



## SOUND OFF

*...He doesn't pay attention to you? Show him someone who will...*

What a way to spend their anniversary, mentally dividing furniture not worth a dime, and considering extra-curricular plumbers and attorneys.

She neared Congressman Kerr's house and slowed her gait. All appeared quiet. The scaffolding now stood only on the west side of the house, as if bragging about the progress made in mere days, and the painting crew had gone. Harley's truck was back, and because he wasn't repairing any exterior trim, Mya assumed he was tending to something more intimate indoors. Better him than another woman's husband—specifically Mya's. She imagined Harley romancing her neighbor in a remote part of the house, Sharon's knees pinned to her shoulders, and his tongue working fast between her thighs.

Mya should be so lucky. As she crossed the street on an angle toward her own home, she imagined today was the day she *would* be. Visions of a pleasing hunk—wearing nothing more than a tool belt and waiting beyond the door—danced in her head. Seeing as her husband kept a safe distance from the list of things to do at home, she had two choices. Take Bianca's ridiculous advice and evoke some jealousy, assuming Dale would notice, or live with disappointment...

ALSO BY PENNY DAWN

*Ancient History*  
*Blue Silver: Making Noise*  
*Measuring Up*  
*Rolling In Clover*  
*Salute*  
*Wake-Up Call*

# SOUND OFF

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BY

PENNY DAWN

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# SOUND OFF

## AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

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*For my brother, Ken, and his wife, Laura,  
whom I consider my sister. They know the pain of side jobs,  
inconsistent paychecks, and the challenge involved in  
the upkeep of a home built in the Stone Age.*

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A lifetime ago, in stagnant August heat, Mya Reese met her husband on the corner of Ida Street and Sycamore Place, where he'd been repairing rotted siding on Congressman Kerr's house. The moment she saw him, she knew he was the man for her. Everything about Dale was agile, and, even from a distance, his large hands looked strong and capable, as if they could stroke a frigid woman into a flame. Hell, had he used his fingers solely for changing channels, he would have forever changed the remote control with his touch. But he didn't have the body of a couch potato—and to this day, not an ounce of fat marred his trim physique.

His muscles, carved out of caramel-colored skin, had glistened with sweat that day, and his wild brown hair had curled with the humidity. Worn jeans had hung low on his hips, exposing the waistband of his underwear and the thin strip of hair climbing from the glorious unknown toward his navel. A smudged, white T-shirt lay on the grass

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at his feet.

No breeze blew that day. And thank the Lord for that. Right there in the congressman's courtyard, he'd stood like a granite statue in the center of a fountain and turned the garden hose to his body, drenching the mop atop his head, dousing his clothing, work boots and all. Moments later, after her striking her down with a lightning bolt of a blue-eyed stare, he'd stripped off his soaked jeans and climbed into his truck in boxers shorts, his tan skin bleeding through the thin material.

She'd gasped with the Greek god-like picture of him then, and again now, as she remembered the sight—ten years and three children later. Too bad reality had settled into their paradise. She rarely looked at him like that anymore. He never gave her reason.

Hard to believe he'd lost the will to woo her, considering a month before their marriage, he'd zapped her twenty times over. It was then he'd surprised her by purchasing an enormous Victorian lady in the heritage district of town, across from the congressman's place. Their days would end, he'd said, where their passionate love affair had begun—if only in their minds—the day he'd taken off his clothes to entertain the beautiful strawberry-blonde with the drop-dead gorgeous legs.

He'd given her the most extravagant wedding gift her friends and family had ever heard of, and in her mind, the house, and his impulsive purchase of it, equated to love as big as the structure itself. Every stylist at Head's Up Beauty Salon, where she still worked, envied her, not only because he'd bought the house—they'd agreed to laboriously restore it to its fullest potential over the course of their marriage—but because she'd snagged such a thoughtful, romantic man. The day he'd presented her with the deed, she'd almost—*almost*—succumbed to taking his last name.

"I got it for a steal," he'd confessed the moment he carried her across the threshold. At the time, she didn't know what he'd paid for



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the house, but whatever the dollar amount, she was fairly certain he'd paid too much. Although they'd moved from a one-bedroom apartment into a twenty-three-room mansion, each nook and cranny was in disrepair and in desperate need of renovation. Yet the sheer size of the place had overwhelmed and pleased her, and despite the dust-covered walnut floors, he'd dropped his tool belt, shimmied out of his work jeans, and made love to her—deep and slow—on the dining room floor, promising all the while to transform their drab, decaying residence into a sparkling palace for her, his queen.

The two-bedroom cottage in Channel Lake, where she'd grown up, easily fit into the front parlor of the monstrosity on Ida Street. But Mya often wondered what life might have been like had they purchased a more modest home. Ten years later, the Victorian was still in disrepair. Upkeep was challenging, to say nothing of the expense, and her husband, now a master carpenter, worked side jobs and overtime to pay for their never-ending renovations. And he never commented on her legs anymore—or her beauty.

Neither of them over the age of thirty-two, and they were dying. As much as she hated to admit it, it was true. He'd stopped trying to impress her long ago, and she'd stopped caring. They'd grown, but in opposite directions. Perhaps it was time to call a lawyer, get her ducks in a row. Leaving him was inevitable.

"There's a new water stain on the dining room ceiling." At five in the morning, Mya sipped too-hot coffee in the dim moments before Dale left for a job site, the only alone time they would manage today.

"Josh's sink still leaks." He bit off a chunk of bagel and clipped his tape measure to his tool belt. "Maybe he moved the bucket again."

"Maybe the bucket's a band-aid on a gunshot wound."

"Mya"—he tucked his hair under a baseball hat and fixed her with an impatient stare—"you know it's on my list."

"Your list." She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Funny how

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this house is always at the bottom of your list.”

“It has to be. We aren’t paying customers. I filled out some paperwork with the village to see if we can—”

“I can’t live like this. Nothing’s fixed, nothing works. Nothing looks nice. We’re in constant construction, and everything’s dirty all the time. I—”

“I’ll have plenty of time to work on it once winter hits. I have to work while the getting’s good. You know that.”

*Would the getting ever be good enough?* She’d tolerated ten miserable summers—without air conditioning, mind you—for winter time off, but something always came up. It took a lot of natural gas to heat the sieve with twelve-foot ceilings they called a home, and they’d kept multiple doctors in practice warding off pneumonia once the arctic breezes started to blow through rattling windows. Astronomical heating bills, doctor bills, bills up the yin-yang had always sent the man of the house to the union hall when winter hit. Commercial outfits were always hiring for indoors work, and any work brought more money than unemployment.

But winter never hit pay dirt as far as their house went. Their personal projects progressed only inches in warm weather, but she’d learned winter meant not only delays, but standstills.

“We’ve tried to make it work, but we can’t do this. This house needs too much work. We got another notice from the village. We have to repaint by next summer or we’ll be fined. Again.”

“I guess my evenings will be full by spring then.”

“You’re going to paint it on your own? You can’t! It’ll take you months just to scrape it.”

“Do you have an extra ten grand? Because that’s what a painter will cost.”

Of course she didn’t have extra cash. She didn’t clear much more than ten grand a year at the salon, once she paid ballet tuition and little

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league fees. “By the time the house is finished, we’ll be in pine boxes.”

“So, when we’re gone, the kids can fight over it. At least we’ll leave them something of value.”

“A standard four-bedroom, two-and-half bath with floors that don’t creak has value, too.”

“Are we really going to go through this again?”

“They’re building on Heron Bay.” And maybe, if their money pit had appreciated in value the way they’d hoped, they’d be able to afford separate residences.

“All those houses look exactly alike. Over-priced Lego™-and-glue-stick productions, Mya. Plastic baseboards and window casings, no crown or ornamentation, and if you think the floorboards will be any more sound than these, think again. They don’t make them like this anymore.”

“Thank God they don’t!” She spoke too loudly and, realizing her volume, shrank back against the garage sale Windsor chair, which needed some wood-glue and a chair clamp. She looked toward the staircase, searching for any sign of life from the second floor. “Thank God,” she whispered, when none of their children materialized.

“We’re not doing too bad, you know.” He grabbed his lunch box and placed a weathered hand on the doorknob that had jiggled for the past year-and-a-half. “A place this size, for a GED and a high school graduate?”

“I have a degree in nail technology.” She knew it wasn’t a doctorate, but she hated that he never remembered to include it in her accomplishments.

“Not bad at all, Mya, for two honest workers with three mouths to feed.” He disappeared into the early morning mist. No kiss goodbye. No *I love you* or *Have a good day*. And that wasn’t unusual. But today she’d expected more from him. Today was September twenty-first. Their anniversary. If there was any love left between them, he

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would've proven it today.

How had this happened to them? They'd been so hot for each other, with such a zest for life. Their hopes and dreams had fizzled into stretching dollars and chasing behind children, switching off lights and catching rusty water in pails.

In the beginning he'd spent days raking through her hair, staring into her eyes, making promises. These days, all he did was break them.

And neither of them had time for passion with a leaking sink on the second floor. Ironic. The very house that brought them together was tearing them slowly to shreds.

She took another tiny sip of coffee and stared out the window at Congressman Kerr's house. Scaffolding surrounded three-quarters of the estate, and as soon as the sun rose, a crew would continue to mend and repaint the siding. The trim carpenter's truck was already parked on the street in front of the house, ready to make annual repairs on the exterior gingerbread moldings at dawn's first light.

"We're far out of our league here," Mya murmured into her coffee cup. They'd known it all along, but neither of them counted on the incidentals. Neither assumed they'd never come into their own. And she never thought she'd file for divorce, but she couldn't shake the possibility today, when he hadn't so much as acknowledged what should have been a special occasion. *Ten years. A long time.*

Congressman Kerr's wife stuck her head out the front door. Before she ducked out in a short nightgown to retrieve her morning paper, she searched for early morning lurkers, as per usual. The woman was near fifty, but she didn't look a day over thirty-five. Women who'd carried neither children nor the burden of earning a paycheck always looked fabulous in their prime years. It wasn't fair for one woman to have it all when others had so little, but Mya couldn't begrudge Sharon Kerr's good fortune—even if she was a snooty bitch.

Her neighbor stepped onto the paver-brick walk and stooped to

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retrieve her *Tribune*. Her golden coils tousled about her shoulders, and her generous bosoms—although she whole-heartedly denied it, she'd had them enhanced several years ago—dared to bounce out of the cotton camisole.

A dark figure emerged from the even darker foyer beyond, and he tapped Sharon's rear.

Mya blinked, but when she looked again with wider eyes, there was no denying what she'd seen.

A muscled hunk, tucking in a T-shirt, kissed Sharon square on the mouth, chucked her under the chin, and bounded toward the work truck parked on the road.

\* \* \*

"I'm telling you, he forgot our anniversary." Mya ran warm water into a pedicure tub and dried her hands against her denim capris. Her disappointing husband wasn't her preferred topic of discussion—not with juicy gossip about the congressman's wife dancing on the tip of her tongue—but there was a time and a place for sordid details. She'd barely had time to mention it to the girls before the first client arrived, and now they'd have to wait for lunch break to dig into it. "Ten years of living paycheck to paycheck in that hell hole. I've paid my dues, haven't I?"

"He needs a good ass-kicking." Liberty Wilson combed through her first client of the day, who happened to be her sister, Bianca.

"What do you know about mature relationships?" Bianca asked. "You haven't had one in years."

"What do you call Jefferson? A training bra?"

"A heartbreak waiting to happen. And you deserve more. You deserve a predictable marriage like Mya's—no offense—and Jefferson's not a marrying man."

Libby rolled her eyes and pointed her shears toward her sister. "You get engaged faster than bunnies reproduce. The rest of the world

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doesn't work the way you do, and if you don't shut up about it, I swear I'll cut four inches off."

"There's no need to get cranky because I tell the truth." Bianca shrugged and flipped through a magazine. "And why threaten a man with an ass-kicking? Hit him where it counts—his manhood. He isn't paying attention to you? Show him someone else who will, and mark my words, he won't be able to keep his hands off you."

"You are *not* suggesting she have an affair." Libby yanked through another section of hair, and the comb caught a snarl.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry." Libby grinned at her sister, then turned back to Mya. "He's a good guy. Don't listen to one tainted word my sister utters."

"Truthful," Bianca interjected. "Not tainted."

"And don't write off your husband because he's out earning an honest living for you and the kids. The rest of us should be that lucky."

"He isn't earning it for me. He's working for that damn house. Unless we win the lottery, we're going to be living in plaster dust until we die. Do you know how many lead screens our kids have had in the past few years? Every time we open a wall, we have to prick them with a pin. And now Josh's sink is leaking, and it's damaging the dining room ceiling, and it's the only decent room in the house." She shuddered. "I can't do it anymore." *Any of it.*

"So hire a plumber," Bianca said.

"But her husband's a carpenter!" Libby yanked again. "He knows how to do all that stuff. He just needs to get his ass home to do it."

"Watch that comb. I know it looks like a simple tool, but I think you need some continued practice."

Mya gave a small smile at the constant bickering between the sisters, wishing her most pressing problem involved sibling rivalry. She rubbed her thumb over her simple gold wedding band boasting only a fleck of a diamond in a low setting. Not entirely impressive—and

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neither was her marriage.

“Not all plumbers are forty and fat, you know,” Bianca said. “And some of them really know their ways around a woman’s pipes, if you know what I mean.”

“Christ, we *all* know what you mean.” Libby shoved her sister’s head downward. “And if you’re worried about my skills with the comb, watch out. I’m about to use the scissors.”

“Do yourself a favor,” Bianca said to Mya. “Find a way to feel good—at any and all costs.”

“I couldn’t do that.” Or could she? Sharon Kerr—the town’s most prestigious, supportive wife—was doing the nasty with a carpenter half her age. *If Sharon could do it...*

The bell on the door jingled, signaling someone’s entrance. *Speak of the devil.* “Sharon, hi!” Mya gathered her white T-shirt and knotted it at the side to keep it out of the way. She pointed toward the pedicure station. “Make yourself at home. Can I get you coffee? Tea?”

“Coffee would be fantastic.”

“You look tired. Rough night?”

“Oh, honey, you don’t know the half of it.” Sharon waved a hand and climbed into the chair. “Quentin’s in Washington again this week, and a squirrel managed to eat his way through the eaves yesterday evening. Luckily, the young man doing my trim work was able to bring over a live trap.”

“Did you get him?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Good for you.” Mya met Libby’s glance, and they shared a smile.

“And I’ve snagged that trim man, too, for more work. His truck will probably be a permanent fixture at my curb until Christmas.” Sharon reached into her tote bag and produced a hardcover classic. She never read during her appointments, but she brought a different book every time she walked through the door.

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“Mya needs a little work done at her house, too.” Bianca didn’t look up from her magazine, but judging by the hissed “Libby!” that followed, her sister had either yanked her hair again, or poked her with trim shears.

“Is that right?” Sharon Kerr knew as well as anyone the oldest place on Ida Street needed more than a *little* work. In fact, she’d probably personally filed a report with the building commissioner and was responsible for their repeated warnings from the village regarding their peeling exterior paint.

“We’re working on it.” Mya gritted her teeth. Perhaps she was done *working on it*.

“I’ll be happy to send Harley over when I’m through with him today.” Sharon licked a finger and found her page. “That’s his name. Harley. A master craftsman. Harley, like the motorcycle, and he’s just as in demand.”

If there’d ever been in a doubt in Mya’s mind as to what had actually transpired between the congressman’s wife and the youngster, it was gone now. Years listening to ramblings about men in the salon had taught her. When women used a man’s name more than once in a sentence, she was either bonking him or would be soon.

“Harley might be a little hard on your budget, but he’s worth every penny. Every penny. And his eye for detail—”

“We’re not exactly at the detail stage. We have a rusting pipe to deal with first.” Wow, if that wasn’t a metaphor for their deteriorating marriage.

“Honey...” Sharon stared down her nose at Mya, who occupied a squat stool in front of the pedicure tub. “I know how frustrating this must be for you. Perhaps I can find some more side work for Dale, and you’ll be able to repaint this year.”

“More side work?”

“Oh, Dale’s been an absolute dream with Quentin away. Oiled my



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gate last week, and installed my deadbolt the week before. Come to think of it, I don't think I paid him. Why don't I give you a little something extra today for Dale's trouble?"

Her heart sank. His own house had plenty of hinges practically begging for oil, yet he'd opted to chip away at Sharon Kerr's Honey-Do list...and he hadn't charged her a red cent.

The image of Harley-the-Wonderboy-Craftsman leaving the congressman's house this morning surfaced, leaving Mya to wonder. Had her husband ever found cause to tiptoe off the property after providing services for which he didn't charge?

\* \* \*

Just after two in the afternoon, Mya left the salon on foot. Wednesdays were slow, but between her nail clientele and the kids' activities, she had a full docket the next three days. Normally, she would have hung around the salon to trade gossip with Libby and the girls, but in the time it had taken to pull one of Sharon's pampered feet from the tub, the woman had uttered Dale's name three times.

No gossiping over Diet Coke today. Before the kids came home from school, she had to research divorce lawyers. Grounds for separation sounded off in her head—extreme neglect, irreconcilable differences, mental cruelty in forcing her to live in that crumbling house.

She looked ahead to the Kerr mansion. Maybe she should include adultery in the list.

If she believed Dale had fixed the gate for free, she might as well believe Sharon had paid him with currency of another kind. At least *someone* was getting *something*. How long had it been since he'd rocked her world? A month? Two? Maybe longer. Their mattress didn't host much action in the humid summer months, and it had been too hot even to hold hands this season. Not that they would've been holding hands in an arctic storm either.

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*He doesn't pay attention to you? Show him someone who will...*

What a way to spend their anniversary, mentally dividing furniture not worth a dime, and considering extra-curricular plumbers and attorneys.

She neared Congressman Kerr's house and slowed her gait. All appeared quiet. The scaffolding now stood only on the west side of the house, as if bragging about the progress made in mere days, and the painting crew had gone. Harley's truck was back, and because he wasn't repairing any exterior trim, Mya assumed he was tending to something more intimate indoors. Better him than another woman's husband—specifically Mya's. She imagined Harley romancing her neighbor in a remote part of the house, Sharon's knees pinned to her shoulders, and his tongue working fast between her thighs.

Mya should be so lucky. As she crossed the street on an angle toward her own home, she imagined today was the day she *would* be. Visions of a pleasing hunk—wearing nothing more than a tool belt and waiting beyond the door—danced in her head. Seeing as her husband kept a safe distance from the list of things to do at home, she had two choices. Take Bianca's ridiculous advice and evoke some jealousy, assuming Dale would notice, or live with disappointment.

In humid weather, the front door swelled, but at least it stayed shut that way. She unlocked the door and kicked it a few hundred times until it opened, inch by stubborn inch. The moment she entered, stepping onto a pile of mail, oppressive heat accosted her, along with the stale scent of wet wood and plaster. With a fist against the window frame, she yanked and tugged until the old pulley system gave way and the window slinked its way up. Unfortunately, no breeze swept in to relieve her.

The familiar drip, drip, drip in Josh's bathroom wafted the scent of rusty water throughout the home, more apparent than usual. Or perhaps she was over-sensitive to the issue—like multitudes of others—today,

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thanks to her husband's complete disregard of the occasion. Not that she expected wine and roses, but she sure as hell needed more than the symphony of the leak echoing in her ears like sand grinding between her molars.

Sifting through envelopes, she climbed the stairs. *Bill, bill, bill. Another notice from the village.* She stepped over the third stair from the landing. Dale's suggestion. That particular stair tread had developed a crack, and it was only a matter of time before it ran the entire length. Until he had time to fix it, she skipped it. She'd be skipping it for years. He never had time to fix *anything*.

Josh's bathroom didn't have a shower, but it had a pedestal sink and an original 1920s water closet with a high tank. The latter was in great condition, but it would probably spring a leak, if Dale ever got around to fixing the sink. That's the way it went with old homes. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. She peeked into the closet of a bathroom, just as she'd done every afternoon for the past four months, and prepared to dump the water in the pail into the girls' bathtub down the hall.

But today, the water was flowing over the brim. It had never reached beyond the midpoint of the bucket before. *Great.* Another pressing project to occupy Dale's hands when he arrived home, ensuring—anniversary or not—he wouldn't grab a handful of *her* any time soon. More water splashed onto the hexagonal mosaic tiled floor, as she switched the bucket with another and twisted the shut-off valve under the pedestal. Better to leave Josh without a sink than to leave a ring on the ceiling below.

She twisted and twisted, but the valve never tightened. On the contrary, it, too, sprouted a steady stream. Her denim capri pants were drenched from the knee down from her kneeling on the wet floor, and the bills stuck to the tile. Josh's damp bath towel, responsible for a moisture spot on the hardwood floors, soaked up some water, but not nearly enough.

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She scrambled down the hallway to the built-in linen cabinet and back again. After damming the bathroom with a stack of old cleaning towels, she raced down to the dining room to gauge today's damage.

Water beaded on the ceiling and heavy drops landed in splats on the tabletop, which had already begun to ripple with moisture.

*Damn it.* The only decent piece of furniture in the entire house, and it was half in the pot now, along with the rest of the place. She caught sight of her reflection in the mirror hanging above the buffet. Everything that entered this house inevitably deteriorated, starting with her and Dale.

"I can't do this!" Tears sprang from her eyes, and she sank against the wall. She was done. With all of it. His passion for a bottomless pit, which sucked the life out of all those dwelling there without giving a lick in return, rated higher on the list than she did.

And she'd had enough. Enough of one-sided compromises. Enough of sacrifice without return. She reached into her pocket for her cell phone—they'd long ago cancelled their landline to accommodate the budget—and dialed her husband.

"Yeah?" he answered.

"Dale, this leak is out of control. You have to come home."

A dull hum registered in her ear.

"Did you hear me? The bathroom's a wading pool, and—"

"Turn off the supply valve. I'll—"

"Do you think I didn't try that? I'm sick of dealing with one mess after another, while you gallivant all over the county, fixing other people's houses."

"Other people's houses pay our—"

"Did Sharon Kerr's gate pay our bills? Or her deadbolt?"

Silence.

"Why didn't you charge her? Why didn't you tell me you were doing work for her, unless you had something to hide?"

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“That’s crazy, Mya. I don’t have anything to—”

“Were you fucking her ten years ago, too?”

“Mya! I’m not—”

“Well, you’re sure as hell not touching me lately.”

“Put a bucket under the valve, and—”

“I’m running out of buckets. And I’m already out of patience.” She sniffled. “I can’t live like this. We don’t want the same things anymore, and I...I think I need some time.”

After a long pause, he cleared his throat. “Time for what?”

“Time alone. Time away from this house. Away from you.”

“Mya, are you—”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a long time.”

“I’m in the middle of something, and I can’t get away right now, but—”

“You’re always in the middle of *something*. Something for someone else.”

“—but I have a few favors coming my way. I’ll send someone over to help with the leak, and we’ll talk about the rest of this tonight.”

“We don’t talk about anything anymore.” She leaned forward to the floor, bawling and barely managing a “Goodbye” before she terminated the call.

She knew she ought to move the table or at least towel it off before the damage worsened, but what was the point? Dale could have the ruined table, along with the decrepit house. She’d rather have the second-hand breakfast set, which boasted a number of nicks and a worn finish. But at least those markings were courtesy of their children—not a crumbling box sucking money out of paychecks before they were earned.

Her T-shirt, damp with the sweat dripping down her spine and between her breasts, clung to her body. Just as well. *Something* should cling to her today, and it sure as hell wouldn’t be Dale. With closed

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eyes, she leaned against the wall and allowed tears to soak her cheeks. Lord, she'd had high hopes for her marriage, but struggle overpowered hope any day of the week. They struggled to make the mortgage each month, struggled to provide their children with basic needs. Hell, they even struggled with sex these days.

A hot breeze filtered through the balmy room, and the backdoor squeaked. Heavy footsteps sounded. It seemed only a few minutes had passed, but when she lifted her tearing eyes to the anniversary clock on the buffet, it confirmed she'd been wallowing for nearly fifteen. *Wonderful*. Dale's stand-in had arrived, and she looked not only physically a mess, but was emotionally chaotic, too. Well, that made for one decision she didn't have to make. Bianca's advice was impossible to follow in her present condition. What decent tradesman would want her looking the way she did?

"Hey."

She opened her eyes to find a muscled body standing in the doorway, bronzed with the sun of the passing season. She knew him. She'd met him years ago. A vague yearning settled in her skin, as memories flooded back. He'd stirred passionate energy in her the first day she'd laid eyes on him. Would he remember? She stood and wiped tears away. "Hi."

"Hi." He rubbed his hands together. Strong, capable. He was no stranger to hard work. "You all right?"

She pulled at her clothing, damp with sweat, tears, water, or a combination of the three. "I'll make it."

"Your husband sent me."

"He mentioned he was sending someone. I didn't expect *you*." She crossed her arms over her chest, her nipples budding with desire. Why couldn't her breasts—not to mention her clit—be as numb and finished with men as her mind was at the moment? But the way he was looking at her....

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His eyes blazed with fervent hunger, as if he wanted to devour her lips, consume all of her body in one pleased plunge. No one had looked at her like that in years. “Bad day?”

“Bad decade, if you ask me.” She finger-combed through her hair, quickly deciding she’d done so to keep herself from raking through his, which looked soft and mussed—begging to be touched.

“Dalton Myers.” He cracked a smile and extended a hand.

She shook it, raising an eyebrow. “Dalton?”

“It’s a family name.” He fiddled with his thick wedding band, brushing an even thicker thumb over it. “The name I used at the altar.”

“At the altar.” Her eyes glazed over as she studied his hitched hip, clad in dirty denim, his thread-bare tank, barely concealing ripples of muscles she suddenly wanted to touch.

“Can’t help it.” His stare smoldered over her body from under heavy-lidded eyes. “I mean, you’re a little different, but...you remind me...a little in the face, a little in...other places...of the girl I married.”

“Do you look at your wife like this?” The moment she whispered it, she bit her tongue. He’d sucked her in, and before she knew it, she was playing his game. And while he was good at it, she was unsure if she wanted to participate.

“Like what?” His voice sounded gruff, as if he were slipping into the same sexual fantasy she happened to be entertaining.

In her mind, his coarse hands massaged up her naked back, worked at her bra hook. His tongue lapped at her nipples, and his fingers stroked her with a heat no married couples remembered feeling. And the way he was looking at her...it was as if he’d never seen a woman before. “Like this. Do you look at your wife...like this?”

“I’d guess not.” He licked his lips, and she imagined he might taste like salty sweat. “Doesn’t matter. I lost her.”

“Lost her?” Her heart clamored, each beat an unexpected ache. “When?”

## *SOUND OFF*

“Four years ago, I’d say.” He shrugged and shook his head. “Let’s have a look at that leaking pipe.”

“There’s a stubborn valve, too.”

“Lots of damage.” He ran his fingers over the buckling, wet tabletop and looked to the ceiling.

“It bled through the plaster today.” Slowly, she approached him, and while it was the last thing the logical side of her brain wanted her to do, the zealous side of her screamed to feel him against her, atop her, inside her.

*Irrational. Impossible. Irresponsible, considering the children would be home from school in an hour.*

But today of all days, she needed to touch, to feel desired. Her hand came to rest on the table, her little finger brushing against his.

In a staccato flash, his gaze penetrated her in obscene places. Either he didn’t notice she looked liked hell, or he liked her dirty. But men didn’t look at women like that unless they wanted to...

She swallowed the lump in her throat, while readiness surged between her legs.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner.” He lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him, and nudged in closer. His body was a fortress of hard muscle.

For the first time in a long time, she felt protected, cherished. “You came as soon as you could.” A strong hand pressed at the small of her back and compelled her closer. Body to body, he had six inches on her—and six inches began to harden against her.

He rested his forehead on hers. Their noses grazed. “I can’t help but think I should’ve been here years ago.” As he spoke, his lips feathered over hers.

“What are we doing?” She sounded naïve, not at all like a mother of three, who’d been opening her body to the same man for ten years.

“What do you want to do?” One lift and twirl, and he had her atop



## *SOUND OFF*

the table.

“What do I want?” A mildewed drop of water splashed from the ceiling onto her forearm. If her hot spots weren’t already wet, the puddle on the table would have drenched them. “You know what I want.”

“I have certain skills—”

“Such as?”

“—but they don’t include mind-reading.” He melted a kiss onto her neck, raising the flame in her panties. “You aren’t coy. Never have been.”

“I don’t want anything.”

“We all want something.” He yanked the knot out of her T-shirt and a hand traveled to cup a breast. His expert fingers caressed her through a cheap lace bra, and drew a circle around the hard nub.

“I’m far beyond want, *Dalton*. I’ve grown up over the years, and I need things now.”

“Hmm.” He hummed at her décolletage and drew in a long breath. “What do you need?”

“Time to decide.”

“I’ll tell you one thing, you sure as hell don’t look like you’ve had three children.”

Sure she did. Faded stretch marks scarred her lower abdomen, and free from the bra, her breasts pouted with gravity. Her body wasn’t half what it used to be. And he’d soon reveal the evidence proving him wrong—provided he remembered it in its prime.

He leaned over her, and she found herself flat on her back on the dining room table, with a very competent man unfastening the buttons at her fly. “It’s been a long time.”

“I’m not sure I can—”

With a swift pull, as if the decision weren’t hers to make, he whisked the capris and panties from her body. His mouth landed on her

## *SOUND OFF*

vagina, and his tongue began a precise rhythm, brushing up one side of her clitoris, swirling with pressure at the apex, and licking down the other side. He darted in to taste her—slow, progressive jabs with his tongue.

*Oh, yes. He made the right decision, all right.* She squeezed his head between her thighs and laced her fingers into his hair.

This wasn't how she'd planned to spend the afternoon and part of her wanted to stop, to regroup, to rewind. But other parts of her—more demanding parts—wanted to press his face hard into her kitty and rock against his mouth until everything around them shattered to pieces. And considering the state of the house, and the talent of his tongue, that might not take too long.

His hands grazed up to her breasts and entertained their pleasure centers. She blinked tears from her eyes and held his head in an iron grip between her legs. This changed things, but it was good. Selfish. But so fucking good.

Water from above christened their bodies, cool and dirty, filtered through hundred-year-old wood. She focused on the plaster medallion and the wrought iron chandelier suspended from its center. Homes on Heron Bay couldn't advertise those sorts of details. The thought consumed her when her orgasm edged higher.

"Mmm." He hummed against her.

*Oh, God.*

A proficient lover. Although she hadn't said a word, he'd read her building orgasm through the tensing of her body. With the liquid bursting within her, he kept his strokes steady, yet with increased frequency, which only prolonged and strengthened the climax. She held her breath, bit her lip, and fixated on the chandelier.

*Oh, God.*

A drop of water hit her abdomen in a cold splat, and his entire mouth worked at her sex. Fleshy lips massaged her externally, while his

## *SOUND OFF*

tongue navigated the tender skin beneath the folds.

His hands stiffened against her breasts. *Oh, my fucking...*

She groaned when the pleasure broke and scattered like raindrops from storm cloud, hitting every nerve center in her body. Quivering, she relented the hold on his head. "Oh, God."

He came up for air, licking his lips. "You're sweet, baby," he whispered.

Her hands flew to his waistband, and within a moment, she unveiled his thick member. He was smooth and hard in her hands, and she wanted—*needed*—him deep inside her. Now. Yesterday. Tomorrow, and all the days after that.

As he lowered his mouth to hers, she guided him to her opening.

He entered her fierce and fast, nuzzling her lips. "Yes."

Involuntarily, she tightened her grip on his shoulders.

He bucked away between her thighs like an animal, and the room went hazy. Crown moldings, built-in china hutch, window seat, arched pocket doors. "Beautiful."

"Yes," he whispered. "You are."

Rippling stained glass shot prisms against the walls, and her cries reverberated against the twelve-foot-high ceiling. "Fucking beautiful!"

"I love you," he breathed.

A warm load spilled into her. Sticky and sinful, it would be dripping out of her all night, a memory of what they'd done. Right there. On the dining room table. She'd never think of the room in the same way again. Struggling to catch her breath, she smiled. "I love you, too."

"I'm sorry." He traced her lips with his index finger. "It's been a long time."

She nodded, taking delight in the twitching of his cock inside her. "Too long."

"I should've been here sooner."

## SOUND OFF

She met his gaze. "You came as soon as you could."

"But you're right. I'm not here when I should be. I should've come sooner." His thumb swiped at a tear on her cheek. "Before I lost you."

"Dale."

He kissed her gingerly on the eyes. "Happy Anniversary."

"I'm not gone yet," she said.

"But you're going, Mya. Every day, you're drifting farther, and I can't pull you back."

"You just did."

His smile was boyish and charming. "What do you say you take my name now?"

"Mya Myers? Are you kidding?"

"Let's make it official."

"Ten years and three children aren't official enough for you?"

He lowered his mouth to hers and nibbled her lips as he spoke. "We've got quite a disaster to clean up here, don't we?"

"Not impossible, though. We're not doing too bad, you know."

\* \* \*

The kids were asleep, and Josh's sink had ceased leaking when Dale managed to turn off the supply valve. Mya stretched her arms above her head and propped her feet atop the table. *Another day in paradise.*

"The bills are dry." Dale dropped three envelopes onto the breakfast table and massaged her shoulders. "We can pay them now."

She chuckled. "No, actually, we can't. Not until I get paid next week."

"And the notice from the village—"

"Can't we talk about that tomorrow?"

"—was actually good news."

She shook her head and sipped cool water. "The *village* and *good news* don't go hand-in-hand in this house."

## *SOUND OFF*

“We’re declared a landmark, as of yesterday morning when they mailed out the certificate. I’d say that’s good news.”

She looked up at him, and all the reasons their marriage would last sounded off in her head. Their children, their passion for one another, their dining room. “*This* place?”

“This place.” He grinned. “I learned a lot hanging out at the congressman’s place last week. Takes a little paperwork, but once you’re declared, you’re declared. The village’s *Restoration Act of 1987* states landmark status is irrevocable. And you know what? The village grants a healthy sum every year for renovation and restoration of landmarks. Guess who always gets the grant?”

Her gaze traveled across Ida Street, where Harley’s work truck continued to occupy a piece of the pavement in front of the Kerr mansion.

“I’m not saying it’ll be easy, Mya. I’m not even saying it’ll be quick. I’m saying it’ll be worth it.” He crouched to his haunches at her side, licked his lips, and zapped her with a blue-eyed lightning bolt. “And so are we.”

## PENNY DAWN

All right, so who among us doesn't have a few demons to exorcise?

Penny Dawn began her writing career at the tender age of seven, before she realized it's impossible to be All Good, All the Time...at least in the religious sense (grinning like a Cheshire.) Romantic stories with passionate twists have since become this Good Girl's forte...and she unleashes her demons on paper, over and over and over again.

Penny Dawn holds a B. A. in history and English from Northern Illinois University and an M. A. in Creative Writing from Seton Hill University, whose alumnae include spicy novelists Jacki King, Shannon Hollis, Suzanne Forster, Dana Marton, and others. When she isn't writing, Penny enjoys tap, ballet, and jazz dance, photography, physical fitness, and renovating her 1906 Victorian Lady with her husband and two daughters.

Drop by her website [www.pennydawn.com](http://www.pennydawn.com) to discuss all things decadent.

\* \* \*

*Don't miss Salute, by Penny Dawn,  
available from Amber Quill Press, LLC*

*Liberty Wilson deserves a few minor indulgences.*

*Her sister Bianca—also her roommate—is a catty bitch, constantly reminding her she hasn't had a decent relationship in months, and*

*judging by her reflection in the mirror, she ought to spend more time at the gym and less time staring at the mysterious ex-soldier, Sergeant Jefferson Muldoon, performing his morning ritual across the street.*

*But it's Liberty's birthday, the fourth of July, and she's in the mood for a few fireworks.*

*There's no air-conditioning at Thirty-two Sprucewood Lane, and it's nearing triple digits. Yet the heat index is no match for what happens when she enters the patriot's lair. Libby and Jefferson light an unrelenting fire, making this a birthday she'll never forget. Who needs to declare independence when coupling is this hot?*

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