

After surviving a lifetime of abuse, Anna Madison, and her daughter Meg, are starting a new life filled with promise and hope. But their dreams are threatened by the eventual destruction of their home.

Weak Strength

By Debra Colby

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WEAK
STRENGTH

A Novel

DEBRA COLBY

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Print ISBN: 978-1-958892-85-5

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-745-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.

2024

First Edition

Prologue

The woman walked briskly across the street; although it was still too early for the morning commuters, she hurried anyway. She knew that if she wanted to get the best spot to passively panhandle, she would need to be there before the others.

The loud crunch of the autumn leaves beneath her feet as she crossed the park annoyed her. As soon as this false summer was over she knew what awaited her, sharp winds, freezing temperatures, wet feet, and frost-bitten fingers.

This was her fifth winter in this city and with each year that passed, she felt the cold pulse of winter deeper into her tired body. She'd left Florida to return to Maine in hopes of making more money but soon discovered that there were dozens of others hoping to do the same thing.

She'd been to many towns and cities over the years, but once in Florida, she had decided to stay awhile. After ten years though, she had grown to hate everything about it; the ever-present smell of poverty and despair, the constant threat of hurricanes, and the unrelenting heat and humidity. She had longed to return to Maine, with its mild temperatures, changing seasons

and where the stench of decay and death didn't linger on her body.

Her plan was to return to her hometown of Newingfield. She'd left there over forty years ago, ruined, broke and with a heart full of hate for the people who had made her into the person she was today, Frank Woodruff and Everett Madison. It had been many years since she'd seen either of them, but she'd never forgotten them or what they'd done to her.

It had taken her three months, but she'd hitchhiked her way from Florida back to Maine and landed smackdab in the middle of Portland. At first, she'd loved it, her corners were uncrowded, and she was able to make a decent amount of money. Five years later though, things had changed. She was older now and found herself challenged daily by a new form of street hustler; ones who were stronger, younger, hungrier, and more aggressive. They had no guilt over strong-arming her and others to get what they wanted.

She'd been punched, beaten, and had weapons pulled on her so many times that she'd lost count. She wasn't an easy mark though; she oftentimes gave as good as she got. She had long ago learned the importance of a sharp blade stuffed up inside her shirt sleeve. She felt no remorse in using it either. To her, it was just self-defense and survival. A cut along the side of the face or the neck or a quick thrust in the stomach

stopped her attackers in their tracks and gave her time to run away. They called her crazy, but she was alright with that. Crazy went a long way in keeping people away.

After crossing the park, she made her way to the median on State Street, she hated working the medians, but the tourists were gone and it was where the greatest number of locals passed by on a daily basis, and this particular median was one of the busiest spots downtown.

There were three lanes of traffic coming from Park Street, which led to Forest Ave or straight across to I-295, with all lanes stopping at the lights for a good five minutes. This spot could usually get her a full money can, by midday.

Once on the State Street median, the woman bent to pick up the half-smoked cigarette butts that littered the median, knowing she could sell those butts, for change later. She placed the butts in a plastic baggie and shoved them into her coat pocket. From her other coat pocket, she pulled out her mittens and knit cap. She tucked her silver-streaked red hair into her hat, then belted the sash on her coat tighter around her bony body. She wound her scarf twice around her neck, and then prepared herself for another soul-sucking day of begging.

She lifted her sign up in front of her and put on her down and out face. She hated the sign; she thought it was redundant; but it was necessary. She had learned long ago the difference between passive and aggressive begging. She had watched others assault drivers or passersby with threats and confrontation and seen how that kind of intimidation would result in handcuffs around their wrists. A jail cell, though warm for a night, wasn't where she wanted to spend her time.

She'd been there for about ten minutes when she saw Zipped-Up Zeke coming her way, with his mouth set in its usual grimace. She knew he was going to give her shit, but she didn't care, he was nothing but a skaghead anyway. He stepped out into traffic and flipped off the cars that honked at him as he made his way to the median.

He stood beside her, arms crossed and breathing heavily. "The fuck, Cindy! This is my spot, why the fuck you in it?"

Cindy backed away from his putrid breath and the sight of his rotted teeth. She wanted to puke from just looking at him but held back her disgust.

Instead, she gave him a wide smile that showed off her still intact and bright teeth. "Morning to you too, Zeke."

"Fuck you! Get the fuck outta my spot!"

Cindy made a show of looking around. “Nope. I don’t see your name anywhere.”

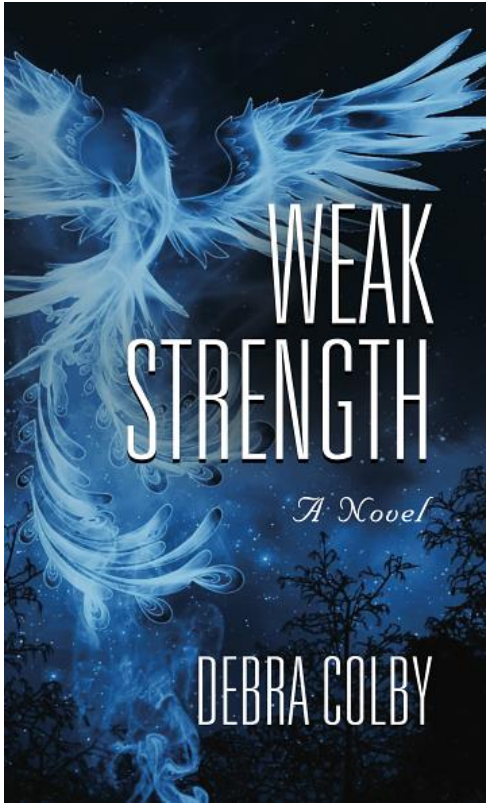
The smugness in her voice caused Zeke to clench his fists. “You know damn well this is my spot until noon.”

“Well, then I guess you should’ve hauled your lazy ass out here earlier and you might be standing here instead of me. Looks like you’re gonna need to stand center street today,” Cindy pointed to the median in the center of Forest Avenue, “lights red Zeke, you might make it across before it changes...or not. If we’re lucky, maybe you’ll get plowed down today.”

Cindy let the blade she had hidden beneath her sleeve slip into her hand. She held it close to her leg and Zeke scowled as the sun glinted off it.

Cindy leaned in close to him. “Now get the fuck away from me!”

Zeke flipped her off and hurried across Forest Avenue to reach the median before the light changed. She knew he’d be glaring at her all day but didn’t care. She also knew that once he got enough change in his tin, he’d go to the nearest dealer, shoot up and then be comatose until well into tomorrow, forgetting this entire conversation.



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