

**TO BE THE BEST**  
**Book Two: Rematch**

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## Chapter 1

One final heave. Sean felt weak and more than a little dizzy as he steadied himself in the bathroom stall. Two primary thoughts crossed his mind: He needed a ride home and he needed to be coherent enough once he got there to slice up the ten-pound turkey breast sitting in the fraternity refrigerator. He had promised the cook that he would do so and he wasn't a man who broke his promises.

"What are you doing to yourself, MacCallister?" he whispered, knowing full well that the time he was spending in the men's room at Whitey's was a direct result of this evening's activities. Evening's activities? He would not let himself admit that the lines had blurred and his drinking binge had truly begun mid-afternoon.

Sean flushed the toilet and sat down, fully clothed. "It's a good thing Whitey's can pull in customers based on the atmosphere in its three bars," the young man thought. "They could never win customers based on restroom cleanliness."

He mumbled some Jimmy Buffett lyrics under his breath. The master of the parrot heads had sung about being drunk for over two weeks and hitting rock bottom. Given Sean's recent track record, two weeks didn't seem like much of a stretch. He pondered whether he should be ashamed of living his life in such a wayward fashion or inspired that he could be following in the footsteps of a very successful musician and businessman.

He closed his eyes and let himself relax for a moment. How could he have slid so far? A year ago at this time, he had been sober for over four months. This year, he felt a sense of pride whenever he made it through an entire day.

"Last year was different," he told himself. In many regards, the statement was true. Since his concussion delivered by Kevin Lakes eight months earlier, Sean had certainly not been the same person. While his personality had remained somewhat stable, his thinking capacity had changed completely. He couldn't concentrate. His once photographic memory had been replaced by one needing to review his text books three to four times in order to thoroughly grasp a concept.

His grades had suffered as well. Even with the extra effort, he often earned B's which he had once considered a disgrace. He was on his way to his first C in one of his Engineering classes before he decided to drop it. He was ashamed of that move as it ruined his chances of graduating a semester early.

Even worse than his strained mental capacity was his pattern of recurring migraines. They were more frequent now. He didn't mind so much when he got the nausea first. At least that gave him time to prepare. The worst ones were those that split his brain out of nowhere like a shaft of lightning and sent him to the floor.

That was the kind he'd had this morning. Fortunately, Kelly had been there for him, like always. His faithful roommate had put a blanket over Sean's head and given him a pillow so that he could ride-out the pain without the added stimulation of light and sound.

What would he do without his best friend? Then again, even that relationship had seen signs of strain. Kelly had insulted him last week, mentioning that Sean had better watch his drinking before he became like his dad. It had been all that Sean could do to keep himself from hitting the big guy. "I'm NOTHING like my dad!" Sean had informed him angrily. And besides, who was Kelly to lecture Sean about drinking? A year earlier, the big man was doing all he could to get Sean to fall off the wagon. The young man got mad just thinking about it.

Yet, despite the occasional heated arguments, Kelly was still the one person Sean fully trusted. The two had been roommates so long that some guys around the fraternity joked that they were legally married via common-law in some states. Financially, they were both in dire straits and received daily calls from collection agencies. Their only transportation was Sean's decrepit Galaxie 500, while their only window to the entertainment world came through Kelly's TV. If they hadn't been living in a fraternity, surrounded by friends who knew they would make good on promises to pay back-rent, both would likely be sleeping in the street.

There was a bond there, beyond just the need both had for someone to shoulder part of their financial burden. Kelly was always Sean's main confidant and "go to" person and vice versa.

He stood up but quickly sat down again. He needed to feel better soon. He had a job to go to tomorrow.

Sean smiled as he thought about his job. He would be coaching wrestling again at Riverside High School. He looked forward to the physical activity and even more so to the wrestlers themselves.

In particular, he thought about Nick Castle. “My protégé,” he thought. The boy had begun to realize his potential half-way through last year’s season. Sean was sure that Nick could take the next step and place at state this year, maybe even win a state title. Why not? Who would stop him? Heck, the boy was probably studying wrestling videos right now, if not actually running or working out.

Who indeed? In addition to technique and attitude, Nick would now have a head coach who actually cared. Sean had applied for the position when Coach Granger resigned during the summer. While he was frustrated when he did not get the call, this frustration was short lived when he discovered that Cole Tyler, the former assistant coach for the University had accepted.

Cole had saved Sean’s life eight months earlier. The least Sean could do was feel happy for him in his new role, even if it did mean that Sean had to go without the medical benefits provided to the head coach but not to assistants. Since his concussion, his debt from medical care had skyrocketed, accumulating to the point that he no longer dared go near the clinic.

Again, Sean got to his feet, this time, more slowly. He steadied himself against the stall wall and opened the door. Cautiously, he walked to the sink.

He leaned on the basin and looked in the mirror. He didn’t even have the same face as a year ago. A deep scar ran down his left cheek. His hair had gotten shaggy and he hadn’t shaved in three days. As he splashed water on his cheeks and eyes he took a moment to savor the cool refreshment.

“It will be better tomorrow,” he thought. “Everything will be better tomorrow.”

He wiped his face with his shirt and staggered out to find his friends. They would get him home. Slicing the turkey would be up to him.

## Chapter 2

**W**ith your head up like that, you're asking to be thrown."

Coach Granger's gravelly voice was still echoing in Nick's ears when he realized he was airborne and his stomach lurched ... followed by the thud ... followed by the excruciating pain which spread like a gas-fed fire almost up to his knee.

Lying in a crumpled heap on the mat he had pleaded, looking Coach MacCallister in the eye, "Don't make me throw this match."

The memory jarred him awake.

"That was then ..." he told himself, already out of bed and two steps across his room, headed for his tape and ankle brace, yet unable to shake the horrible scene from his mind. He was taped, dressed, and ready within minutes, "... this is now."

The state title was out there and it wasn't going to get any closer while Nick lay in bed. He left the room and headed down the steps with his coach's words still resonating through him, "You're not throwing it, kid. You're saving yourself for the future."

"Darn right!" the boy said aloud, throwing on his jacket and leaving for his paper route and morning run.

The next phase of Nick's future began today. In less than ten hours, he would return to the mat for the season's first practice. Every ounce of his body was ready.

## Chapter 3

Cole Tyler rolled over in bed again. Was it time to get up yet? The alarm clock showed 5:17. He gently slipped out from beneath the covers, taking care not to wake the woman who lay beside him.

It wasn't the time that he had planned to wake up. Then again, neither was 1:00, 2:45, or 4:00, but his mind was racing and pulled him to consciousness again and again. Now, for the fourth time in the last several hours, he repeated the ritual of turning off his alarm clock and quietly crossing the floor on two re-built knees.

Donning his robe, he opened the bedroom door and stepped into the hall. He paused for a moment to look back at his bed. She hadn't stirred. "She must be awake," he thought. His many trips to the kitchen were sure to spawn an argument later in the day. "Ugh," he lamented.

He returned to the kitchen table to continue working through his other problems.

Cole was not the type to take an assignment lightly and he had two large boxes on the table to prove it. Each was filled with newspaper clippings, tournament programs, match footage and various other memorabilia from his university recruiting trips the prior year.

Riverside had placed in the bottom quartile at the prior year's state tournament. School administration repeatedly reminded Cole that the team's best hope for a championship had died the night of the conference tournament and that another standout had been injured in the same tournament but Cole considered this a cop-out. He needed a team that would produce results, not scenarios of how things should have been better.

"An excuse is like a butt, everyone has one," was a favorite saying of his. He studied the styles of some of history's great coaches ... Vince Lombardi, Herb Brooks ... these men didn't clamor for the love of their players on day one. They led their teams, won their respect and the results followed.

He again, as in past hours, pulled out the roster that he had compiled from one-on-one interviews with all of the boys who had signed up for the team. He had subsequently modified where

certain individuals would fall in the line-up but, even then, he did not like what he saw. He had ten wrestlers with substantial varsity experience, which meant that a minimum of four of his fourteen positions would be held by newcomers.

Of those ten experienced wrestlers, the nine who had wrestled the prior season had a combined winning percentage of 51%. "Ugh," he thought again. The scenario got worse as he looked at the paper. The three wrestlers with the best prior records were all lumped together. Kevin Hermanns was their only returning wrestler to have placed at state. He was currently slotted at 152 pounds where he had a solid shot at placing third but little to no chance of placing higher.

Occupying the neighboring weight classes were the two Castle brothers. Nick, who had shown some promise late in the past season, was currently slotted at 145. While the boy had drive and had developed some tools, Cole was disappointed at his lack of ability to motivate his teammates. If the team was going to be a success, it had to have leaders to motivate the masses. From what he could tell, Nick and Kevin had held the title of "leader" over the off-season but had failed to find anyone to follow them. He would need to find ways to push some buttons and light a fire under those two.

The final entry on Cole's list was the one that intrigued the coach the most. Ron Castle's return to the line-up was one of the reasons that Cole had even considered this job. After an amazing sophomore year and injury-laden junior year, Cole wondered exactly what the boy could accomplish in his senior season. The 140-pound weight class in which he was currently slotted had some solid competitors, but it did not hold returning champions like the two at 152 or Travis Spegidos at 135.

This team's initial lack of clear championship contenders would not keep him from making them great. He would bring in football players, track stars and any other athlete he could find to add depth to the roster. These characters would beef-up his non-existent junior varsity program and provide competition for his varsity. They would also add a lot of extra work to his plate.

Cole rubbed his eyebrows as he gently shook his head. As if it were not enough that his team was in disarray, he had been handed a coaching staff that may need more guidance than the wrestlers themselves.

One assistant coach was a newcomer, Randolph Kreitzer. As far as Cole could tell, the man had no interest in the position beyond the fact that it put him in a better position politically. He was the

assistant principal at the school and, from what Cole had heard, had been passed over for several principal positions. Titles had never impressed Cole so, while it was frustrating that the man knew little about wrestling or coaching, it was downright disturbing that this man was Cole's assistant as well as his boss; not a situation that Cole would have readily sought out.

The only real benefit he could see to having the man around was in possibly leveraging Kreitzer's political clout to update the team's gear and equipment after several years of under-investment.

His second coach, Sean MacCallister, had a year of coaching experience under his belt but could prove to be a detriment as well. Cole's history with the man had been limited but intense. In addition to a few conversations in which Sean had tried to get him to look at Riverside wrestlers for scholarships, Cole had broken up two fights that Sean had gotten into, the second of which had seen Cole send a man to the hospital. This incident and the related assault charges had cost Cole his assistant coach position at the University.

Whether MacCallister was a bad egg or just had bad luck remained to be seen. Cole's only recent contact with the man had been an outing at a bar in which he saw the man completely inebriated mid-afternoon. The main point in the assistant coach's favor was the support and admiration he had from the team as evidenced by multiple glowing comments from the wrestlers. Yet, if MacCallister was going to be the "Good Cop" to Cole's "Bad Cop," he wouldn't do so as a drunk.

He put his tablet back in the box alongside the practice routine for the next two weeks.

More than anything else, he wanted to create wrestlers who would make something of themselves and create results by working hard. The results were the question mark right now as he knew that his mere presence would ensure the hard work.

"Oh yes," Cole thought, "they will work hard."

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