so?” Eden replied recoiling in her chair. “And I guess you'd call an Alligator a lizard you, stupid fool! You're plain deluded, Page,” Eden said quietening her mouth to think. “Mmm... I'm a poor me, huh...? Well, I bet you declare that to your holier-than-thou ass every time Mark punches you up and down the stairs.”

“He's never punched me around the house; how dare you insinuate.”

“Insinuate? Is that the word you're looking for?” She snapped. “The next thing I know, you'll be calling me pedantic,” she replied drinking the last of her whiskey and then slamming the empty glass down on the bar so hard, the whole bar room went silent.

The bartender spun his head around to give Eden an appropriate frown as Page remained formally silent as Eden impatiently scraped her glass along the uneven bar surface to get the barman's attention. She lifted her glass in the air, smiled and then shook it from side to side as he angrily approached.

“You were always top of the class at big words Page. You swallowed a God- damn dictionary when we were kids, but you're still completely useless at common sense. Useless of affairs of the heart and the good and the right. Fact is... you should have just choked on the damn dictionary,” she scolded as the barman appeared right in front of her.

“Hey, mister. Yes, that's right, more whiskey. You catch on quickly, unlike my dumb-ass sister. Set 'em up again, sweet-cheeks and make mine a double-double this time. P l e a s e.” The bartender reached blindly behind himself, keeping his eyes firmly trained on Eden and picked up a bottle of whiskey.

“Ok, Page. So, let me get this straight in my head, once and for all.” Eden said wetting her lips and going in for the kill:

“I'm sorry... slap, I do... slap, apologize... slap,” she goaded her sister, hitting her wrist at the same time. “That was a poor choice of words... slap... stupid old me. Not when he's punching you. When he's SLAPPING your ass all over the house. Can you

hear this people,” she shouted, standing up and glancing around the crowded room with her finger pointing down at the bowed head of her sister? “Physical and mental marital abuse right here! And don't you dare deny it, girl? I've seen you caked with make-up to cover the bruises and hiding behind your sunglasses:

“Hi, I'm Page Buckley and I enjoy nothing more than hanging from my ceiling as a human punch-bag!” She said, mimicking her sister's snobby voice. “What bull-crap you talk. And you stay with him and you take it? You're a damn tragic comedy of a woman and a self-torturous fool. Do you honestly think I'm as stupid as you?”

Page did nothing but sat deathly silent and looked away as Eden impatiently waited for an answer, then angrily banged down her glass.

“If brains were leather, you wouldn't have enough to saddle a June bug! Hell, I bet there's a tree stump in a Louisiana swamp with more brains than you,” she shrilled as Page's head sank lower. “Even the kids have told me what he does to you,” she explained as Page suddenly looked up. “Oh, yes. You'll look at me now, won't you? Aaron told me Mark picked him up off the floor and raised his fist to his face,” she stormed. “They rang me up crying their little hearts out, Page. They were both scared out of their wits in case Mark or you found out they'd told me. You're living a bad and sad hollow existence of denial and fear, and I am not going to end up like that Page. I refuse to end up like you. I will not! I swear on my child's life, you hear me. NEVER!” She screamed.

“Keep your voice down Eden, you're embarrassing me.”

“Me embarrassing you? You, don't need any help on that score, miss posh-ass. Living a life like you, IS living a lie. You embarrass yourself just fine on your own,” she snapped. “Shall I tell you what I want, Page? I want to be healed. I want to be saved, in love and happy. I have been missing the rapture this whole time. I want to feel whole and loved again. That will never happen if he's by my side, or with him around me, or with him anywhere nearby. Or with you, sitting there like you know everything and trying to paper over the cracks,” she whispered as she took, Pages hand and the barman returned:

“Well butter my butt and call me a biscuit, thank you, honey,” she said to him, smiling and changing the mood. She nodded and thanked him as he put down her glass, noticing a young woman who seemed a little more interested in the situation than she should be.

“What the hell are you looking at, missy?” Eden grimaced, quizzing the dyed-blond girl who was now looking away as she waited for the barman to serve her. “Are you enjoying listening to my grief and my sad ass pain? Oh, I'm such a sorry-assed drunken single mother, aren't I? Eden asked as if that was what the young girl was thinking. “If you keep on staring at me, I'll give you something you can be sad about. Do you want some of my pain? I make it to order, right here. It's free too,” she said lifting her clenched fist. “I'll slap you to sleep, then slap you for sleeping,” she cursed taunting the fear-faced teenage girl.

“Eden, stop it, right now! That's not fair. Leave her be and stop taking your baggage out on her,” Page interjected, feeling her sister wasn't being fair, but feeling more than thankful she, herself was out of the firing line.

“She's looking at me like she's seen a whole world of life. The girl hasn't seen anything yet, Page,” Eden explained turning back to face the girl. “Not saying anything, huh? Has the cat got your tongue?” She questioned picking up her drink. “Stop judging me or this cat will have its claws dug in you in a second,” she purred, waiting for any kind of reply. “Good. So, keep this zipped and keep that out,” she motioned pointing at her nose and mouth feeling bad about her crass behaviour. “Sorry honey, but you don't even know your ass from a hole in the ground yet, so just order your drink and disappear like a good little girl,” Eden motioned her dismissal with quick a wave of her wrist.

“Hey, and don't you be going far with that whiskey bottle, mister bartender,” she shouted across the room. “This glass right here has an empty heart to fill, so it's gonna need filling up all the time. Hey, why don't you save yourself a heck of trouble and leave the bottle right here?” She asked, winking at him as he returned and leant across the bar and close to her face. “I'll take good care of it. It's a nice place you got here mister, what's it called again?” She asked realising he was angrier than she thought and she was being a little more than a handful.

“It's Brannigans Skoolhouse and keep your voice down. There are good folk in here. I value my business and their custom. I don't want them scared away by the likes of you. Deal with your heartaches and get over yourself. Then you can get over him,” he advised as she looked wide-eyed shocked and silent. Page looked straight back at her and shrugged her shoulders out of the debacle. Eden scowled over her full glass at the pair of them.

“Are you two in this together or what...! Out to get me, huh...? I'm here to forget my troubles and have a good time. That's the whole damn reason I'm even here at all,” she frowned. “To celebrate my divorce and move on. Isn't that what hanging out at the Skoolhouse is all about, mister? You two ain't my parents, you pair of dumbasses.”

“Please calm down, Eden. You're embarrassing everybody in the room now. I'm very sorry sir, she's so contrary she'd float upstream,” Page retorted, resorting to Eden's tactics as a few more people turned around to tune in to the commotion.

“And you're so highfaluting, you think your crap tastes like sherbet,” Eden responded as Page grabbed Eden's arm.

“We're not ganging up at you. You're just getting an inferiority complex and repeating yourself. So, go easy on the fire water or you'll be on your back and I for one am certainly not carrying you out of this place. You'll be drunker than Cooter Brown if you carry on like this.”

“Oh, shut up about the damn whiskey, Page. You're all gurgling and have no guts with the big words. You're so full of shit! I'll inferiority complex your face in a minute,” she beefed, grinding together her teeth. “You just don't get it to do you, Page? I'm done taking heed from you, about anything. You're wasting your breath. Kyle hit me more than one time, you hear me, Page? He slapped me, kicked me and punched me! He even kicked Bailey for no good reason,” she chided, taking another hard slug of her drink then banging it on the bar as the bartender turned around and watched, still in earshot of every word. “He's an out-of-work, drunken bum, who cares for nobody and nothing but himself. I wouldn't walk across the street to piss on him if he was on fire. On top of everything else, he's whoring. Getting his home comforts elsewhere. And knowing that, you tell me to forgive him?” She asked looking at Page, and then the innocent barman. “He's slept with other women. I know that for a fact,” she said stopping herself from talking by putting her hand over her mouth and feeling her hard shell begin to crack. “Now forgive me for being just a heartache or two upset, Page, but knowing that. Well, it cuts deep and it hurts so much.” She spun her seat to the bar and clasped her hands between her knees, then bowed her head. “I'm scared of him, Page. It just couldn't go on anymore. And still, he keeps coming back to the house in the middle of the damn night, drunk. I'm scared for me and my boy. Jamie is the most important person in my life.” Page and the barman listened in silence as Eden's voice began to shake and falter with emotion. She let go of her hand and put the other one across her mouth, then bent lower as her head slumped forward. She bit hard on her finger then started to openly and uncontrollably weep. She sat there, feeling completely helpless, shaking and trembling as Page quickly leant over from her stool and crowded her arms around her sister's shoulders as Eden tried to blatantly resist. Shaking and wriggling her body away from her sister, until she gave into, Page's caring grip as her floodgates finally opened, releasing all her pent-up aggression, anger and sadness in one go.

She continued to shake and blubber, whilst trying to hide from every open eye in the bar. She tried everything to shield her face from the room as Page stood up and threw herself tighter into her. She felt as if every face in the room had watched her fall apart. Then, unemotionally and un-embarrassed, they had just turned their backs to ignorantly resume their conversations. A couple playing pool had made eye contact with Eden, then looked at each other blankly. Feeling lost as to how to compensate her, they had silently turned back to their game feeling at a loss, and powerless to the beautiful stranger's tears.

After a second or two, Eden slowly pulled herself together. She wiped the tears from her cheeks onto her sleeve as Amelia reappeared from the toilet and looked across the room at the sad faces and Eden's waterworks. She ambitiously strode across the bar room with her usual high-heeled clicking canter to immediately address her friends' plight, as Page continued to hug her sibling and whisper in her ear:

“Oh, Eden. I'm so very sorry baby. I now know exactly what you're talking about so quit making things worse. He's a pig and a rotten apple. Just forget about him and

move on and that's straight out, coming from me. I love you, and I've only ever wanted the best for you. But after what you just said, to hell with him. I now know things have gone too far to ever make it right," Page admitted walking behind her sister and resting her head on her shoulder. She wrapped her arms around her waist as Eden grabbed her sister's hands, mirroring her kin's movement and snuggling into her tight.

On hearing every angered word, the bartender quickly walked to the far end of the bar and returned with a box of tissues and placed them by her side. She unearched her nuzzled head from her sister's chest to see him looking helpfully down at her as Page pulled a tissue from the box and Amelia appeared.

"Come on now honey, dry your eyes he's not worth it. None of them is," Page admitted.

"Now you're talking a little bit of sense at last, Page," Amelia agreed nodding in agreement from behind her and coming to the fore. She put her arm on Eden's shoulder to pull them all together in a group hug as Eden finally smiled and stopped her sniffing and tears.

"Not worth it, except him. Maybe he's a good man?" Eden suggested looking up and straight at the bartender as he pulled another tissue from the box for her. He smiled and offered it to her, then turned around to grab four clean glasses from behind the bar.

"You were getting a little sorry-ass, drunken-bum yourself there for a minute, young lady," he said as she sat back in her chair and thankfully took the tissue from his hand.

"Thank you, sir. I, I sure was," she acquiesced. "I'm going to be pulling myself together and stop being a damn fool," she asserted nodding her head and gritting her teeth. He grabbed the whiskey bottle and poured it into her glass, then repeated the gesture in the other glasses. Then, he placed the bottle down on the bar, right beside her. "Shall we make a little toast on that then?" He asked nodding at Page and raising his glass. They looked at each other, then at Eden and grabbed the glasses from the bar and saluted together. "This is on me. Compliments of the house."

"Thank you, sir. You are so kind. So, the Skoolhouse you say," she sniffed. "I take it she's all your work?"

"Me, and the little lady. I sunk everything we have into this place. We're doing ok, I suppose. Sometimes it's hard when there's no money left in the working man's pocket. But that's just like everything these days, isn't it? You just put on your best smile and keep on going with the head down," he explained.

"The place is neat," Amelia said casually looking around then sitting back down and crossing her legs. "Even the funky signs on the toilets are cool. There's a big red bra daubed on the ladies and a chamber pot boy on the door for the dudes. It's great. Have you seen them, Eden? There's even a plaque over the top: 'No scratching eyes

or pulling hair' and well... would you look at the hot clientele... golly! If it's good enough for us witches, I guess it's good enough for every damn coon-hound," she grinned. "You sure got one great place that's ours for the taking, ladies," she bubbled looking at the sisters. The bartender smiled at Amelia's comment as Eden glanced over to look at the sign above the toilets. "Sounds good okay me, girls. Just, be happy and have a fine old time," he said smiling and walking away.

"Oh, he's gone, sir. That damn husband will be clean out of her mind," Amelia shouted. "It's girl time for me, so let's have a little fun. We'll be a long time dead, huh?" Amelia ran her fingers through Eden's hair and across her teary cheeks. "Hey, come on hot lips, you can always change things around, and have me. I still got that teenage crush on you. Come here, Angel face. MWAH!" Amelia grabbed Eden's head and kissed her on the cheek then moved back out of slapping distance. "You'll always be a yummy mummy to me, ain't that right Page?" Amelia smiled as Page nodded and Eden burst out laughing.

TWO: The Lecture

"That's correct sir. We are viscerally intertwined with every living thing on this shared, spinning Earth," he agreed, responding to the question that was put to him by a highly interested audience member. As he continued his stage presentation, he was feeling pleased with the audience's over-keen interest, as he'd been talking non-stop, for well over an hour and a half. He once again glanced at his watch and made a positive decision to ignore the time constraints he'd previously set himself. After all, the subject was far too important for everyone.