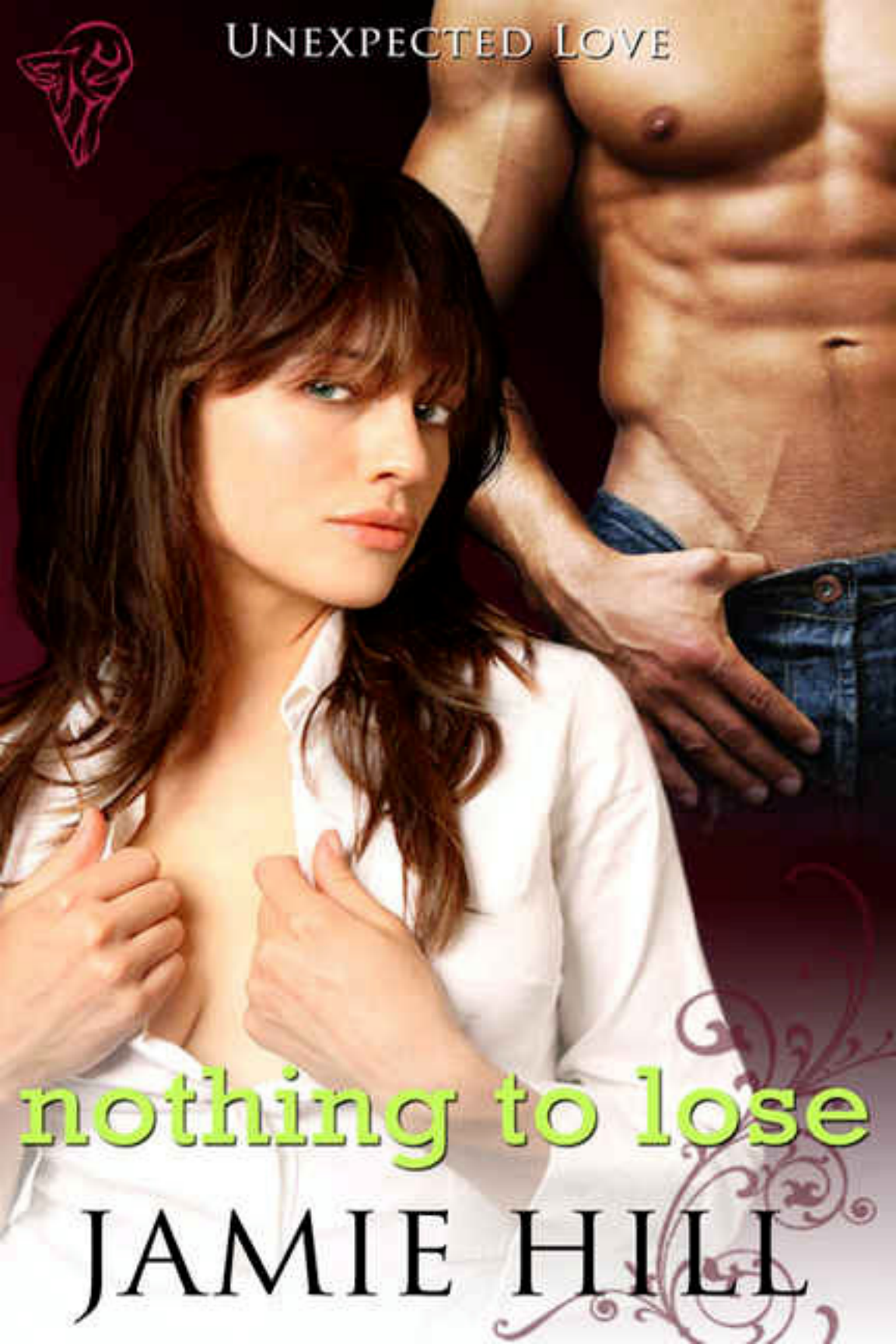




UNEXPECTED LOVE



nothing to lose

JAMIE HILL

Nothing to Lose
by Jamie Hill

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Nothing to Lose
by Jamie Hill

A Total-e-bound Publication

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Nothing To Lose

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Warning:

Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Nothing to Lose
by Jamie Hill

Unexpected Love

NOTHING TO LOSE

Jamie Hill

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Nothing to Lose
by Jamie Hill

Dedication

To John, now and always.

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Chapter One

The limousine pulled slowly out of the cemetery and Bailey Montgomery sank down into the plush back seat. It was the end of a long day and she felt tired and ready to get home. Or to her mother's house, more precisely, because Bailey's home was almost three hundred miles away in Chicago. She closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind, but nagging thoughts kept swirling around.

She shouldn't have put off coming to visit. Showing up in her mother's last hours when she was too sick to recognise Bailey wasn't enough. Bailey knew she should have been there, should have done more.

She'd taken two weeks of vacation when her mother was diagnosed with cancer the previous year, and stayed for the first round of chemotherapy. There had been two more rounds since then, and Bailey thought the disease was under control. She didn't realise how quickly the cancer was progressing.

Her mother hid it from her, Bailey thought bitterly, and then shook her head in another attempt to clear it. When she started blaming her mother for dying, she knew she wasn't thinking straight.

The limo pulled into her driveway and Bailey thanked the driver as she got out. She glanced at the white clapboard house where her mother had resided the last five years. It was smaller than the other homes in the neighbourhood but had an attractive appearance just the same. Her mother had

professed to love the little house, but Bailey never shared the enthusiasm. The place just never felt like home.

Melissa Montgomery had moved to the tiny town of Perry, Illinois, after the death of her husband. Bailey's beloved father had loved big cities and insisted they raise their daughter in his hometown of Chicago. Once he was gone, her mother had chosen to return to Perry, the place of *her* birth, and the tiniest town on the planet in Bailey's eyes.

She walked up the short sidewalk and the three steps to the porch, pulling her keys out. There was an envelope tucked in the front door and Bailey grabbed it as she went inside. She opened the card, from a friend of her mother's whom Bailey didn't know. She didn't know any of her mother's friends or neighbours anymore. For that reason she had requested no reception or gifts of food or flowers—she wanted to keep things as simple as possible. Donations to the Cancer Society or to her mother's church were requested in the newspaper write-up. Bailey spoke with her mother's minister and he agreed to spread the word among Melissa's friends.

Looking at the blinking light on her mother's answering machine, she felt too tired to face the messages and walked on by. More condolences from people she'd never met, who probably wouldn't want to know her. Ever since she'd arrived, she'd felt an underlying current of accusation. Her mother's friends thought she should have been here, too.

Down the short hallway to her room, Bailey peeled off her dress and stockings, then dug around in her suitcase until she found her spandex running tank and shorts. She looked in the

mirror and thought about scrubbing the make-up off her face but decided to do it as she showered after her run.

She pulled her long brown hair into a ponytail and fluffed her bangs. They were overdue for a trim, but it would be a while before she went back to Chicago. It would take at least two weeks to sort through and dispose of her mother's things. She had requested a month's leave from *Chicago Today*, the magazine where she worked as an editor, just to be safe. Bailey winced as she looked around the room—it was full with just her things. The idea of clearing out the whole house was daunting. What to keep, what to throw away? Would she recognise the things that had been important to her mother? More guilt, realising that except for a few items, she had no idea.

She decided to run now and worry later. A nice long run was just what she needed to clear her head. Things usually seemed to fall into perspective after a few miles of sweating. Bailey was tying her second shoe when the doorbell rang and she went to answer it.

"Hi, I'm sorry to interrupt you." The woman was about her age, pretty with long blond hair and a nice smile. "I'm Sarah Stevens, I was a friend of your mother's from church and the neighbourhood." She held a small casserole dish with what appeared to be an apple pie on top of it.

Bailey looked at her, embarrassed. "I asked the reverend to tell people I didn't need food. It's just me here and..."

"I know." Sarah shrugged and smiled. "But you need to eat. It has to be incredibly hard on you, losing your mother and all. I wanted to bring you a little something."

Bailey shifted from one foot to the other uncomfortably, but Sarah didn't back down. She remained there, smiling pleasantly, until Bailey took a step backward and motioned her in.

Sarah entered and said, "I can put these in the kitchen for you. It looks like you were on your way out."

"Thank you." Bailey followed her.

The woman seemed to know her way around. She opened the refrigerator and set the food inside, then shut the door gently and straightened the towel that hung on the handle. She smiled at Bailey again. "So, you're from Chicago?"

"Yes," Bailey nodded. The woman certainly seemed to smile a lot. *Is she covering up her disapproval?*

"What do you do there? I think Missy told me but I can't remember."

"Missy?"

"Your mother. She talked about you a lot, she was very proud of you."

Bailey stuck her foot on one of the kitchen chairs and began her pre-run stretches. "I've never heard her called 'Missy' before."

Sarah watched the stretching. "Everyone around here called her that. Didn't she tell you?"

"Nope." Bailey switched legs. "Never heard it before. Even my father called her Melissa—no nicknames or anything cutsie. That's why it surprises me."

"She talked about your father a lot, too. She loved him a great deal."

Bailey stood up and looked at her guest. "Yeah, she did. Well, if you'll excuse me, I was going for a run."

Sarah glanced over Bailey's physique. "You must run a lot. You're in great shape."

"Every day." She knew her taut bare midriff and long, tanned legs were good looking. She worked hard to keep them that way. But the scrutiny made her uncomfortable, anxious to escape. Heading for the front door, she stopped to get her cell phone and keys from her purse, then reconsidered and put the phone back. "No damned reception in this one-horse town."

"Guess there was reception at the cemetery."

Bailey looked at her and blushed slightly, remembering how her phone rang during the minister's final blessing. Evidently, the little cemetery which sat on a hill got great phone reception. Bailey hadn't answered the call and had shut her phone off quickly, but the damage had been done. Her mother's friends and neighbours had looked at her like she was a pariah.

Shrugging, Sarah commented, "Oh well. Hey, I put my name and phone number on the casserole dish—call me when you're done with it and I'll send my daughter to pick it up. Mandy's fourteen and thinks Perry is the most boring place in the world to live. She's dying to meet you, your being from the city and all."

"Okay," Bailey said hesitantly.

"If there's anything we can do, please call. We thought the world of your mother and would be happy to help with whatever you need." She stepped onto the porch and touched

the handrail that led down the steps. It wiggled precariously.
"Well, how did this happen?"

"What?" Bailey looked at the railing.

"This is broken. It's not safe at all. I'm going to send my brother over to fix it."

"Please don't bother," Bailey said. "I'm still trying to decide what to do with the house. I may have to hire someone to do some repairs if I'm going to sell it."

Sarah replied, "Doug did all the repairs your mother needed. He knows this place inside and out." She shook the rail one last time then looked at Bailey. "You'll know him when you see him, he looks like me but taller with dark hair. His name is Doug Kenny."

"I don't know," Bailey hesitated.

Sarah was insistent. "I'll send him to fix this because it's dangerous. You can do what you want after that."

Bailey shrugged and decided she didn't have much choice.
"Well, thank you. And thanks for the food."

"You're welcome. Call if you need anything."

"Uh, yeah," Bailey answered, shoving her keys into her tight pocket and pulling the door closed. While it probably wasn't necessary to lock her door in this little town, she was used to the city and did it out of habit. She left the other woman standing on the porch as she headed down the road for her four-mile run.

* * * *

Later that evening Bailey showered and slipped into the pink silky tank top and pyjama shorts she wore to bed. She

picked at the casserole the blonde woman had left her, deciding it was pretty good after all. Listening to the messages on her mother's answering machine was depressing, but she needed to do it. Bailey erased them and took the cordless phone into her bedroom. She dialed a number and waited several rings to get an answer. "Hey baby," she said softly to her boyfriend, Marc Nelson.

"Hey yourself, gorgeous. How's it going?"

"Okay I guess. The whole thing is pretty overwhelming, actually."

"I left a zillion messages on your phone."

She chuckled. "And by a zillion you mean...?"

"Four. Screening your calls?"

"Not getting my calls. I've got no service in this Podunk town. I can give you the number here at the house."

"Can you leave it with my secretary tomorrow? I don't have anything to write with here in bed."

"Yeah, sure," she replied. "You in bed already? I hope you're alone."

He laughed. "You've only been gone a few days. Give me a little more credit than that, will you?"

She chuckled. "Just askin'. It's pretty early."

"Actually, I'm not alone. I'm surrounded by stacks of motions and briefs. We have opening arguments in the Anderson trial tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah, how's that going?"

"So far, so good. I'll let you know more once we open. I may be a little out of reach for a while—I imagine we'll be working later and later as we get into this."

Bailey smiled. She knew Marc's law practice was his number one priority. When they were together he made an effort to make her feel like *she* was number one, but she knew the truth. It was easier not to think about it when she was lying in his arms as he made love to her. But now she was three hundred miles away, and maybe it was a good thing. He wouldn't have time for her during the trial anyway. "Well, good luck. I know you'll do great."

"Thanks, beautiful. I do miss you. This is not the way I prefer to warm up for the big game."

"Ooh, me too. I wish I was there, for about an hour, at least. After that, you'd have your face buried in those papers anyway."

He chuckled suggestively. "But just think where my face could be buried for that first hour..."

"Ooh, stop it! You're making me want to hop in my car and come home. But you need your sleep, and I've got a shitload of stuff to do around here."

"How was the funeral?" he asked, almost as an afterthought.

"Funeral-like," she answered, not sure of the proper answer to that question. "Okay, I guess."

"And how are you holding up?"

"I'm okay," she said, unsure about the answer to that question, too.

"Well, I miss you," Marc told her. "My dick is getting hard just talking to you."

"Oh, now I'm really sorry I'm not there. Feel it and tell me just how hard it is."

He chuckled, and she heard the sound of papers shifting around. "Oh, yeah, it's pretty hard, Bay. When I squeeze it and stroke it up and down, there's a little drop of cum on the tip."

She moaned softly into the phone. "I'd lick that off if I was there."

"Mmm hmm," he muttered, breathing heavily.

Bailey could tell he was stroking himself.

"What else would you do?" he asked.

"Ooh, after I licked all over the sticky-sweet tip, I'd suck the length of your shaft into my mouth. I'd swallow you whole, with more suction than a Hoover."

Marc groaned and Bailey grinned. "I'd squeeze your balls and suck them into my mouth too. Then I'd lick one of my fingers and trace a path from the slit at the top of your throbbing cock all the way down past your balls and run my wet finger around your puckering—"

"Aw, Jesus!" he swore, panting.

The grunting sounds he made were a good indication that he now had a mess to clean up.

"Oh yeah," he mumbled. "That was good, very good."

Bailey squirmed in her bed. It might have been good for him, but she was still horny and now very damp between the legs. She dragged her pyjama bottoms down and slid one hand into her valley. "Oh wow, I'm really wet. You should see it, baby, there's probably a big old wet spot on the sheets."

Marc chuckled again. "Slip your fingers in there and tell me how wet you are."

She obliged and answered, "Really, really wet. My fingers slid right into my pussy, um, it feels hot and tight."

"Now taste your fingers and tell me what I'm missing."

Bailey withdrew her hand and inserted the sticky fingers into her mouth. She licked her juices and her pussy throbbed. "They're sticky and hot, spicy tasting. They taste like your tongue after you've just eaten me."

"Mmm, I'd love to be there doing that. You'll have to imagine I am, baby. Rub your clit and make it nice and big."

Bailey rubbed her fingers in little circles over her engorged clitoris. "It's big. It feels so good."

"Pump your fingers in and out of your cunt. Do it fast, like it's my cock and I'm getting ready to come."

His words sent her over the edge, and Bailey cried out as her climax swept through her. "Oh yes!" she moaned, continuing to thrust her hand in and out of her drenched pussy until the throbbing stopped. "Sweet Jesus," she whispered. "My sheets are soaked."

"Damn, I wish I was there. Not a drop of that nectar would have gone to waste. I'd still be down there slurping it up."

Bailey sighed. "I won't be home for at least two weeks, possibly three."

He sighed in return. "This trial is slated to last two weeks. We'll both be busy."

"No way you could slip away on the weekend?"

He didn't answer, and she was sorry she brought it up. He was just starting a new trial, far too busy for a four-hour weekend trip. "Never mind. Good night, Marc."

He seemed almost relieved. "Take care of yourself. I'll talk to you soon."

"Good luck tomorrow," she said softly. "Night."

"Good night, Bay." He hung up.

She tossed the phone on the nightstand, readjusted her pyjamas and snuggled down into the covers. Marc was a great guy, definitely cute with his thick, wavy blond hair and muscular build. He was fun to spend time with—especially in bed—but she wasn't sure how serious they were. They'd only been dating a couple of months. She didn't expect him to take off work and come here, but she wished he'd at least offered.

* * * *

She was awakened the next morning by the sounds of a hammer pounding near the front of her house. Fumbling for the clock, she squinted to read it. Six-forty a.m. Still half asleep and disoriented from being in a strange bed, Bailey wandered out to the living room and opened the front door.

A dark haired man in a T-shirt and jeans was working on the railing by the front porch stairs.

"Excuse me?" she called out to him, and he stopped to look up at her. Bailey went on, "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

He flashed a sly grin. "Is that what you came out here to ask me? Most people have a clock next to their bed to tell them the time."

Bailey put her hands on her hips and looked at him. "A fucking comedian. *I* know the time, it's six-forty in the fucking

a.m. I just wondered if *you* knew the time. People are trying to sleep around here."

He straightened and Bailey's gaze went up with him. Maybe it was his boots, because she was barefoot, but he seemed tall. His legs appeared long in form-fitting, tight jeans. For just a moment she let her gaze wander up muscular thighs, settling on his crotch. Images of what the jeans hid flashed through her mind, and she shook her head. Trying to get back to the perturbed feeling of a moment ago, she stomped a foot.

He leaned against the rail, taking a moment to look her over. "Your mother was always up at this hour. She knew I had to get to work by eight and didn't mind me coming over early. In fact, sometimes she made me breakfast."

Bailey snorted. "Hang on to those memories, buddy."

Smiling at her lazily, his dark, clear eyes crinkled at the corners. "Oh, I'm making a whole new bunch of memories, right now as we speak." He made a point of looking at her breasts.

Bailey glanced down quickly. In her sleepy state, she'd neglected to put on a robe, and her nipples poked out through her silky pyjama top.

She gave him a dirty look and spun around to go back inside.

"Don't rush off," he teased.

"Could you finish this another time?" She stuck her head out from behind the door.

"I could." He nodded. "But I'm not going to. I'm almost done, I'll finish it now. You go on back to ... whatever ... you were doing."

Bailey slammed the door between them and stomped back to her bedroom. She lay down but knew she was so irritated she'd never fall back to sleep. The blond woman's brother—what was his name? Hell, she didn't even remember the woman's name. But he did look like his sister, only taller with dark hair, as she mentioned.

Not that it mattered. She had enough to worry about under the circumstances, laden with both grief and guilt. It was hard to accept the man as a friend of her mother's—even more unreal that the woman she knew would put up with such a mouthy person. He was a smart-ass and downright rude to her, and Bailey didn't appreciate it. She also couldn't believe she found him so damned good looking.

* * * *

Doug Kenny pounded the last nail in the porch railing and gave it a shake. He smiled to himself as he put his tools away and looked towards the house. He chuckled at the irritation of its occupant. He was completely prepared to dislike Bailey Montgomery. He *wasn't* prepared for how pretty she was.

She had a natural-looking yet sexy style. Her face was beautiful and her body—*Christ!* He couldn't picture those full, round tits without his dick growing hard. She had a gorgeous body.

He shifted his jeans on his hips and, with one last look at the house, walked to his truck. After setting his toolbox in the

back of his old Ford, he climbed in the driver's seat and looked around. The blueprints he needed for work weren't there. He swore silently as he drove home to get them.

He lived a mere three blocks from the Montgomery house, in a loft apartment over his sister's garage. After parking in the driveway, he took the steps up to his loft two at a time, went inside and grabbed the blueprints off his table. He locked the door behind him as he left again and, noticing his sister's kitchen light was on, stopped in for a moment.

"Good morning." Sarah dumped a pot full of water into her coffeemaker and smiled at Doug. "You're up and at 'em this morning."

He reached for a bagel off her counter, opened it up and popped it in the toaster. "You told me the porch railing at Missy's house needed repair, so I wanted to—"

Sarah looked at the clock and back at her brother with surprise. "You're not going over there pounding at this time of day?"

"Already been." He grinned and grabbed the two pieces of the bagel as the toaster expelled them. They burned his fingers and he muttered, "Shit!" as he dropped them on the counter.

"Watch your mouth, little brother." Sarah reached for the bagel with a napkin and handed both pieces to him.

"You said it was important," he muttered in his defence. "I don't know how late I'll be working tonight, so I thought—"

Sarah shook her head. "You *didn't* think, Doug. Did you wake her up?"

He grinned again. "Oh yeah. She's a feisty one, isn't she?"

Sarah nodded and nibbled at some dry cereal she poured for herself. "She seems that way. But to be fair, her mother just died. I don't think we're meeting her at her best."

"Why are we just now meeting her, is what I want to know. Missy was so sick. I don't understand why her daughter wasn't here with her. *We* were with her."

"That was between them, Doug. It's none of our business."

He poured himself a cup of coffee to go. "Always the diplomat, Sarah. Whatever, I need to get to work."

She glanced at him. "So, did you fix the railing?"

"Of course."

"She may need some more work done over there."

He opened the door and looked back at his sister. "Then she's going to have to ask. And if she does, I might have a few questions of my own."

* * * *

Bailey lounged in bed, trying to figure out what she was going to do. There was no avoiding it any longer, she had to decide how to handle her mother's house and belongings. Goodwill or the Salvation Army would probably take the clothes and furniture. That still meant Bailey needed to sort through everything, which seemed like a painful and overwhelming task.

She also needed to contact a realtor and find out what might need to be done to the house before she listed it. She hoped there wouldn't be much—she really wanted to clean out the house and go home. She tried to remain strong, but the longer she stayed, the more she missed her mother.

She dozed on and off for another couple of hours before finally getting up for the day. Wandering through the house in her pyjamas, she realised she had no idea where to start. Maybe she would go for her run and then think about what to do.

She changed into another running outfit and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. While she was tying her shoes, she looked out the window and thought she spotted someone in her backyard—it seemed unlikely because the yard was fenced. She couldn't imagine people wandering through.

Bailey opened the back door and saw a girl sitting in one of the flowerbeds pulling weeds. "Hello?" Bailey called, to get her attention.

The girl looked up and smiled sheepishly. "Oh, hi. I hope you don't mind—I usually like to tend to these before the heat of the day kicks in—"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Mandy Stevens. You met my mom Sarah yesterday..."

Bailey recognised the features of the blond-haired girl's face—she looked just like her mother. First the handyman, now a girl—these people seemed intimately familiar with her mother's house. It made her squirm, realising there was so much she hadn't known, even talking with her mom regularly on the phone. Guilt bubbled inside her, spilling out as anger. "Your family is too much! I asked to be left alone, and you're all over the place with food and hammers and weed whatchamacallits."

"It's a weed whacker," Mandy said quietly, looking at Bailey.

"Whatever the hell it is, I told your mother I don't need help. I don't know what I'm doing with the house yet, and I don't need you and your mom and your dad all over the place—"

"My father is dead," the girl said, speaking quietly again.

Bailey stopped for a moment, embarrassed, then threw her hands up. "Whatever! The smart-ass guy with the hammer, over here at freaking six-thirty in the morning." She looked at the girl. "I just want some privacy, and peace and quiet."

Mandy stood up and gathered her things. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you." She had a dejected look on her face as she headed towards the gate.

Bailey felt guilty, watching the girl leave. She hadn't meant to respond so harshly, but it just came pouring out. The house was hers, now, and she had the right to say what should be done or not done—*didn't she*? It stung that these strangers knew so much more than she did.

She went back in through the house to stretch before her run. Aching feelings of guilt nagged at her as she saw Mandy walking slowly down the street. She pushed them aside and took off running in the other direction.

* * * *

Doug finished working earlier than anticipated. His drive from one construction site to another found everything running smoothly and under control. Sometimes his supervisory role put him on the road more than it did wielding a hammer, but he enjoyed the change of pace. He arrived

home, parked in the driveway and had started up the steps to his loft when he heard a voice above him.

"Hey, Uncle Doug."

He looked up to the tree house that had been in the old oak next to the house for over ten years. "Well hey, Squirt. What are you doing up there?"

"Thinking," Mandy replied.

He could tell by her voice there had been some crying involved, too. Climbing the ladder, he reached the floor of the tree house and leaned in to see his niece. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." She wiped her face and looked away.

"Amanda Jean, don't lie to me now. I can see something is wrong."

She wiped her eyes again and looked at him. "I went to Missy's house before lunch to weed the flower beds. Her daughter was there."

He smiled. "Oh, you met Mizz Personality, did you?"

She didn't smile back, and Doug frowned. "What did she say to you?"

"It wasn't that bad." Mandy sniffled as her tears fell again. "I shouldn't have gone into the garden without asking her first. She kind of yelled at me that she wanted to be left alone. She said our family is too much, with the food and hammers and weed whackers."

Doug scowled and hoisted himself up onto the wooden floor. He pulled Mandy into his arms and hugged her. She cried harder when he did, and he rubbed her back. "I can't believe she yelled at you. You were there to pull her damn weeds, for Pete's sake."

"She cussed at me too," Mandy added.

Doug recalled Bailey calling him a 'fucking comedian' that morning and it infuriated him to think she had talked that way to his niece. No matter how attractive the woman was, she didn't have to be rude. Thinking he'd like to teach her a thing or two, he cleared his throat when he realised he was imagining the woman naked, over his knee. He ran a hand over his face, embarrassed. "Don't let her get to you, she's not worth it."

"Missy was so sweet," Mandy cried. "How did she get a daughter like that?"

"I don't know, Squirt. Some people are born jerks, I guess." *This one was a sexy, hot jerk with mile-long legs and perky nipples.* He looked down as his sister's car pulled into their drive.

Sarah got out with a shopping bag and looked up at the tree house. "What are you two doing? I haven't seen anyone up there for two or three years."

"We're commiserating," Doug told his sister.

Sarah chuckled. "About what?"

"You won't be smiling when I tell you." He guided Mandy to the ladder so they could climb down.

"What's wrong?" Sarah set her bag on a lawn chair and took Mandy's face in her hands. "What happened to you?"

"It's not that bad." Mandy shook her head.

"Bailey Montgomery," Doug answered, wiping dust from the unused tree house off his hands. "She yelled at Mandy when she found her pulling weeds from Missy's flowerbeds."

Sarah looked at her daughter with surprise. "Did you tell her you've always tended to those flowerbeds?"

Mandy shook her head. "I didn't get a chance. I introduced myself, and she started yelling about how our family is too much and she wants us to leave her alone."

Sarah almost shook with indignation. "You have got to be kidding me."

Mandy wiped her eyes again and shook her head. "I left real fast after that."

Sarah pulled her daughter to her and said, "You do not go back there."

Doug tossed the keys to his truck in the air and caught them. "*I'm* going back there. I'm going to let Mizz High and Mighty know exactly—"

"No, you're not," Sarah interrupted him. "You stay away from her too."

Doug made a face and said, "Mandy, would you excuse us for a minute?"

"I'll go inside and wash up." She headed into the house.

Sarah called after her, "I'll be right in."

Doug took a step towards Sarah and said, "I'm not going to let that bitch get away with yelling at my family. I don't care if she is in mourning from losing her mother, that's no excuse to—"

"You're right," Sarah nodded. "But I'm going to handle it. Mandy is my daughter, and this makes me very angry. I told that woman just yesterday how excited Mandy was to meet her, and then she does this."

"She's a bitch," Doug repeated. Saying it made it easier to put her nipples out of his mind.

"And I'm a Christian woman, so I don't appreciate language like that."

Doug frowned at his sister. "Mandy said Bailey cussed at her."

"She what?" Sarah's eyes flew open. "What did she say?"

"I don't know, but she dropped the F-bomb on me a couple of times this morning, so I can only imagine..."

Sarah's face reddened and she took a couple of deep breaths. "She better *not* have used that kind of language with my daughter."

"What are you gonna do?" Doug shrugged, knowing very well what his sister would do.

Sarah picked up her grocery bag and shoved it towards him. "Tell Mandy dinner will be late."

"Want me to come with you?"

"No thank you, I can handle it." She got back in her car and pulled out of the driveway.

Doug watched her go. He'd love to be a fly on the wall for that conversation. Or did he just want to get another glimpse of Mizz High and Mighty's knockers? *That too*. He smiled.

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Chapter Two

Bailey had just fixed herself a Margarita when she heard the doorbell. Before she could answer, it rang again. She opened the door to the angry blond woman. "Hello," she said, and Sarah lit into her.

"You probably don't realise that my daughter has taken care of your mother's flowerbeds practically ever since Missy moved here. You obviously don't care that my brother has taken care of this house—inside and out—for almost as long. Your mother and I—and all of my family—became quite close, especially since her illness."

"I appreciate that," Bailey replied. "I simply told your daughter that I don't want any help right now until I figure out what I'm doing with the house and grounds."

"You *simply told her* by yelling and swearing at her? Gee, I wonder how you treat your enemies if this is how you treat your friends."

"I didn't swear at her!" Bailey scoffed.

"Mandy tells the story otherwise. Well, I would appreciate it, Ms. Montgomery, if you would control yourself around my daughter. My brother and I are old enough to stick up for ourselves, so if you want to swear at someone, swear at us. But leave my daughter alone. I'll see to it that no one from my family ever darkens your doorstep again." She turned on her heel and walked off.

Bailey was too surprised to offer a comeback, so she closed the door and nursed her drink while she rehashed the

conversation in her mind. She didn't remember swearing at the girl, but maybe she had without realising it. She had a bad habit of forgetting things which didn't seem that important to her. She still couldn't remember the woman's name, even after the reaming she just took from her.

The casserole dish was sitting in the sink and Bailey glanced down at it. *Sarah Stevens* and a phone number were printed on the side. That was her name, Bailey recalled now.

She wandered around the house, sipping her drink and trying not to notice how full each room was with various kinds of stuff. It was going to take forever to clean the place out on her own. She envisioned herself becoming sidetracked by every trinket, recalling memory after memory. If her mother was there, she'd tell her to get busy and just do it. Bailey sniffed. If her mother was there, she wouldn't be cleaning out the house. She swiped at a tear with the back of her hand.

It was summertime, and the kids were out of school. Perhaps Bailey didn't have to go through this alone. The Stevens family had insisted they wanted to help. If she could make amends, perhaps offer to pay the girl for her time, maybe they could strike a bargain.

In an effort to find an olive branch, she went into her mother's room and looked through her jewellery box. Melissa didn't have a lot of expensive pieces, but there were a few things that were special. One was a simple gold necklace with a small cross on it, which she knew her mother especially loved. Bailey stared at it for a moment then cradled it in her hand. She could picture her mother wearing the cross on many occasions, and the images made her smile.

Exactly why I need help. Everything reminded her of something special about her mother. She'd get caught up in old times, and the house would still be full after her month had come and gone.

Digging in the bottom of the jewellery box, she found a black velvet bag and dropped the necklace into it. She carried it out with her and continued to walk around the house, formulating a plan in her mind.

* * * *

Bailey looked up Sarah Stevens' address in the phone book the next day before hitting the local market and buying a bouquet of carnations and daisies. She put the flowers in a crystal vase of her mother's and at six p.m. headed to the Stevens' home.

She approached the front door cautiously then rang the bell. Normally not a nervous person, Bailey felt actual trepidation as she waited for the door to open. Mandy answered the bell and a cloudy look immediately covered her face.

She attempted a smile. "Hello, Mandy. Is your mother home? I hoped to speak with both of you."

Without saying a word, Mandy turned and walked into another room. She left the door open, so Bailey waited.

In a moment Sarah returned with her daughter. "Yes?" She spoke as if they had never met.

"Sarah, I owe you and Mandy an apology. May I come in for a moment, please?"

Mother and daughter exchanged glances, and they stepped aside to allow Bailey entrance. She walked inside and extended the flowers. "I'd like to give you these. The vase was one of my mother's favourites. I hope you'll accept it."

Sarah looked it over, taking the arrangement carefully into her hands. "That wasn't necessary."

"Yes, it was. I acted horribly and I'm sorry. I know it's no excuse, but this whole week has been hard for me."

"Please, come in and sit down." Sarah motioned to the small living room.

"Thank you." Bailey chose a seat on the sofa, which was covered by a knitted afghan.

Mandy sat next to her and smiled.

Sarah dropped into the chair across from them. "I know this has been horrible for you. Really, we were trying to make it easier."

"I get that, now," Bailey nodded. "In the city you don't have neighbours offering to do things for you. Everyone wants something in return."

"We just wanted friendship," Sarah replied.

"I'm sorry," Bailey repeated. "I've been down in the dumps and I shouldn't have taken it out on you." She turned to Mandy. "I understand you took care of my mother's flowerbeds."

The girl nodded.

Sarah said, "I think at first Missy enjoyed the company, and they worked side by side. Later, she couldn't do the work by herself. Mandy did everything this season."

Bailey smiled. "Well, I know my mother enjoyed her flowers." She reached in her purse and pulled out the little black velvet bag. "I think Mom would want you to have this."

Mandy opened the gift and gasped. "Oh, I couldn't..."

"Please accept it. I think it will look lovely on you." She looked to Sarah questioningly.

Sarah thought about it for a moment and then nodded. "Thank you." She finally smiled at Bailey.

Mandy removed the necklace and put it on. "It's beautiful! Oh, thank you!" She threw her arms around Bailey's neck and hugged her.

Bailey was caught off guard by the open act of tenderness. She took a moment to compose herself then accepted the hug. When they pulled apart she said, "All right, I do have an ulterior motive. I thought I was being strong and tough, wanting to do everything myself. Now I find myself alone in that house which is so full of *stuff*, and I haven't the foggiest idea where to begin." She looked at Mandy. "I hoped, if I paid you, you might considered helping me sort through things and clean it out."

"You don't have to pay me. I'd be happy to help."

Bailey looked at Sarah. "With your permission, of course."

Sarah nodded. "It does seem like a big job. I'll be happy to help whenever I can, too. But we won't accept payment."

Bailey shrugged. "We'll see. Perhaps mom had some things you might like to have. I certainly don't have room for half of her stuff at my place."

Sarah repeated, "We'll see. When would you like Mandy to start?"

Bailey looked at Mandy. "As soon as you can? Tomorrow?"

Mandy nodded. "I can be there tomorrow. What time?"

Looking around for anyone else in the house, Bailey said, "Later than six-thirty a.m., if possible."

They laughed, and Sarah added, "I'm sorry about that. Doug can be a little stubborn. But he's a good worker and he cared an awful lot for Missy."

"Stubborn seems like an apt description." She caught her thoughts drifting to his long, jean-clad legs, and stood. "It's nice to hear Mom had such good friends. Oh, Sarah—I need to call a realtor about selling the house. Can you recommend anyone?"

"Sure. Let me think about it and I'll send a couple of names and phone numbers with Mandy tomorrow. What, about eight-thirty, nine?"

"Nine would be great." Bailey nodded. She looked at Mandy and said, "I'll see you in the morning, then. And thank you both for giving me another chance."

"See you tomorrow!" Mandy walked her to the door. "And thank you!" She fingered the necklace happily.

"Yeah, thanks," Sarah added as Bailey left.

She felt better as she drove home. She hadn't been trying to make enemies, but she felt so out of place in Perry it seemed like that was what she was doing. She'd made a good start at changing that, though, and was at least formulating a game plan for cleaning out the house. With someone to help her, she knew she could get it done.

She ate a salad and cleaned up the kitchen before she sat down with the phone to try to call Marc again. She'd reached

his voicemail last night, and he'd never called her back. Bailey made a noise of disgust with her tongue as the voicemail answered his phone again. She left another message, a little crisper this time, and hung up.

She wandered into her mother's room and looked around. They would box up clothes and personal items tomorrow for Goodwill. Bailey picked a necklace and two rings she especially treasured from the jewellery box and decided she'd let Mandy go through it too.

From the closet, Bailey took a sweater and a robe that were two of her mother's favourites. She put them in her own room and then decided to get ready for bed. It was early, but she was lonely and depressed and just wanted the day to be over.

* * * *

Mandy arrived at precisely nine a.m. Bailey greeted her at the door with a yawn and a cup of coffee in her hand. "Hello."

"Good morning." Mandy stepped inside.

"I guess you don't drink coffee. Can I get you anything?" Bailey hid another yawn behind the back of her hand.

"No thanks, I'm fine. Here are the realtor names and numbers mom wanted you to have." She handed over a slip of paper.

"Great, thanks. I thought we'd start with her clothes and the stuff in her room today. I called Goodwill and they'll pick it up—we just have to put it in boxes."

Mandy got a nervous look on her face and Bailey asked, "Is that going to bother you? I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"N—no," Mandy said uncertainly. "It'll be okay."

Bailey nodded, somewhat nervous herself, and headed into the bedroom. "Let me know if this creeps you out. We can do something else." She almost hoped the girl would say something. When she didn't, Bailey opened the closet doors and put an empty box on the bed. "I guess we'll just start boxing. Anything that looks worn out we should throw away. I'm going to pitch a lot of stuff in the dresser."

Mandy watched as Bailey opened the top drawer and began throwing underwear away. She turned to the closet and pulled clothes out one at a time. "I remember this dress," she said and folded it lovingly.

Bailey looked at the girl and said, "You know, if there's anything you'd like to have, just take it. It's all going to Goodwill. I kept a couple of things for myself."

"Thanks." Mandy set aside two sweaters and a gardening smock.

"Yeah, you should have that. I really had no idea you helped my mom so much with her flowers. It's funny, we talked about a lot of stuff, but I don't know if she ever mentioned your family." Bailey realised that her mother might have mentioned them and she just didn't remember. Once again, she realised how much she let things go in one ear and out the other, especially things that didn't pertain to her busy daily life. Realising that made Bailey feel a little uncomfortable.

She tried not to think too much, and soon the closet and dresser were empty. "Wow, this isn't as bad as I thought." She closed a box and tucked in the flaps. "I really hated the idea of tackling it by myself—thank you so much for coming over."

"Sure," Mandy replied. "So what's next?"

She cleaned off the top of the dresser and handed the jewellery box to Mandy. "Would you like to look through here and see if there's anything you want? I know there's nothing valuable, but there might be some fun stuff if you're interested."

"I don't know if I should." The girl bit her lip.

"Of course you should. In fact, why don't you take it and keep what you like? Whatever you don't want you can donate or give away, I don't care."

"Okay," Mandy agreed and set the box on the bed with the other things she was keeping. "Mom's going to have a fit if I come home with too much stuff."

"I don't know why. I'm giving it to someone, so if you want it I'd prefer to give it to you."

Mandy nodded and they finished up in Melissa's room by noon. They ate a sandwich and then Bailey had Mandy start boxing up unopened food to take to the food pantry at the church. While the girl started that, she called one of the realtors Sarah had recommended and made an appointment for the next day.

She threw another box on the kitchen table and stood next to Mandy to fill it. "So, what grade will you start in the fall?"

"I'll be a freshman," Mandy replied.

"Do you like school?"

"Yeah, I have to admit, I do. I love to read and write. I think I might want to be a journalist someday."

"Did my mother tell you I'm an editor at *Chicago Today* magazine?"

"Yes," Mandy smiled slyly at her. "I was dying to ask you about it."

Bailey shoved the last of the food into her box and sat in a kitchen chair. "It's a great job. I get to travel and meet people. I can write as much or as little as I want, and they let me pick my story ideas. I highly recommend it as a career possibility."

Mandy sat in the chair next to her and looked in the air dreamily. "Getting out of Perry sounds like the best part, and to travel and meet all kinds of people—wow! My fantasy job."

"I'll show you some stuff on my computer when we have time."

"Cool!" Her eyes lit up.

Bailey chuckled. "Maybe tomorrow, if we get a good head start on boxing this stuff up."

"Yeah!" Mandy agreed.

Bailey called the Goodwill store and confirmed their truck would be there at four-thirty. The sky was clear with no rain in sight, so she and Mandy hauled the boxes out and stacked them in the driveway. They grabbed some other small stuff that Bailey wanted to send and a couple of end tables. She looked around the house and couldn't see anything else to go at that point. They might come up with more later, but for now she felt like they'd accomplished a good day's work.

* * * *

Doug found them sitting in the shade of the porch, sipping lemonade, when he arrived that afternoon. He started to focus on Bailey's long, tanned legs, prominent in the shorts she wore, but got sidetracked by the pile of stuff in front of his truck. He got out and walked around the stack, then looked at her incredulously. "What in the hell are you doing?"

"Drinking lemonade at the moment. Care for a glass?"

"What's this stuff doing out here?"

"Goodwill is picking it up anytime now."

He looked at her as if she were insane. "You're giving it away?"

She set her glass on the little table by her chair and walked down to stand next to him. "My mother is gone. What do you suggest I do, keep everything in her house as some sort of Norman Bates shrine?"

He felt a surge of fury as he looked at her and then back at the pile of Missy's belongings. "No, but it might be nice to ask someone before you start giving things away."

Bailey's eyes flashed. "Ask who? You? Why the hell would I do that? The will's been read, honey, and you weren't in it. All this is mine, now. If I had room in my condo, I'd take it with me, but I don't. Sorry to break it to you."

Doug closed his eyes for a moment to collect his thoughts. He opened them and said calmly, "So if this stuff is going to Goodwill, you won't mind if I take a couple of things?"

"Knock yourself out. I'm not sure her dresses will fit you..."

He glared at her as he picked up the two end tables and stacked them gently in the back of his truck. Every time he ran into her, they butted heads. She was so near, he could either reach out to kiss her or throttle her. It was a tough choice. He looked past her at Mandy on the porch. "You about ready to go, Squirt? I'll give you a ride."

"Sure," she called back. "Let me get my things." She went in the house.

Doug looked back at Bailey. "I hope you're paying her to do all this work for you."

"I intend to," Bailey gave him a nasty look. "I guess that's what motivates you—money? I suppose my mother paid you for every little thing you did."

He bit his tongue and turned away from her, not wanting to say what he was thinking. He headed for the cab of his truck and said, "I never took a dime from your mother. Some people you just *want* to do things for." He looked at Bailey. "And some people you *don't*."

"Aw, bite me." She turned and walked towards her house.

"You'd have to pay me to do that!" he muttered.

She turned back to him, her expression incredulous. "What an arrogant ass you are! I can't believe my mother allowed you near her or this place."

"That just goes to show how much you know. Your mother and I spent quite a bit of time together, and we both enjoyed it very much. But you wouldn't know that, would you? You were never here."

"How dare you!" she started, but stopped again as Mandy came out and bounced over to the truck. Bailey shook her head at Doug and muttered, "You're so lucky..."

She wouldn't say anything else with Mandy present, and he knew it.

He waved his hand in the air at her, a gesture of irritation and impatience.

Mandy waved at Bailey. "See you in the morning!"

Bailey turned to the girl, offering a smile that looked forced. "Thank you for your help. I'll see you tomorrow."

Doug peeled out of the driveway, willing himself to calm down on the drive home. Mandy talked the whole way about what a great day she had and what a great person Bailey Montgomery turned out to be. The chatter irritated him even more, and by the time they got home, he was livid.

"I'll be down later to eat." He jumped out of the truck as soon as he had parked. "I want to shower and unwind."

"Okay." Mandy went in her house and Doug climbed the stairs to his loft. He went in and locked the door, going immediately to the bathroom where he stripped and stepped into the shower. He turned the water to lukewarm—almost cool—and stood under the spray for a long time.

He tried to decide what upset him the most about Bailey Montgomery. The bottom line was the fact that she had not been here for her mother during Missy's battle with cancer. He, Sarah or Mandy had been with Missy every day for the past several months. They had jobs and school but still managed to make time for what was important.

Mandy was already bragging what an important person Bailey was, with an impressive editor's job at some magazine. Doug scoffed at that—who cared about money or prestige over the health of a loved one? Nobody he wanted to know, that was for sure.

So why was his dick standing straight up? The mere thought of Bailey Montgomery made his cock twitch. And right now, Jesus! He was hard as a rock.

Doug grabbed his shaft and stroked it back and forth. The shower grew cold so he heated the water to match his rising body temperature. He stroked himself slowly, picturing Bailey's long dark hair spread out on a pillow beneath him. Her bangs were a little too long and hung in her eyes in a sexy way that drove him crazy. And her tits, God Almighty, they were a sight to behold. He could still see those nipples poking through her silky pyjamas.

Imagining his tongue circling one of the brown peaks, he groaned and stroked his cock faster. He thought about sucking the nipple into his mouth roughly until it was cone-shaped and swollen.

Doug grasped the wall as an intense orgasm shattered through him. He milked the last of the jism from his prick and when he could think straight, used the soap and washed up. No, he definitely wasn't thinking straight—Bailey Montgomery was a snotty bitch from Chicago, and he wanted her to return there. So why did his cock still tingle?

He rinsed the soap from his body and shut the water off. After stepping out to grab a towel, he dried his hair and then the rest of him. He looked at himself in the mirror—his dark

hair was short and stood up, and he liked it that way. He didn't have to do anything to it and he thought it looked good. Rubbing his chin, he decided not to shave—he also liked the three-day-beard look but occasionally had to shave to keep it from growing too thick.

He stepped into boxers and a lightweight pair of gauze pants. He pulled a tank top on and went to his small fridge for a beer. He was trying to avoid the issue that was upsetting him—Bailey Montgomery, with her mile long legs and big tits. And her spunk. Doug liked a spunky woman, but something about Bailey surpassed spunk and went right into bitchiness. It pissed him off that he was wasting even one minute thinking about her. She would pack up and be out of here in a few days, and it was for the best. Thinking about her only got his dander—and his cock—up.

There was a tap at his door, and he unlocked it and opened up to his sister. "Hey," he said.

"Hi there. Mandy said you were in a bad mood. Anything I can do to help?"

"No, thanks."

"What is it this time? She said you seemed unhappy at Missy's house."

He looked at her. "She was giving away the end tables I made for Missy. It just struck me wrong."

"I'm sorry." Sarah touched his arm. "Missy loved those tables. I hope you told Bailey."

"Hell no. I took them."

She laughed. "Did Bailey care?"

"Nope. She said it was all going to Goodwill."

Sarah nodded. "Mandy got some stuff, too. Bailey was very generous with her."

Doug downed the last of his beer and said, "If I come to dinner do I have to hear about the wonderful Bailey Montgomery the whole time?"

"No, you don't. You can listen to me complain about the leaky faucet in the bathroom and the cracked window in the back room that needs to be replaced..."

"Much, much better." Doug followed his sister down the stairs and pulled his door shut.

* * * *

Bailey put Mandy to work the next day boxing up pots and pans while she met with the realtor and walked her through the house. Jane Barnes was a tall woman with glasses, her blond hair pulled tightly into a bun. She looked prim and fussy, but after spending a few minutes with her, Bailey decided she was actually quite nice and seemed very knowledgeable about the real estate market. Jane made notes about the house and everything that needed done to it. Bailey cringed as the list grew longer—repainting inside and out and a new roof were the major items of concern.

The ladies ended up in the backyard and Jane turned to Bailey. "I'm going to be up front with you, Ms. Montgomery—" "Bailey, please."

"Okay, Bailey, this is how I see it. The house needs major repair. Yes, it's a nice place, and it might be worth the investment if someone really wanted to fix it up. But this has grown into a very desirable neighbourhood in the past few

years since your mother bought here. I have clients that would snap this property up in a heartbeat."

"I'm not sure what you're saying," Bailey told her.

Jane said carefully, "A lot of people might want this land." She glanced around. "Not that many will want the house. If I were you, I'd sell it as is and let the new owner remove the house and build their own."

Bailey looked at her. "Remove the house? You think someone would tear it down?"

Jane nodded. "I know they would. I'm positive, if we market it properly, that we can get you as good a deal for the land as we could if you spent a lot of time and money fixing the place up."

"That's something to think about," Bailey mused. "I didn't realise the house was in that bad of shape."

"It's not *that* bad," Jane said unconvincingly. "It just doesn't exactly fit in anymore, given the direction the neighbourhood is going."

Bailey bit her lip and thought about it.

"The nice thing would be the convenience for you. Once you got your mother's things moved out, you'd be done. You wouldn't have to stick around to deal with a contractor and oversee the work on the house."

"That would be nice," Bailey nodded. "I'm anxious to get home." She walked around the yard a bit and finally said, "I need to think about it. Can I call you when I've decided?"

"Of course. What you do will make a difference in how we market the place. If you choose not to worry about the house, I'm quite certain we can sell the property quickly."

"Okay." Bailey led Jane inside, and the woman picked up her briefcase. "I'll be in touch."

"I'll look forward to hearing from you." Jane shook her hand and left.

Bailey looked at the sky as it started to open up. Big raindrops turned into a downpour in a matter of minutes. She closed the door and went to the kitchen where Mandy worked on boxing up pans. "How's it going?"

"Fine," the girl replied. "I found these cookie sheets—if you don't want them, could I have them?"

"Sure." Bailey shrugged and opened the fridge for a soda. "Want one?"

Mandy nodded and said, "Thanks," as Bailey handed it to her. "Your mom and I used to bake cookies together. They were so good and always came out perfect. Missy said it was the cookie sheets, but I think it was Missy."

Bailey chuckled. "Let me guess—oatmeal chocolate chip?"

Mandy smiled. "Yeah. Sometimes we put walnuts in them too. Uncle Doug always swore he could smell them cooking and he'd stop by on his way home from work. He likes walnuts."

"Pretty good nose to smell them cooking that far away."

The girl giggled. "Actually, he stopped by here most days on his way home from work."

"Oh yeah?" Bailey ran her fingertip over the edge of the cookie sheet and thought about that. Apparently this family did watch out for her mother, maybe more than she realised. She wondered about including them in the decision she had to make about the house.

"Wow, it's really pouring." Mandy looked out the back window.

"Yeah, it is." Bailey snapped out of her thoughts and looked outside. "I don't want to haul this stuff downtown in the rain. It can wait until tomorrow."

"Sure, whenever." Mandy nodded. "This looks like a good day to stay inside."

"I think so too. Why don't we finish up in here and then get some lunch? Maybe this afternoon we can tackle mom's bookshelves."

"You bet," the girl agreed, and they finished boxing up what Bailey didn't think she would need.

They ate salads and finished off Sarah's apple pie for lunch. The bookshelves were in the front room, and Bailey dragged several boxes in and began sorting. They took frequent breaks to look through the books and it took them all afternoon to empty the shelves.

There was a knock on the front door, and it opened before Bailey could get to it. Sarah stepped in and peeled off her dripping raincoat. "Hey you two. Sorry to barge in, but you've got a flood going on above your door."

Bailey stepped over and looked out. The gutter was pouring water out directly over the entrance. "Oh geez. What a mess."

"Probably just needs to be cleaned out," Sarah commented. "Wow, look at the books."

"Yeah." Bailey smiled at Mandy. "We started leafing through them and didn't get them all boxed up."

"Oh, my girl loves to read."

Mandy stood up and pointed to a full box. "Bailey's giving me all these! Can you believe it?"

Sarah raised her eyebrows, and Bailey chuckled. "Unless you don't want them, of course. Most of them are classics. I thought she could read what she wanted and then donate them somewhere later, if she likes."

"Wow, how nice of you. You're being very kind." She looked at her daughter. "Why don't we take off for today? You'll have to leave the books until the rain stops."

Bailey went to the front closet and pulled out one of her mother's jackets. "Here, Mandy. It's not waterproof but it'll help."

"Oh, thanks! I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sure, see you." She turned to Sarah. "We're making great strides!"

"Wonderful. See you later." They headed out and Bailey watched them get in their car before she closed the door. She remembered that she was going to talk to Sarah about what the realtor told her, and slapped her forehead. Oh well, she decided, it could wait.

* * * *

Bailey heard pounding the next morning and looked at her clock. It was seven a.m., but still much too early for her liking. She remembered to put on a robe and slippers before she went to the front porch this time.

Doug was on a tall ladder, reattaching the gutter and cleaning debris out of it.

"What are you doing?" she asked him, inanely. *Stupid question!* It was obvious what he was doing. Something about this man had an effect on her brain. She didn't seem to be able to think clearly while staring at his ass in tight jeans.

He looked at her. "Reading the paper and eating a bear claw," he replied, and then smiled. "So you do have a robe."

Bailey gave him a dirty look. "Why are you here? Didn't I make myself clear that I don't want your help?"

"Well gee, that was before the truce you made with Sarah and Mandy. They're all high on you now—in fact Sarah insisted I come clean this thing out before work. She said it was dangerous, and it's supposed to rain again today."

She glanced at him sceptically. His boyish grin made it hard to discern if he told the truth. "Sarah insisted you come over here at this obscene hour and start pounding on my house?"

He grinned. "The pounding was my idea. She just asked me to clean out the gutter."

Bailey went back inside the house and returned with a broom, shaking it at him. "Come down from there. I don't need your help and I don't want it."

Doug grinned again and climbed down the ladder. "Be careful with that, you might make me fall."

"Oh, that would be too delicious to be true. I'd like to see you fall on your ass and get knocked down a peg or two."

"You're just trying to get me on my back," he teased.

She felt her face redden. The comment stung even more because it was partially true—as angry as he made her, she couldn't keep from mentally undressing the man every chance

she got. The muscles in his biceps rippled. She could only imagine those strong arms, hands planted firmly on the bed on either side of her, holding the weight of his body above hers. "What an arrogant jerk!" she sputtered.

He shook his head. "You are too much. As gracious as your mother was, I can't believe she never taught you better manners." He took a step closer to her. "But then I'll bet she tried, and you were too fucking rude to pay attention."

"Ooh, watch the swearing. You might get struck by lightning or whatever happens to you Christian folk when you're naughty."

He smiled grimly. "My sister is the angel in the family. I pride myself on being the devil. And you are a person who obviously needs someone to swear at her so she can understand what the hell they're talking about."

She took a step closer to him. "Fine then—fuck you. I don't need *anything* from you. I wish you'd get that through your thick skull."

"Yeah, like you're going to climb up the ladder and clean out the gutters?"

"Why not?" She grabbed one side of the ladder and stepped onto it.

"Get down from there," he scoffed. "You're wearing pyjamas and slippers, for Pete's sake."

She climbed up a couple of steps, and he came and stood below her. She looked down and said, "Trying to catch a peek? Sorry, I'm wearing underwear."

"Get down from there right now," Doug insisted. "You don't have to prove anything to me. I believe that you can do whatever you want. Just get down."

"I like it up here," Bailey climbed higher.

He reached for her ankle and she shook her foot at him.

"You're going to make me fall," she teased him. "Maybe *you* want to see *me* flat on my back."

"This is not funny. Come down now."

Bailey laughed and started to say something about him bossing her around when she lost her balance. She reached out and grabbed the gutter, which pulled loose, and tumbled to the ground still clutching it.

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Chapter Three

Doug reached for her but it happened so fast, the next thing he knew Bailey was lying sprawled out across the steps. "Shit!" he swore. "Are you okay?"

She groaned. "No, I'm not okay. I fell off the god-damned ladder."

He knelt next to her. She'd been right, he did enjoy seeing her flat on her back. He shook his head to clear the sexual thoughts. "And whose fault was that? You had no business being up there in the first place."

She gave him an irritated look. "Neither did you, asshole. I told you I don't want or need anything from you."

"Fine." Doug stood up and reached for his toolbox. "I'll be going then."

"You could at least help me up." Bailey looked at the guttering in her hand and tossed it aside. "And I suppose you could re-hang that stupid thing."

He reached for her hand and yanked her to a standing position. "Oh, why certainly, ma'am, since you asked so nicely."

Bailey scowled at him and took a step, wincing.

"What?" he snarled at her. She irritated the hell out of him at every turn, yet he couldn't help imagining himself tugging off that robe and stripping her gorgeous body naked.

"I think I twisted my ankle," she replied a little more softly.

"Let me see." Doug knelt in front of her again and touched the ankle gently. "Doesn't look broken."

"I said I twisted it," she muttered. "I suppose you're a doctor too?"

Standing again, Doug shook his head. "You are probably the most unpleasant woman I've ever run across in my life, which I find totally amazing, seeing as how your mother was probably the most pleasant woman I ever met in my life. Geez, your apple didn't just fall far from the tree, it hopped a plane to another state."

Bailey glared at him. "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, buddy. I'll tell you what, don't fix the gutter. Just get the hell out of here and don't come back." She turned away from him muttering, "You're one to talk. Your sister and niece are so sweet, and you're the biggest jerk on the face of the earth." Bailey took one step and grimaced. "Damn it!"

"You probably shouldn't walk on that," Doug told her quietly. He reached down and picked up the broom she'd carried out earlier. "Maybe you can fly in to the sofa."

Bailey's eyes lit with fury and he laughed, ducking to avoid her swinging arm. "Come on." Without waiting for her approval, he swept her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and headed into the house.

"Put me down!" Bailey slapped at his butt, the only thing she could reach in the position he held her.

"As you wish." He deposited her on the sofa, grinning. "You need to stop that, you're getting me all excited."

She growled at him. "If you touch me again, I swear I'll get a knife and cut every ounce of *excitement* from your body."

"Ooh," Doug made a face. "Nothing kills a hard-on quicker than talk of knives."

"Get out of here!"

"I'm going. Christ you're bossy." He stepped into the kitchen and opened the freezer. Grabbing a bag of frozen vegetables, he pulled it out and tossed it to Bailey as he left. "Put that on your ankle. Should help with the swelling."

She glared at him and Doug smiled to himself. Why did he enjoy tormenting her so? She was rude, irritating and a total bitch, he knew that for a fact. He also knew his hard-on was *not* gone—all he had to do was think of Bailey and it returned painfully. That idea intrigued him, and at the same time it pissed him off.

* * * *

Bailey nursed her ankle until Mandy showed up, then she let the girl fuss over her for a while. She insisted on phoning her mother, who left instructions for Bailey to stay off her feet and informed them she would bring dinner over when she got off work. Bailey did as Sarah suggested, and by evening her ankle wasn't so sore.

"Pizza always makes me feel better," Sarah smiled at her when she entered, carrying two pizza boxes.

"That was very nice, but you didn't have to do it," Bailey said.

Sarah tossed Bailey a look as she passed through to the kitchen. "I wanted to do it. Can you get used to the idea of people helping you out now and then, perhaps?"

"I don't know, but I'll try." She made her way into the kitchen where Mandy flipped open a pizza box.

"What kind do you like, Bailey?"

She shrugged. "I'm not picky. I usually get Canadian bacon and mushrooms. But I'll eat anything."

"Hey, that's Uncle Doug's favourite, too!" Mandy exclaimed.

"Imagine that," Bailey muttered, accepting a slice of pizza on a plate from Sarah. "So we do have one thing in common."

Sarah chuckled, picking at her own pizza. "I'd say you have a lot more than one thing."

"No way." Bailey shook her head. "He's the most stubborn, pig-headed—" She looked up at Sarah. "Oh, well, maybe I see what you mean."

Sarah laughed and squeezed Bailey's shoulder as Doug knocked, coming in through the kitchen door. "Speak of the devil."

"That would be me, I assume." He planted a kiss on his niece's cheek and took a plate of pizza from his sister. Tossing his leg over the back of a kitchen chair, he sat.

Bailey glared at him and he grinned at her as he ate.

She made a face and then said, "While you're all here, I wanted to discuss something. I met with Jane Barnes, the realtor, yesterday. I wasn't expecting what she told me, and I thought maybe I could bounce it off you guys."

"Let me guess," Doug remarked, picking a mushroom off his pizza. "You need a new roof and the whole house needs paint."

Bailey nodded. "That, plus a few dozen other things. But she said something else—did you know the neighbourhood has increased dramatically in value since Mom bought here? Jane said this property is quite desirable right now."

"Then you should be able to get a good price," Sarah commented.

"Possibly, but that wasn't what I meant." Bailey continued, "Jane thinks whoever buys this property is not going to want the house. She thinks I shouldn't do anything to fix the place up, and sell the property as is."

"So they can tear it down?" Sarah asked, surprised. "It's a beautiful house!"

"I know," Bailey nodded. "But she said it's no longer suited to the neighbourhood. The fact is, I'm probably going to get the same amount for the place whether I spend the money or not, so why bother?"

"Missy loved this house," Mandy said softly.

"I know she did," Bailey agreed gently. "But it's a matter of economics."

"It's Bailey's decision." Sarah put a hand on her daughter's shoulder.

She watched the exchange and then looked at Doug, who hadn't spoken yet. "What do you think?"

"Does it matter?"

She shrugged. "Apparently it mattered to my mother, so I'm asking."

"Well, I like the house. But that's just me. It would suck to invest a lot of money in the place and then have someone tear it down."

Bailey sighed. "I don't know what to do."

"Why don't you let me check into some things? I'd like to get a little more information before you make your decision. Can you give me a day or so?"

"Sure." She shrugged again. "I'm not going anywhere until we get the place emptied, anyway. We didn't make much progress today, did we?" She smiled at Mandy. They'd spent the whole day surfing the internet.

Mandy grinned. "We'll do better tomorrow."

"You betcha." Bailey pushed her plate away and rose. "Leave this. Let's go sit and relax for awhile."

"I can't," Mandy said. "I'm going to the movies with some friends tonight. Can someone give me a ride home?" She looked from her mother to her uncle.

"Sure, I'm leaving." Doug shoved one last bite of pizza into his mouth and stood up.

"Can I sleep in tomorrow, please?" Bailey asked him politely.

"Makes a rat's ass to me. I won't be here."

"Thank God!"

He rolled his eyes at his sister and led Mandy out.

"See you tomorrow Bailey!" the girl called.

"Okay, have fun! Don't—"

Doug pulled the door shut, cutting her off.

"Well," Bailey snorted, and headed to the front room.

Sarah followed her, sitting at the opposite end of the sofa.

Bailey sighed. "I know my mother loved this house. I just don't know if it'll be worth it to fix it up."

"We all love this house. We spent quite a bit of time over here, especially towards the end. Your mom had a lot of bad nights, and we didn't want her to be alone."

"I've been thinking about that." Bailey kicked her feet up on the coffee table. "I wonder if Mom didn't mention you guys because she didn't want me to know how much she depended on you. I know she didn't want me to take time off work to come stay with her. If I'd known how bad she was, of course I would have been here."

"She kept it from you?" Sarah appeared surprised.

Had they assumed I'd simply chosen not to come? "She kept a lot of things from me. I regret now that I didn't visit more often. I would have gotten a better idea of what was going on with her. But I was swamped with work, and after I talked to her on the phone a couple of times a week, it seemed like things were okay. I feel bad about that now."

"She should have told you." Sarah shook her head. "It's not fair for you to feel guilty. She didn't do you any favours by keeping things from you."

Bailey appreciated the sentiment. "Well, thanks. But I feel like a crummy daughter. I have to face the fact—your family was here for her and I wasn't. Now you're here for me. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"Nobody's looking for payment. We're just doing the right thing, and we're doing it because we want to. Your mother was a nice woman. *You* are a nice woman."

"You're kind to say so." Bailey sat up, feeling tired all of a sudden and ready for sleep. "I suppose I should turn in. I've got some decisions to make tomorrow and I need a clear head."

Sarah stood and gathered her things. "Try to get some sleep and don't worry too much. It'll all work out."

"I know," she said softly. "Thanks for the pizza and the talk."

"Good night, Bailey."

"Night." Bailey walked her out, stopping long enough to stare at the house with its chipped white paint. *What am I going to do?* She flicked a chunk of paint into the grass and went back inside.

Checking the clock, she decided to call Marc. He was out every time she'd tried to reach him, and she got his voicemail again. "Call me," she said in an irritated voice into the phone. Hanging up abruptly, she cleaned the kitchen and got ready for bed, thinking about him. Six voicemails in the past two days, and he hadn't returned one call. She knew he was busy, but that was ridiculous.

* * * *

Bailey had just finishing emptying a kitchen cabinet when Doug arrived the next afternoon.

"What are you doing with all that stuff?" he asked.

Rolling her eyes, she tossed her hair over her shoulder and carried a box to the front porch. "Same thing as the last time you asked, getting rid of it. You see something you want, take

it. There's a rolling pin that would be perfect for someone to use when beating you over the head."

He grinned. "I may take that, thanks, Darlin'."

She flopped onto the sofa, trying to ignore the mental images forming in her mind. Doug pulling her into his arms, nuzzling her neck, whispering in her ear, 'How do you want it, Darlin'? Hard and fast, or slow and sweet?' Pressing his denim-clad crotch against hers—the picture became increasingly uncomfortable as her thighs trembled. Fighting the thoughts, she shook her head. "I'm not your darling, so don't call me that. Did you want something or are you just here to piss me off?"

"That *would* be a good reason to come over, I'll admit. But I wanted to talk to you," he sat on the edge of the chair across from her, "about the house."

"What about it?" She willed herself to focus and ignore the bulge in his jeans when he sat.

"I've been thinking. I'd like to fix it up." He raised a hand when she started to interrupt. "Please hear me out, I've given this a lot of thought. I'll buy all the supplies and I'll do the work myself. What *you* would need to do, though, is find the right buyer—someone who wants the house and won't tear it down. I wouldn't want to go through all that work for nothing."

"How could I be sure a buyer really wanted the house? They could lie to me and tear it down anyway."

"They could," he nodded. "But I think we'll be able to tell. I'll talk to the realtor and help screen prospective buyers if you like."

She looked at him. "I know you like the house, but I don't understand why you'd want to go to all that trouble and expense."

He shrugged. "We could add the cost of the supplies on to the selling price. If you get it, I could be reimbursed. If not, I'll swallow it. But I'd really hate to see the house get torn down."

Bailey studied him for a minute and finally said, "Maybe we could tack another few thousand on for the labour. Not good business sense doing it for nothing."

"I'm not doing it for the money. But I wouldn't turn it away, either."

"I don't know. It seems so much easier to sell it as is and not have to bother with fixing it up."

"You're going to sell the house either way and make the same amount of money. I like the fixing up—it's what I enjoy doing. If it doesn't work out, well hell, I gave it a shot. But you won't have to do a thing, I promise. Really, you've got nothing to lose."

"Nothing to lose," Bailey repeated. "And I won't have to do a thing?"

He shook his head and she thought about it some more. Actually, she would have to do one thing—put up with a smartass Doug Kenny every day. Each time she saw him she formed new mental images—his lean, long form, naked and sweat-slicked, bending her over the sofa and fucking her senseless. Fighting the fantasies might be harder than the actual work. "Oh, all right. I'd already planned to stay here

for a couple more weeks. I guess I can give you that long to see what you can do with the house."

"Two weeks? Well, gee, I hope I can find my magic wand..."

She gave him a sarcastic look.

He grinned. "Okay. I have two weeks of vacation coming. I thought I'd use that to get the roof replaced and the outside painted while the weather forecast is with me. A couple questions—I'll run the colour choices of paint and shingles past you, but I'm assuming you'll let me handle the choice of materials? I'll use good quality but affordable supplies."

"Of course, you know more about that than I do. You can pick the colours, too, I trust you."

He smiled wickedly. "Why would you say such a thing?"

She placed her palm against her temple. "I don't know. Feeling light-headed all of a sudden, must be getting hungry or something."

"The other thing is—what time am I allowed to begin work in the morning? Wouldn't want anyone to come outside and start yelling at me."

"Heaven forbid. You know what, come over whenever you like. I've got nothing pressing going on these days so it doesn't matter if you wake me up early."

"Six-thirty works for you then?"

"Come over at fucking four-thirty, I told you, *I don't care*. Whenever."

"Okay, okay," he held his hands up. "Lordy, you're a hot-blooded woman."

"You'd better believe it." She threw him a sassy look, noticing how his eyes crinkled when he was fired up. She resisted the urge to stare into the brown orbs, but it became harder with each day that passed. Saved from herself by a knock at the door, she glanced up to see Sarah enter.

"Hello, everyone. What's going on?"

"Hi there. Mandy's in the kitchen. Your brother and I were just ironing out some details on the house. He's going to fix it up for me."

"You are?" Sarah smiled at Doug. "How great! I wasn't going to say anything but I would hate to see the place torn down. I was noticing it more and more while I was here yesterday—it's a beautiful little house."

"Little being the problem," Bailey said. "The lot is huge but the house is small with just the two bedrooms and one bathroom. Too small for a family, really."

Doug said, "But it would be so easy to add on. There's plenty of room in the back—a person could easily add a couple more bedrooms and a bathroom and still have a nice-sized yard."

Sarah thought about it and nodded. "You'll have to find the right buyer."

"Definitely," Doug agreed.

"You two think alike." Bailey leaned back into the sofa. "Scary."

Sarah laughed and Doug stood up next to her. "I'm starved. How about dinner, my treat? Anybody up for Chinese?"

"Chinese sounds great," Bailey said. "Sweet and sour chicken and Crab Rangoon."

He wiggled his eyebrows in her direction. "I love Crab Rangoon."

"What's scary is how much you two have in common," Sarah commented.

Bailey snorted. "Yeah, a total of two things—both food related."

Sarah grinned "It's a start!"

"Please," Bailey forced a shudder. He annoyed the hell out of her. The fact that she creamed her panties whenever he walked by was just as disturbing.

Doug chuckled. "Okay, on to the food. Sarah, you want your usual?"

She nodded and he asked, "You mind if I run home and shower real quick? I came here straight from work."

"Go ahead, we'll survive until you get back."

He leaned down to Bailey and asked softly, "How about you? Will you survive until I get back?"

"I'll try," she said sarcastically, working to keep her manner light. If he sensed the feelings he aroused in her, she'd never hear the end of it.

He made a point of looking at her breasts, shook his head and walked towards the kitchen. "I'll see what Mandy wants and go out through the back."

"Okay." Sarah dropped into the chair next to Bailey. "He giving you a bad time?"

"Always," Bailey replied. "But it's nice what he's doing with the house. He said he'd pay for the supplies himself. Can he

swing that? I don't want to put him out and I've got the money..."

"So does he. Let him do it his way, Bailey. It'll make him happy."

"Well the most important thing is to keep Doug happy, now isn't it?" Bailey said jokingly, and they laughed.

* * * *

A couple of evenings later, Bailey looked around the garage at all the supplies Doug had purchased. There were several buckets of paint, and as she was checking out the colour—*green?*—he stepped up behind her.

"Help you with something?" he asked.

She jumped. "Shit! You startled me!"

"Maybe because you're snooping in stuff that doesn't belong to you."

She stood up and faced him. "It's in *my* garage, to be used on *my* house. And by the way, whoever told you that you could paint the house *green*, for fuck's sake?"

Doug chuckled as he removed his ball cap and shook his head. "I asked if you wanted to be in on the colour decisions and you said no."

"But green?" Bailey was sceptical.

"Are you going to micro-manage everything I do? Because I know what I'm doing and I don't appreciate—"

"Oh who gives a damn what you appreciate?" She stepped closer to him. "I'm sick to death of your macho bull-shit attitude—"

Bailey's eyes widened as Doug grabbed her, and she put up her fists in protection. He didn't strike her. Instead he yanked her next to him and pressed his mouth firmly on hers.

She pounded her fists on his chest for a moment until she felt his tongue nudging her lips, seeking entry. It was the last thing she expected and the last thing she wanted ... *wasn't it?* Not exactly sure, Bailey opened her mouth and Doug's tongue took over, tracing every inch, every line, and batting against hers as if it, too, was looking for a fight.

His hands ran down her back and cupped her butt securely, pressing her body into his. Bailey could feel his rigid erection against her thigh and it was enough to make wetness seep between her legs. A thrill shivered down her spine as she pressed into him. She knew it was wrong—the whole thing felt extremely wicked—but she couldn't remember wanting anything more.

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Chapter Four

Doug tugged at Bailey's T-shirt impatiently, and she raised her arms to assist. She was as eager to be rid of it as he seemed to be. He yanked it over her head and sent the shirt flying. Her bra fell away with a flick of his fingers, and then his mouth was on her. She groaned with pleasure as he sucked her nipple, getting it wet and hard before moving to the other side. As he closed his teeth over the second nipple, he twisted the first between his thumb and forefinger. Bailey felt like she might explode.

She arched her back to him, offering more, and his hands skimmed over her waist. Quickly unbuttoning her jeans, he pulled them down and dropped to his knees before her. Without uttering a sound, Doug peeled off her panties and worked his fingers through her damp folds. He sucked her clit into his mouth and worked two fingers in and out of her pussy.

Bailey leaned back against the workbench in the garage and bit her lip. He was being so quiet but she was about to come, and quiet had never been her style. When the first waves of her orgasm washed over her, she groaned loudly, grasping the bench behind her for support.

She felt a gush of fluid release from her throbbing pussy and heard him moan enjoyably as he lapped it up. That was all she needed to let go, and her climax was swift and intense. Doug stayed with her until her pussy stopped pulsing

around his fingers and then he released her and stood up. He tugged at his jeans and practically dragged them off his body.

Bailey looked down at the stiff cock between them and knew she wanted it inside her. "Oh yes," she whispered, and reached for him.

He leaned in to her ear and asked softly, "Condom?"

"Not necessary," she answered, raising one leg and guiding him to her soft centre.

He slipped into her well-lubed body and held steady, not moving for a moment.

She reached for his face and kissed him deeply, tasting her own musky-scented juices. She tugged at his lower lip with her teeth and murmured, "Fuck me."

Doug groaned and thrust deeply, grabbing her waist and holding her close. She wrapped one leg around his ass and drew him in, enveloping his cock the way her mouth enveloped his tongue. She felt the pulsating sensation begin from deep within and clenched her muscles so he could share it with her.

"Sweet Jesus!" he muttered, pounding into her until they were both quivering and clutching each other.

Bailey felt his heat spew into her in waves, warming her centre and intensifying her own pleasure. "Oh yes!" she cried out, grabbing his hair as he clamped down on one nipple. "Oh god, yes!" Her orgasm was powerful and magnificent and, judging by his expression, his was much the same.

As they regained their senses, Bailey lowered her leg so he could pull out of her. He looked into her eyes but she

suddenly felt embarrassed, mortified really, and turned away to reach for her clothes.

"That was—" he began.

She cut him off. "You should go." She dressed without looking at him.

"Bailey..."

He obviously wanted to talk, but she couldn't face him, not yet.

"Please just go," she repeated quietly and walked away from him into the house.

* * * *

Doug's emotions were a jumbled mess. He'd just experienced the hottest sex of his life with the most infuriating woman on the planet. Even after what they'd shared, she wouldn't look at him or talk to him. He finished dressing and left, seeing as Bailey had gone into her house almost immediately after they'd separated. He couldn't get a read on her feelings and it pissed him off. Did she like it? Did she hate it? He couldn't be sure. He *was* sure that she came twice, quite explosively it seemed, but then she pushed him away.

He slammed his truck into gear and headed home. To hell with her. No woman treated him like that. She liked the sex, he was sure of it. But then to walk away as she had, well, screw her. He didn't need her, or that hot, sexy body. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

Unless she let him.

* * * *

Bailey tossed and turned all night. Her feelings were conflicted—she had just lost her mother, and there she was having sex like an animal, in the garage of all places, with a man she couldn't stand. It was fantastic sex, no doubt about that, but she and Doug didn't like each other. So why did they practically tear each other's clothes off?

And what about Marc? Just because he hadn't called in a few days didn't mean anything was wrong. She had an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, but that was just a feeling. Bailey wondered if she was using that as an excuse to keep from feeling like a cheap whore.

It seemed like she never got to sleep, but pounding on her front door woke her the next morning. Glancing at the clock, she saw it was barely six-thirty. She knew who was there.

Moving slowly, she used the bathroom and brushed her teeth and hair before heading out to the front room. He wasn't going anywhere. Did she want him to? Was she hoping if she walked slowly enough he might give up and go away? No, she hoped he was going to fuck her again, and she'd wanted to pee and brush her teeth first.

She opened the door wearing her silky pyjamas.

Doug looked her over before speaking. "Took you long enough."

"Did we have an appointment?" She turned and walked away from him.

He followed her down the hall. "I couldn't sleep all damn night. You're lucky I waited this long to show up."

She stopped and faced him. "What do you want, Doug? More sex? You are an arrogant one to think you can just waltz in here—"

He grabbed her arm. "You answered the door."

Bailey looked up at him. "So that means I want to screw you? My, aren't we full of ourselves."

Doug shoved her up against the wall, knocking a picture to the floor but ignoring it. "Well, do you? Because I couldn't think of anything else all night. We have this totally hot sex and then you walk away like it was nothing. Are you really that cold-hearted of a bitch or are you just afraid?"

"I'm not afraid of you," she spouted back.

He looked into her eyes. "You want the sex but you don't want me. I get it now."

"Gee, you're quick."

The fact that she didn't deny it seemed to irritate him. Shoving her by one arm, he forced Bailey into the bedroom and plunged her facedown on the bed. "Okay, princess, we'll do it your way. Bury your face in the pillow so you can pretend it's not me." He grabbed her hips and raised them, yanking off her pyjama bottoms.

"Doug!" she protested.

He froze. "Do you want me to stop?"

Bailey hesitated a second and then choked out the words "No ... god no!"

In a frenzied manner, he kicked off his pants and, gripping her hips, positioned the tip of his cock at the opening of her pussy. He inserted a finger, then groaned before sucking the digit into his mouth. "You're dripping wet already. It's a damn

good thing, because I'm gonna fuck you now. You just close your eyes and pretend I'm somebody else."

He drove into her and Bailey cried out, her first orgasm arriving instantaneously.

Doug held firm as her body shuddered around his, and when she fell flat, he grasped her hips and dragged her back up towards him. "Stay with me, I'm not finished with you yet."

His words sent tingling waves through her and she pressed her butt into him. He wrapped his arms around her, massaging her clit with one hand and her breasts with the other. "Feel good?" he whispered in her ear.

"Yes..." She almost sobbed. Nothing had ever felt better.

"Want me to keep fucking you?"

"Oh god, yes!" Another orgasm ripped through her and she quivered in his arms.

He kept a tight grasp until the shaking subsided. "You like it this way, don't you, baby? You can imagine you're with anyone you like when I'm fucking you from behind. So who are you thinking about? Some big shot pencil pusher from the city?"

Bailey tried to shake her head but everything was fuzzy and she couldn't concentrate.

"Your clit is so big, you're gonna come again in just a minute, here." He rubbed her swollen nub in circles. "Come on. I want you to be good and satisfied before I empty my load into you."

She groaned again, his words driving her crazy. No one had ever talked dirty to her during sex before, and Bailey

discovered that it drove her wild. Another orgasm shot through her and she gasped.

"Come on, beautiful girl, that's it. God, you're pretty when you come! Your face looks so sweet, and your nipples are hard as rocks."

She tried to slump forward but he held her securely. "I can't..." she moaned.

"Had enough?" Doug dragged her back up against him.

"Y ... ess..." she whimpered.

"Then hang on."

He released her breasts and grabbed her hips, pounding into her until she couldn't see straight. Wave after wave of hot, sticky seed poured into her and Bailey sighed when he finally let her collapse on the bed.

He remained firmly planted inside, lying gently on top so he didn't crush her. After a few minutes he pulled out and rolled off to the side. "I'll just slip out quietly, like I was never here."

"Doug!" Bailey whispered without looking at him.

"What, beautiful?"

"I wasn't imagining I was with anyone else. As much as it pains me to admit it, I was thinking about you. I wanted to be with you."

"Well now." He chuckled as he stood up to get dressed. "What do you know about that?" Leaning down, he kissed her cheek. "I'd say we have a problem."

Still lying on her stomach, Bailey watched as he finished dressing but never made eye contact with him. "I'm not sure it's such a problem."

Doug hesitated a moment, and Bailey saw him smile as he walked out.

* * * *

She remained in bed a while longer, enjoying the satisfying after-effects of their lovemaking. Doug was quiet the first time they had sex, but this morning he'd talked the whole time. Not just talked—ordered, commanded, totally took control of her, and Bailey loved it. She ran a hand over her sticky, naked body and felt a small bruise on her thigh—it hurt a little now but felt heavenly when Doug had given her the hickey last night. He was an imaginative lover, and she wanted to get him back in her bed as soon as possible.

She tried to ignore her other thoughts about him. Theirs had been a mutual dislike from the start—both thinking the other was arrogant, rude and mouthy. Bailey knew she hadn't treated him well, or Sarah and Mandy for that matter, when they originally met. She thought she'd made progress in correcting the situation ... with Sarah and Mandy, anyway. She and Doug still clashed like oil and water.

Regretfully she rose to shower and dress but continued thinking about him. How could she dislike his arrogance but manage to find him so incredibly sexy? He *was* rude, pushing his way in here this morning, and remembering it sent a flood of dampness through her core. Bailey rubbed her clit as the shower spray thrummed against her, still thinking of Doug. He was mouthy. Hell yes he was mouthy, and when she remembered how he spoke to her during sex, her pussy gushed.

She leaned against the shower wall and continued to flick her clit in small circles. The memory of Doug pounding into her from behind took her breath away, and as she relived the moment, she could almost feel his strong hands grasp her hips. An intense orgasm spilled from deep inside, causing her to shudder and quake as she held herself up for support.

Bailey gathered her bearings and climbed out of the shower. Just thinking about sex with Doug produced great orgasms. The actual sex was the best she could imagine, and she wanted more.

His vacation started in a few days, and she wondered how much of that time she could keep him flat on his back in bed. Probably not much—Mandy would be around every day, and Sarah would notice if Doug never accomplished anything. *Oh well*, Bailey chuckled to herself, *a girl could dream*.

She pulled herself out of the daydream long enough to dress before Mandy arrived. They cleaned out several more cabinets, and Doug came over after work to start scraping the house for painting. He went straight to work, and Bailey and Mandy stopped to greet him on their way out.

"Hello." She looked him in the eye.

"Evening. Where are you two headed?"

Mandy spoke up. "Bailey and I are dropping some boxes off at Goodwill and then we're grabbing something to eat before she takes me home. Mom has that church meeting tonight."

"That's right," he nodded.

"Can I bring you anything ... to eat...?" Bailey looked at him and licked her lips.

Doug cleared his throat and looked down. "I'm good, thanks."

She waved a set of keys in front of him. "You'll need a key to the garage. Here you go."

Taking the ring from her, Doug looked at it. "This was your mother's, to the house and everything."

"I know." Bailey tried to convey meaning without saying the actual words. "In case you want anything in the house. Take them, and *use them*."

"Yeah, sure. Okay." He cleared his throat again and shoved them in his pocket. He was obviously embarrassed in front of his niece, and Bailey was delighted. She hadn't seen much of this side of him.

"See you later!" Mandy called cheerily, heading to Bailey's car.

"Later." He watched the girl go, and when she was out of earshot turned to Bailey. "You've sure done a one-eighty."

She knew it was a complete turn-around, but standing next to him now, all she could think about was throwing him down and devouring him. It was probably a good thing Mandy was waiting.

Looking him over carefully, Bailey made a decision. So what if they were polar opposites? Nobody was talking about forever, and she could use a couple more weeks of hot-monkey-sex. "You complaining?" She ran a finger over his zipper teasingly.

"Hell no."

"Good. Then maybe I'll let you flip me into another one-eighty and fuck me from behind later."

He closed his eyes as if to steady himself and Bailey saw his erection twitch and bulge.

She laughed softly and glanced to be sure Mandy was in the car. "What, you think only you can talk dirty?"

"Oh no, I know better," he declared. "When you told me to fuck you, I thought I was going to lose it right then and there."

"I like saying it," she admitted. "And I like hearing it. So get used to that."

He laughed as she walked off, throwing her hair over her shoulder. "Well, I like doing it!" he called after her. "So get used to that!"

"I am." Bailey turned back to him and winked.

She and Mandy ran their errands, grabbed a bite to eat and waited at the girl's house until Sarah returned. Bailey wandered around the comfortable little home, stopping in front of a table with several framed pictures. "Cute." She touched the shot of a smiling young Mandy at about the age of five.

"Thanks. This was my dad." Mandy picked up another photo, of a handsome young man.

"He looks very nice."

"He was a good dad," she agreed, and then showed Bailey an old picture of Doug throwing Mandy over his shoulder. "Uncle Doug's going to make a good dad, too, if he ever finds the right woman and settles down."

Bailey looked at the photo, remembering when Doug threw her over his shoulder like that. She felt a pang of discomfort at Mandy's words but knew she couldn't let the girl bother

her. She was a child, really, and Doug was an adult. He was free to have an adult relationship with Bailey, and when it was over they would both move on. It was as simple as that, she told herself. But the pang of discomfort didn't go away.

When Sarah arrived, they chatted a few minutes before Bailey drove home quickly, hoping with all her might that Doug was still there. She exhaled when she saw him putting away his supplies and locking the garage.

After parking her car in the driveway, she stepped out and looked at him. "I'm glad I didn't miss you."

He smiled at her. "I wasn't leaving. I thought about hopping in the shower before you got back."

"Ooh, I'm glad I didn't miss that. Come on, I'll show you where I keep the soap." She led him inside and watched him lock the doors before following her to the bathroom. She pressed him up against the wall, kissing him firmly.

Doug kissed her back and then lightly pushed away. "I really need to shower. I've been working all day in the heat."

"I thought I might help you." She tugged his T-shirt over his head and tossed it aside.

He groaned as she unfastened his jeans and dragged them off. His erection jutted forth.

Bailey cupped it gently. She licked her lips then reached in and turned on the water. "Shall we?"

Doug quickly helped her strip and they stepped under the warm spray. He reached for the soap but Bailey took it from him, running it over his body in foamy trails. "Jesus," he muttered as she washed his cock and balls thoroughly, then handed him the soap.

"You can do the rest." She dropped to her knees and licked the length of his shaft from base to tip. A drop of milky-white cum appeared in the slit of the tip, and Bailey sucked it off. "Mmm," she swallowed his length and he grabbed the shower wall for support.

"That feels fantastic." He ran a hand through her hair.

Bailey chuckled and deep-throated him several more times before he reached for her shoulders.

"You should stop." He dragged her up into his arms. "I have other things in mind and I'm gonna need a nice, hard cock."

"Mmm, you have a *very* nice, hard cock." She kissed him lightly and then opened her mouth wider. Their tongues darted back and forth, teasing and plunging before Bailey finally pulled back and traced a finger over his eyebrow. "Tell me what you have in mind."

He nuzzled her breasts and pulled one nipple into his mouth. "That depends if you're up for some soapy, bend-over-in-the-shower butt sex. If not, no problem..."

Bailey groaned and pressed in to him. "Yeah, I am. I love getting down and dirty in the shower. Hang on." She shoved him back gently and stepped out for a moment, returning with a tube of lubricant. "I'm not sure soap is going to cut it."

Doug took the tube from her, opening it and squeezing out a handful of the thick, sticky goo. He kissed Bailey again and turned her away from him. Rubbing the thick lube over the crack of her ass, he inserted a finger into her puckering anus. "Oh yeah, so nice and tight."

Bailey gripped the back shower wall, ready and willing for whatever he wanted to do to her. She was hot and horny and wanted him to fill every orifice.

He worked two fingers inside her and nibbled her earlobe. "How's that feel?"

"So good I can barely stand it—I want more! Is there any way you can rub my clit when you're in there?"

"Absolutely. If you're ready, I know I am. You're so beautiful, I might not last long."

"Do it," she moaned as he withdrew his fingers and nudged his cock at her anus. "Fuck me in the ass."

Doug groaned and pushed himself forward.

Bailey felt the resistance of her tight outer rim, and reached between her legs to rub her clit. The added sensation would help her relax and allow his penetration.

"That's it. Rub that little button until I can reach it." He pressed on, slowly forcing his cock into her tight hole.

"I'm coming!" she muttered, and as the orgasm blasted through her, Doug squeezed her breasts and nipples. Bailey leaned against the wall for support. When her pussy stopped throbbing, she felt an entirely new sensation. "Oh, Jesus," she groaned again. "That feels incredible!"

She felt the curve of Doug's smile against her cheek. "It sure as hell does. That sweet little orgasm was all I needed to push my way in. Now we're gonna work on a bigger one." He massaged her clit with one hand and her nipples with the other.

"Oh lord, oh..." She was at a loss for words. The feeling of Doug reaming her ass was exquisite. Her pussy was drenched

with fluids and they poured out of her, adding lubrication to the already well-oiled machine. "I need to feel you inside my pussy. Can you stick your fingers in?"

"You bet." He reached lower and easily inserted three fingers into her throbbing centre.

"Yeah..." Bailey massaged her clit as Doug worked on her pussy and continued to pluck at her nipples. "Fuck me. It's good, so good..." She threw her head back against him and came violently, the shuddering so intense he had to remove his hands and grasp her waist.

"Oh baby!" he hollered.

Bailey felt the heat of his fluid pouring into her ass. He pounded against her a few more times until he was empty, and they both clung to the shower wall. They pressed against the tiles quietly, trying to regain their breath.

Finally Doug muttered, "Cold."

Bailey chuckled. The water had gone frigid and was pelting his back. "Turn the handle, there should be some more hot water if you just crank it up."

"I didn't notice it for a long time, but Christ, now it's fucking freezing!" He gripped her waist. "Relax for me." He pulled his cock out slowly.

Bailey groaned, barely able to stand.

Doug turned and adjusted the faucet so hot water reappeared. "Oh yeah." He stood under the warm flow for a moment before reaching for Bailey and pulling her into his arms. "Sorry about the abrupt departure."

She looked up and batted her eyelashes. "Me too. I never wanted you to go." They kissed gently. She finally pulled back

and said, "You'd better finish washing up. The hot water won't last much longer."

"Right." Doug grabbed the soap and cleaned his body and then hers.

Bailey let him soap her thoroughly and turn her around to rinse.

"That feels like we got it," he decided, and stuck his head under the spray to rinse his hair. He shut off the water and she grabbed two towels for them.

"It certainly does." She locked eyes with him and they watched each other dry off. She stepped close, and he opened his towel, wrapping it around both of their bodies.

"Mmm." He kissed her hungrily and walked her backwards to the bedroom.

Bailey dropped onto the bed, looking up at him seductively. "I can't believe I'm still horny."

He grinned and looked down at his erect cock. "I thought the cold water might have done me in." Doug climbed on the bed and leaned over her. "Actually, I thought your hot ass was gonna do me in. I've never felt anything so incredible in my life, Bailey."

She spread her legs and reached for him. "My pussy is feeling neglected. Think you're up to equal time?"

"God, yes." He sunk into her, growling with renewed desire. "Oh lord, just when I think it can't get any better ... it does." He thrust into her deeply and she wrapped her legs around him.

"I feel the same way," she panted. "Each time is better than the last. Oh yeah, fuck me, baby! Fuck my pussy like

you did my ass, make me come so good!" They rocked back and forth for a few more minutes before they were each spewing fluids into the other.

Bailey's body was riding one giant quiver, and it took a long time for it to stop.

Doug collapsed on top of her, breathing heavily. "I'm sorry, I'll move in a minute."

"Don't move a muscle," she clutched him. "I like you right where you are."

She ran her hands over the rough stubble on his chin.

"Probably should have shaved," he murmured.

"Don't you dare!" she insisted, and trailed kisses from his chin to his jaw line. "I love the way it feels against my skin." She pressed her mouth against his and they kissed passionately, rolling around on the bed until the phone rang.

"Well, hell," she muttered.

He grinned and pulled out of her. "It was time to go, anyway," he said of his relaxed cock.

She glanced at him sharply. "You're not leaving?"

"Not me, him." Doug pointed at his dick.

"Oh, okay then." Bailey breathed a sigh of relief and answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Bailey, it's Sarah. Sorry to bother you, but Doug hasn't come home and it's dark out. Did he mention anything to you?"

Glancing at the clock, Bailey saw it was barely ten p.m., but that was probably late to Sarah. "Um, yeah," she smiled at Doug. "He did say that some friends were grabbing a

burger and beer when he left here, so I'm sure that's where he is."

Doug nodded and lay back on the bed quietly.

"Oh, well good. I don't usually keep tabs on him, but he's been in such a mood lately, and I'm not sure what his problem is. I was concerned."

"Don't worry," Bailey reassured Sarah as she ran a finger over Doug's hairy chest. "I feel sure he was meeting some friends. Maybe a night out is what he needs to put himself in a better mood."

"I hope so. Well, thanks. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Sarah." Bailey punched the off button and tossed the phone on the nightstand. "Sarah says you've been in a mood lately and she's not sure what your problem is."

He laughed and caught her hand up in a kiss. "I have been in a mood, but I can promise you ... I don't have a problem any longer. Life is great from this position on the bed."

"Ooh, this position too." Bailey rubbed her body against his. "So what was the mood about?"

He shrugged, looking at the ceiling.

"My mother dying, the house needs so much work..." She trailed off when he didn't reply. "Or was it your attraction to a woman who so obviously irritated the hell out of you?"

Doug laughed.

Bailey could swear that he blushed. "Don't feel bad. I already had this argument with myself. I thought you were arrogant—"

He started to interrupt but she touched a finger to his lips.

"But I knew I'd been just as arrogant, even more so. You were rude and mouthy and irritating as hell, same as me. And you know what? While I was having this argument with myself I started thinking about how you came waltzing in here, threw me on the bed and fucked my brains out. I got so hot I had to rub myself in the shower this morning. So quit feeling guilty. Been there, done that."

He was laughing so hard he had to hold his side. When he could finally speak he asked, "Are you kidding me?"

Bailey climbed up and straddled his body, pressing her soft pussy into his rapidly rising cock. "I kid you not. My shower has had quite a day. I've never felt hornier in my life, and I still want you."

Doug chuckled and flipped her on her back. "As delightful as that sounds, I'm starving. I think I need to eat some food, so I have enough energy to come back and eat *you*." He kissed her nipples one at a time, laving long wet strokes on them.

"I'm sorry!" Bailey sat up. "I forgot you missed dinner. Shall we see what's in the fridge, or did you want to go get something?"

He leaned in and kissed her neck. "I most definitely do *not* want to go out. Whatever's in the fridge will be fine."

"Good." She slipped her arms around his neck. "Then why don't you call Sarah and tell her you've had a few beers and you're going to stay on a friend's sofa?"

"Mmm, sounds good," he nipped at her earlobe, "as long as you set the alarm so I can get home and change before work. I need to get out of here before Mandy shows up."

"Alarm?" Bailey smiled at him. "Who said we were going to sleep?"

* * * *

For the first week of Doug's vacation, he divided his time between painting Bailey's house and driving her wild in bed. He agreed it was a good thing Mandy was there or the work would never get done.

With Mandy and Bailey helping and Sarah pitching in evenings, the little home became a deep shade of forest green with white shutters. Bailey hated to admit how beautiful it looked and how much she loved it—Doug knew it looked great and she didn't want to feed his ego out of the bedroom. For Sarah and Mandy they kept up appearances, sniping at each other and exchanging barbs at every opportunity. Bailey thought the tension only made the sex that much hotter. By the time they were alone in the evenings they ripped each other's clothes off.

Friday night, they ate pizza with Sarah and Mandy, who then went home to pack. The two were leaving Saturday to visit an aunt in Urbana, a couple of hours away, and would be returning late Sunday. The car had barely pulled out of the driveway when Bailey tugged at Doug's waistband, yanking his jeans and briefs down around his ankles.

"You want to move to the other room?" He grinned, not really complaining.

"No." She shoved her own pants down and kicked them off.

"How about we clean up these pizza boxes?" Motioning to the full table, he looked at her.

She pressed him back onto a chair, straddling his ever-ready cock. Wriggling her hips, she enveloped him deep into her pussy, clutching the collar of his shirt with both hands. "How about you stop talking and start pleasing me, Mister."

"Greedy wench." He clasped the back of her head and drew her face in for a kiss. "You can't get enough, can you?"

Bailey's tongue batted against his for a moment, then she pulled away and threw off her shirt. "I'll never get enough of you," she agreed. "You make me feel things I'd never dreamed possible." She pressed her breasts into his face.

Doug groaned, releasing her bra and sending it flying. "I love these tits. I could live with my face buried right here." He inhaled deeply of her cleavage.

"Suck me," she encouraged, wiggling her bouncing globes in his face.

"Oh yeah. Just don't stop riding me. I love seeing you jiggle." He cupped her ass firmly and tugged a nipple into his mouth.

She groaned and contracted her inner walls around his cock. His forceful sucking on her tender nubbins drew her over the edge, and she cried out as the first waves of an incredible orgasm washed over her. "Yes!"

"Oh yeah," he murmured, biting the swollen peaks as he emptied into her pussy.

Bailey pressed his head against her breast, the pain of his nip causing another climax to zing through her. She

pummelled her body on his cock as they came together, her fingers leaving red marks on his neck and shoulders.

"Jesus!" he panted, pulling back for air.

"Yeah," she agreed. She understood exactly what he meant.

He gazed into her eyes, and she saw something there she hadn't seen before. Lust, desire, those things had always been there. This was something new, and it scared her a bit. She looked away to break the connection.

"Come on." He cupped her butt as he stood, allowing their bodies to separate. He carried her to the bedroom, laid her gently on the bed and crawled up next to her. "That was fucking fantastic, Bailey."

"It's always fantastic with you," she admitted, then lowered her eyes shyly.

He raised her chin so she faced him. "You always get this way right after sex. Demure, like you weren't the same person just yelling 'fuck me!' a minute ago."

She had to smile. "A lady can attempt decorum, can't she?"

"She can try." He ran a finger over her puffy crimson nipple. "But it just makes me want you even more. I like the wild side of you."

Her body tensed as his finger aroused one nub, then the other. She couldn't believe her pussy ached again, so soon after they'd made love. "I like how easily you can bring out that side of me. God, Doug! You're merely touching me, and I'm creaming the sheets to get fucked again."

"Oh yeah?" He flipped on top of her, glancing down between their bodies. "Look at that. You're not the only one who feels that way." His cock was hard, pressing against her centre. "Open up, baby. My turn to rock your world."

She groaned and spread her legs to his thick rod. It slipped easily into her wet chamber. Bailey wrapped her legs around his ass and clung to him. When Doug leaned up on one knee for better purchase, she knew she was in for one hell of a ride.

* * * *

Late that night, they lay sated and exhausted in each other's arms. With moonlight peeking through the curtains the only illumination, Doug stared at shadows on the ceiling as he rubbed a hand over Bailey's arm. "So you really like living in the big city?"

"I do. There's always something going on. It's fast paced, interesting."

"There's always something going on here," he countered.

She chuckled. "Yeah, craft shows and tractor pulls. Not quite the same."

"I guess not." He stroked her forearm with a light touch. "I like the quiet, myself."

"That's nice, too. You enjoy your job?"

"Yeah, I've always liked construction."

"What does Sarah do? I've never asked."

"She's the office manager at the water department. Don't forget to pay your bill, it won't be pretty."

"I'm sure," she snorted. "She's a prim and proper one, your sister. How'd that happen, with you being the way you are?"

He laughed and thumped her arm. "I'll ignore that remark. Sarah's been through a lot. She married Ron, her high school sweetheart, right after graduation. He got sick a few years later. They didn't have much time together."

"What did he die of?"

"Leukaemia. It was sad. Mandy was young, she barely remembers him."

"You were here for them?"

"I did what I could. Our family has been through some rough patches, but we've weathered them pretty well. Mom died of cancer a few years back."

"Oh no!" Bailey squeezed his hand. "And then my mother. Good grief, you guys have been through the wringer!"

"Sometimes it feels like it," he agreed. There'd been days when they'd prayed for something good to happen. He glanced at the woman lying next to him. Maybe it was finally the right time.

"What about your father?" she asked quietly.

"That old son-of-a-bitch? He was never much of a father. Moved out when Sarah and I were teenagers. Last I heard, he was living in Kansas City, driving a truck."

"How awful!" She cuddled next to him.

"Yeah, we don't talk about him much. Some things are best left alone."

"I guess." She traced a finger over his chest, twirling it in the hair. "And some things don't want to be left alone. Take

my poor little pussy, for instance. You haven't looked at it for at least thirty minutes. It's starting to feel neglected."

"We can't have that." He rolled on top of her, pressing her into the mattress. "You do realise, we have to get up long enough to tell Sarah and Mandy goodbye. And we can't look like we just crawled out of bed."

She glanced at the clock. "We have a few hours, yet. Ravage me some more, and then I'll ravage you. We can shower and get presentable—you can be doing something outside when they get here. But once they're gone, clothes are history, dear man. You're mine for a solid twenty-four hours. I'll tie you to the bed if I have to."

He placed a quick kiss on her luscious lips then squirmed lower until his face settled between her legs. Parting her soft hair, his tongue delved into the crevice, laving her second set of delicious lips. "Tying me down won't be necessary." He flicked her clit and she jumped. "But it does sound like fun."

* * * *

Bailey jogged down the porch steps when Sarah and Mandy stopped to say good-bye on their way out of town the next day. Doug had been tinkering with a box of roofing nails and met them in the driveway.

"You should take my cell phone," Bailey insisted, "in case of emergency."

"We'll be fine," Sarah replied. "We've made the drive plenty of times."

"Look, I'm not using it. You might as well have it, just in case."

"Take it, Sis," Doug agreed. "Her Highness finally came up with a good idea and she's doing something nice, for Pete's sake. Don't spoil the moment."

Bailey kicked at his shin but he side-stepped her. She tried to give him a nasty look but it was getting harder and harder to look into his eyes and not melt. "I've come up with plenty of good ideas, admit it." She couldn't help grinning at him.

Doug laughed and stepped away. She saw the 'embarrassed uncle' look on his face and knew he had to put some distance between them.

"You need to quit picking on Bailey," Mandy said. "She's been wonderful to me and Mom since we got to know her."

"That's right," Sarah added. "She's been a real doll."

Doug grinned, then made a face at Bailey. "Ooh, a real wonderful doll. I guess you're saving your pain-in-the-hiney side just for me."

She swiped at the box of nails and replied, "I'll show you a pain in the hiney..."

They all turned their heads as a sleek, silver Lexus pulled into the driveway.

"Who is that?" Mandy asked, awe in her voice.

"Oh shit," Bailey muttered, not bothering to excuse the swearing. She knew who it was.

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Chapter Five

Bailey looked at Doug frantically, but he didn't have a clue. Marc Nelson stepped out of the Lexus and stretched, then smiled when he spotted her. "Hello there."

"Marc! What are you doing here?"

"What kind of a greeting is that?" He strolled to her, arms held out.

She smiled nervously and turned her head so he kissed her cheek rather than her lips. Marc looked at her quizzically, and she motioned towards the three people watching them.

"Ah ha," he commented and nodded.

Bailey struggled to back away and he let go of her.

"Um, Marc," she began hesitantly. "These are some friends of my mother's. They've been helping me out around here. Mandy and Sarah and Doug." She looked at them. "This is my—uh—Marc Nelson."

"Hi," Mandy gazed at him with an awestruck expression.

"Hello," Sarah said and smiled pleasantly.

Doug neither spoke nor smiled.

Bailey coughed. "So what are you doing here?"

Marc gave her a woeful glance. "This hasn't been a good week. The judge in my trial made some fucking stupid mistakes, and I'm going to call the asshole on every one of them."

Sarah cleared her throat. "We were just leaving. I hate to ask you to move your car, but we need to back out."

"Oh, sure." Marc tossed his keys up and caught them. With a nod to Bailey, he said, "Be right back."

"It was a pleasure to meet you!" Mandy called after the man.

"Yeah, you too." Marc went to his car and backed it into the street.

"Sorry." Bailey made a sheepish face at Sarah, knowing how she felt about swearing.

"No problem," Sarah replied stiffly. "We'll see you two tomorrow. Come on, kiddo." She led Mandy to her car and finally smiled at Bailey. "Have a lovely weekend!"

"Yeah, thanks." She glanced at Doug.

"See you," he called to his family and turned back to Bailey. "Who the fuck is that? Did you forget to tell me something?"

"I'm sorry! I haven't talked to him in almost two weeks!"

Doug glared at her and Bailey added, "I haven't even thought of him. For the last ten days, the only person I've thought of was you."

He glanced at the Lexus as it pulled back into the driveway. "Well, that's about to change." He looked at her. "What are you going to tell him?"

Bailey saw pain in his eyes. "I don't know, but I'll think of something." She lowered her voice as Marc approached. "Don't worry, Doug. I promise you, I'll think of something."

She watched Marc as he neared, remembering how attractive she used to find him. His thick blond hair was brushed back from his face, making his unnaturally bright blue eyes stand out. He was tanned and kept trim with tennis

and sailing—he probably never put in a day of manual labour in his life. His casual uniform of khakis, polo shirt, sweater knotted at the neck and loafers looked the same as always, and of course he was neatly shaven.

Bailey glanced at him one more time, wondering why—when he looked so much the same—she thought something was different. His hair came across as fussy, like he spent more time fixing it than Bailey did on her own. The knotted sweater, perfectly normal at the yacht club, seemed strangely out of place here. His shiny, smooth face was also out of place.

It took Bailey a moment to realise she was making a comparison, but it took her no time at all to realise who came out ahead. Everything she thought she ever wanted had been turned upside down in the past week by a pair of long legs in tight blue jeans, deep, dark eyes, closely cropped brown hair and a scruffy three-day beard. She glanced quickly at Doug and then back at Marc.

"I'm starved. Do they have any decent restaurants in this rinky-dink town?"

"There's a nice restaurant," Bailey replied. She'd felt the same way about Perry when she arrived, but suddenly felt strangely protective of the little town. "It's a little early for dinner."

Marc slipped his arm around her and kissed the side of her head. "I've been driving for four hours. I want food and some time alone with you."

She squirmed nervously away from him. "I guess we can go out to eat then." Anything to put off being alone with him

a bit longer. She'd have to figure out something to tell him over dinner. Giving Doug a tight smile, Bailey said, "I guess we're going to go eat. Maybe we'll see you later."

Marc looked at the box of nails in Doug's hands. "You're not working tonight, are you?"

"Hadn't planned on it," Doug replied, his voice thick with sarcasm. "In fact, I believe I'll go get drunk." He tossed the box in the back of his truck and headed around to the driver's side. "It's been a real pleasure to meet you," he snarled at Marc.

"Doug!" Bailey called after him, but when he stopped and looked at her, she didn't know what else to say.

He slammed the door of his truck, and before Marc could offer to move the Lexus, Doug drove through the yard to reach the street, squealing his tires as he went.

"I think he's started drinking already." Marc looked at Bailey.

She chuckled nervously. "Yeah. Grab your stuff, come on in." She went into the house smiling, but found no humour in the situation with Doug. He was just as pissed as she expected. Who could blame him? Bailey was in a bad spot.

She'd have to come up with an excuse to ward off Marc's advances. Suddenly she realised that was exactly what she had to do. She looked at him and knew she didn't want him touching her. The only man she desired touching her was headed out to get drunk. She hoped he went home instead of going to a bar where he might meet another woman. In his mood, and after he got a few beers in him, no telling what might happen.

Bailey took Marc to the one restaurant in town and they enjoyed a nice meal. She tried to prolong it as much as possible, still not sure what she was going to say to him. Neutral topics, such as work, seemed easiest. "So the trial is over?"

"Yeah." He shook his head. "I can't believe we lost. I think we have a good chance of getting an appeal, though."

"I'm sorry. I know how you hate to lose."

He chuckled. "Who doesn't? So did you really take a month off work? Aren't you bored out of your mind?"

"Not at all. I'm enjoying the time off." Bailey smiled to herself and then got serious again. "It's been stressful, and it's a lot of work cleaning out my mother's house. I'm lucky to have help."

"Yeah, they seem nice," he replied absently. "The dad's a little weird, though."

She realised Marc thought Doug was Mandy's father rather than uncle and decided it was probably best left that way. "They're all very nice. They were kind to Mom and they've been very wonderful to me."

"Great," he said vaguely. "So, have you talked to anyone from the magazine lately? I saw that Madison chick from advertising at Twenty One, and she asked about you."

"When did you go to Twenty One?" They often went to the nightclub together, but he never mentioned going alone.

He shrugged. "We worked late and went there for drinks a couple of nights."

"But you were too busy to phone me."

He looked at her. "Do you really want to get into this right now?"

"You're right." Bailey pushed back her plate. "I've had enough."

"Fine." He waved for the waiter and paid the check. He led Bailey to the car, helped her in then got himself situated.

"Can you just drive for a bit, please?" she asked quietly. She had to avoid going home.

"Why not?" Marc muttered and proceeded to cruise around the town. He finally said, "I think we're both tense from being apart so long. I know when we get back to the house and get naked, we'll feel a hell of a lot better."

Bailey glanced over at him and said the words she'd been dreading. "We need to talk."

He stiffened. "Yes, I guess we do. That idea used to be met with much more enthusiasm. The fact that you haven't even kissed me has not gone unnoticed."

She sighed. "I'm sorry. But I've been through a lot in the past few weeks and I don't think you've taken my feelings into consideration at all."

His hands gripped the steering wheel tightly.

"I lost my mother. You don't seem to remember or care that she just died, and that's the reason I came here."

"Of course I remember. What do you want me to do about it? I can't litigate her back to life."

"You son-of-a-bitch," she muttered. "What a cold-hearted thing to say! I don't expect you to *do* anything, but a little compassion might be nice."

"It's been two weeks, Bailey. Pull up your big girl panties and deal with it."

She used to think that expression was funny, now it made her furious. "You have no idea what I'm going through! My mother has a lifetime of memories in that house. I'm trying to dispose of everything in the best way possible, and then I have to sell the house before I can think about getting back to the real world."

He glanced over at her. "So you expect me to wait until you're done tripping down memory lane?"

"I don't know what I expect from you anymore," she replied angrily. "I know I called you a whole bunch of times and you managed to call me back once. Busy or not, that says something. Now I hear you had time to go to Twenty One—"

"Oh for God's sake, who cares? If you'd have been home I would have taken you with me."

"That's not the point! I'm here, going through a bad time, and you're having drinks at Twenty One. Our priorities are different, Marc."

"I'm starting to regret making this trip."

"Perhaps you should have called first."

He yanked the steering wheel sharply to the right and parked on a side street. Facing Bailey, he said, "I've never needed an appointment with you. I thought we could comfort each other."

"You want *me* to comfort *you*, you mean. You're pissed because you lost your trial and you want me to coddle you and suck your dick and make you feel all happy inside."

He glared at her. "You've never minded before."

She chuckled. "You're right about that. But you know what? When I needed comfort these past few weeks, you were nowhere to be seen. Total strangers have given me more help than my so-called boyfriend—and they asked for nothing, not one thing, in return."

"Everyone wants something in return," he countered. "That's the way this world is, face it."

"Maybe." She looked down and realised that was the way she'd felt when she'd first come to town. She used to think he was right. Sarah, Mandy and Doug had shown her the way the world could be, and now she greatly preferred it that way.

"You've changed," Marc said simply.

"Yeah, I have," she agreed. "Losing my mother, being here with nothing but time on my hands to think about things ... I know I've changed."

He thought about that and crossed his arms. "I'm not sure I like the new you."

"I'm not sure I like the old you."

Marc slapped his hand on the dashboard. "This was a fucking wasted trip."

She looked at him incredulously. "We're breaking up, and the only thing that bothers you is the fact you're not getting laid this weekend?"

"Not here, anyway."

"Ooh, you son-of-a-bitch! I can't believe how selfish you are. You don't give a damn about anyone but yourself."

"That's pretty much how I see you right now. You don't give a damn about me or my needs. It's all about you, you, you."

"You're right," Bailey shrugged. She was done arguing, they were never going to agree. "You're welcome to stay overnight. But I think you should leave in the morning."

"I think I should leave now," he muttered.

"It's a long drive, and you're upset. Stay over and leave as early as you like tomorrow."

He rubbed his temples. "It has been a long day. My head is pounding. We were up early yesterday. The verdict came in at noon. Maybe I should stay the night."

"Of course you should. Just because this didn't work out for us doesn't mean we have to part as enemies."

He looked at her sadly. "I'm sorry for what I said about getting laid. I didn't mean it."

She nodded. "I know, it's okay."

"If you'll show me how to get back to the house, I think I'll take some aspirin and turn in. I'm suddenly beat."

She directed him back to her mother's house, and they walked inside.

"We have Rocky Road ice cream." She raised her eyebrows at him.

Marc rubbed his temples again. "Nah, you go ahead. I'm not feeling very festive tonight."

"Come here." Bailey held her arms out to him, and he slid into them. "I'm sorry, Marc. I know you came a long way and never expected this in a million years. I've just changed, is all, and I guess I'm looking at things differently these days."

"And it's a picture without me in the viewfinder ... I get it."

"I really am sorry," she repeated.

"I know. Me too. We had some good times, Bailey."

"Yeah, we did." She rubbed his back and then let go of him. "Grab your stuff, and I'll show you the room."

"Don't go to any trouble," he said, following her down the hall.

"No trouble at all." Bailey smoothed the comforter on her mother's bed. "Do you have aspirin or can I get you some?"

"I have some."

She gave him a small grin. "Okay. Are you sure about that ice cream? It's *Rocky Road*..."

"I'm sure. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay. Here are fresh towels, and the bathroom is through there." She pointed and lowered the window shade. "Let me know if you need anything else."

"Yeah," he snorted.

Bailey left quickly, heading into her room. She felt bad, but knew it was the right thing to do.

Picking up the phone, she dialled Doug's number but got no answer. Not even an answering machine. *Damn!* He was out somewhere, pissed and getting drunk. She wished he had a cell phone and then remembered there was no service in Perry, anyway. That used to irritate the hell out of her, but now it was no big deal. She was getting used to life without a cell phone. But it would be handy tonight if she could reach Doug. She wanted Doug.

Trying unsuccessfully to sleep, she tossed and turned. All the day's events bounced around in her head, niggling at the

back of her mind. It felt like there was something she needed to figure out. She went over everything again, knowing as hard as it was, she'd done the right thing. She didn't love Marc, although at one time she thought she might. She wasn't sure how she felt about Doug, but she definitely wanted more time to find out. He would be pleased when she told him she'd ended things with the other man. She thought about Doug and smiled, finally falling into a deep, dreamy sleep.

* * * *

At six a.m. the next morning, Doug climbed on the roof of Bailey's house and began pulling up shingles noisily with his hammer.

After about ten minutes, Marc appeared on the front porch and looked up sleepily. "Excuse me?"

"You're fine." Doug waved to him and continued to hammer at the shingles, which was actually *not* the way to remove them.

The man gave him a nasty look and Doug stopped hammering.

Yawning, Marc said, "I can't believe Bailey appreciates you waking her up this early in the morning."

Doug grinned. "Well you know, when she first moved here she didn't like it at all. But once we got to know each other, she didn't mind. In fact, I'm pretty sure she enjoys it when I wake her up early these days." He gave Marc a satisfied nod.

The two men stared at each other, and Doug let the smile fade from his face.

Marc finally said, "The woman and kid who were here yesterday..."

"My sister and my niece."

Nodding, Marc said thoughtfully, "You mentioned when Bailey first 'moved' here. I hate to break it to you, but she hasn't exactly *moved* here. As soon as she unloads this—" he looked around distastefully, "*house*, she'll be back in the real world where she belongs."

"Time will tell." Doug gave a shrug and smiled again. "She's here now, isn't she?"

Marc gave Doug the once over with his eyes and said, "Yep, I guess she is."

"Oh, yes she is." Doug shook his head and wiped his brow.

Marc gave him one last angry look before stepping back inside. The door slammed and Doug felt victorious. He also felt a bit evil, but he only spoke the truth. Using the hammer more quietly this time, he continued to pluck at the shingles.

* * * *

Bailey thought the hammering was in her dream. When she came fully awake and looked at the clock, she muttered, "Oh good grief." She stood up and reached for her robe. Stepping into the hallway, she came face to face with Marc, completely dressed and not looking happy.

"Hey," she said to him. "I'm sorry if Doug woke you. He likes to get an early start—"

"So I'm given to understand. You could have been honest with me, Bailey, instead of all that whiney bullshit about your needs."

"What?" Various thoughts rushed furiously through her mind. *Did he talk to Doug? What did Doug tell him?*

"Sounds like your needs are getting satisfied pretty nicely—by the uncle. You lied to me."

"There must be some mistake. I told you they were helping me..."

"That's a nice word for it!" He brushed past her into the bedroom and tossed his bag on the bed. Shoving the few things he had gotten out back in, he said, "I made a mistake all right. Coming here was a *huge* mistake."

"Did Doug say something to you? Because—"

Marc held up his hand. "Never mind. It doesn't matter anymore. You broke up with me last night, and now I see why. It would have been nice if you'd been honest with me. Goodbye, Bailey." He grabbed up his bag and headed to the front door.

"Marc, wait." She hurried after him.

He was out and in his car before she even got to the porch. She watched him drive away and took a couple of deep breaths in and out. Pulling the front door shut, she walked around the house and found Doug standing there.

"Don't go away angry, just go away," he said as he watched the Lexus speed off.

"What did you say to him?" Bailey fumed.

"Hmmm?" Doug turned to face her.

"Don't give me that innocent look. I know you said something to Marc. What did you tell him?"

He shrugged and said, "Nothing, really. Oh, he asked, and I did let it slip that I was Mandy's uncle. I don't know where he got the idea I might be her father. Sorry about that."

"Sorry my ass. You didn't let anything slip that you didn't want out. You told him on purpose, and now he knows I lied to him. What else did you say?"

He took a step towards her. "You're looking very pretty this morning."

"Don't even start with me—I am very pissed off at you. Everything was fine last night, and this morning he's mad as hell and now he's gone."

"So are you pissed that he's gone?" Doug raised his voice.

"I'm *angry* because I had things under control and everything was fine until you stepped in and screwed it all up!"

"Just what did you have under control?" he asked loudly. "The last time I saw him he had his arm around you, kissing all over your cheek. You can't imagine how that felt."

"I was the one brushing off his advances, so I damn well know how it felt. And I managed to do it, too. He never so much as even kissed me, other than that once on the cheek. I *told you* I would take care of it." She looked at the house and then back at him. "Oh my god—you wanted to see what room he slept in! That's why you were over here hammering at six in the fucking a.m."

"I was curious." He looked at her.

"You stupid jackass." She shook her head. "I can't believe you didn't trust me. I told you last night that I would take care of things. You didn't trust me to handle it."

"I trusted you—I just didn't trust him. I didn't know how much influence he might have over you."

"Bullshit," she muttered and turned away from him. "I can not believe you." She started to walk away, then abruptly turned and walked toward him and poked his shoulder. "As close as we were the past ten days, you really thought I might sleep with him last night?" She used the palm of her hand and shoved his shoulder hard.

"Hey!" he stumbled back and caught himself. "I told you I didn't trust *him*!"

"Or me. I'm very unhappy about this." She gave him a cold glare before walking towards the house.

"Bailey, wait..."

"Leave me alone."

He followed her to the front door.

She didn't look at him. "I told you, leave me alone. I need some time to figure this out."

"Whatever," he muttered, shaking his head again.

She stepped inside and slammed the door between them.

* * * *

Doug went back on the roof, becoming increasingly agitated the longer he thought about the situation. Bailey was being unreasonable, as he knew she could be, and wasn't seeing things from his perspective. Had it been him with an old girlfriend, he felt sure she wouldn't have liked it one bit. He decided to leave her alone for a while and see if she came to her senses. He certainly had enough work to do. He started yanking at the shingles angrily.

* * * *

Bailey lay in bed thinking. She sorted through everything in her mind and tried to figure out why she felt so lousy. She wasn't sorry Marc was gone, she'd asked him to leave today, anyway. She didn't like his being angry, but it really didn't matter that much.

She didn't like the fact that Doug talked to Marc—whatever he'd said had caused the whole problem. He never admitted everything he told Marc, but Bailey decided it didn't matter. What *did* matter was that Doug didn't trust her. That was troubling.

Bailey realised the other thing that had nagged at her all night—Marc had reminded her that at some point she'd return to Chicago. She hadn't thought about that. She'd spent all her time thinking about Doug and what she wanted to do to Doug and what she wanted Doug to do to her. But she'd never thought about leaving him.

She had a condo in Chicago that she absolutely loved. Her position at the magazine was every writer's dream job. With creative control and lots of travel, Bailey felt she got paid extremely well to do something she loved. But she hadn't spent much time thinking about work or her condo. Good thing she didn't have a cat—he would have starved to death by now. Her plants were surely dead. She simply hadn't thought about them.

She sat up and realised perhaps she didn't care about those things as much as she thought she had. She looked around—when had this place started to feel like 'home'? She

knew when it was, when Sarah, Doug and Mandy came into her life. *Oh lord!* She flopped back down and covered her face with her pillow. She had so much to figure out.

She slept off and on most of the day. A couple of times she spotted Doug passing by outside and felt bad that he was working when they were supposed to be doing something much more enjoyable. But she couldn't face him yet.

When the sun went down, she saw his shadow in her doorframe.

"You about done pouting?"

"Screw you," she muttered.

He chuckled. "Apparently not."

"You didn't trust me," she said petulantly.

"I've been thinking about that, and you're right. I was a heel, a cad and a total asshole. A true jerk. I'm sorry. I should have had more faith in you, but I was completely freaked out by the situation and I started drinking, which didn't help. I'm really sorry, Bailey."

"I am too," she looked at him. "But I'm going to need a little time to sort through this. I hope you can understand that."

"What's to sort?" His voice oozed irritation.

She shot him a peevish look right back. "The relationship I was in for several months just ended. Please don't pressure me, I need some time."

"Pressure you?" he gripped the doorframe tightly. "We weren't talking about me pressuring you before, when we made love. I thought it was quite mutual."

"It was. But maybe we rushed things. I need to get my mind wrapped around all these new developments..."

"You think too much." He slapped the wall. "You're gonna think everything to god-damned-death."

"Oh back off," she spouted at him. "Now you're sounding like Marc. If my plans don't involve you getting laid, they must be bad plans."

His eyes flashed and he took a step back. "I'm going to leave before I say something I'll regret—like the fact that you're acting like a total bitch. Whoops—hope I don't regret that."

She frowned and watched him walk down the hall. The sound of the front door slamming caused her to cringe. She didn't know why she was being so bitchy with Doug again—no, she *did* know why, but didn't want to face the truth.

She was going back to Chicago soon and Doug would stay here. She couldn't have a relationship with him. They'd had some fun—a hell of a lot of fun—but she needed to end things before either one of them got hurt.

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Chapter Six

Doug drove home in an angry mood. His plans for a romantic weekend had been shot to hell and now Bailey was furious with him. He could usually divert her anger with one of several tricks—yanking her shorts down and burying his face between her legs came to mind—but this time was different. She seemed more sad and hurt than angry. He hated that.

Sarah and Mandy arrived at the house the same time he did. He didn't feel like talking, but they were bubbly and happy to see him.

"How was your weekend?" Sarah unloaded her suitcase from the car.

"I've had better." Doug took it from her. "Hey, Squirt." He took Mandy's bag from her hand and they headed inside.

"So did Bailey's boyfriend stay over?" the girl asked dreamily.

"Mandy!" Sarah snapped at her and looked at Doug.

He made a face. "I wouldn't know." After setting their bags down, he went to the fridge and pulled out a beer.

"Why don't you go unpack?" Sarah asked her daughter.

Mandy rolled her eyes before lifting her suitcase and trudging down the hall.

Sarah poured herself a glass of iced tea and sat at the table. "So, did Bailey's boyfriend stay over?"

Doug dropped into the chair next to her. "Son-of-a-bitch."

Smiling over the top of her glass, Sarah said, "Why does it upset you so?"

He looked at her. "You know."

"Yeah, I do. You've been keeping some pretty late hours, and I didn't think you were painting after dark."

"Sorry to keep it from you. But we weren't sure where it was going."

"Where is it going?"

He scoffed. "Right in the crapper. The lawyer showed up, they had a fight and apparently broke up, and now she's mooning over him."

"Are you sure about that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. She's not talking to me. I sort of made things worse."

"What did you do?" Sarah almost screeched at him.

Doug felt his face redden and as he spoke, he peeled the label from his beer bottle nervously. "I went over there early this morning and started pulling shingles. I guess I woke him up and we had a little chat."

"Oh, Doug!" She shook her head. "You should have stayed out of it and let Bailey handle things."

"That's what she told me."

"And now she isn't speaking to you?"

"She was pretty pissed," he admitted.

"I'll call her."

Doug smiled at his sister hopefully. "Put in a good word for me?"

"You bet." She stood up and ruffled his hair. "I'll tell Bailey you don't mean to be a jerk, but it just happens sometimes."

"Thank you," Doug replied, knowing Sarah was teasing but thinking no truer words were ever spoken.

* * * *

Bailey was nibbling on a sandwich when the phone rang. "Hello?" she answered cautiously.

"Hi there," Sarah said pleasantly. "So how was the weekend?"

"I've had better."

Chuckling, Sarah told her, "Funny, my brother said the same thing. Apparently his weekend did not go according to plan."

"Did he tell you that?" Bailey was surprised.

"Not in so many words. But I've known Doug for a long, long time, and sometimes I can almost read his mind. He was pretty upset tonight."

"So was I. Frankly, Doug just made things worse."

"He said that, too. So, did the lawyer mention why he popped in for a visit this weekend?"

"Is this to report back to Doug, or for your information?"

"Whatever you prefer. I won't say anything if that's what you want."

"All right then." Bailey hesitated. "He lost the case he's been trying for over a week. He came here to let me comfort him."

Sarah snorted. "Comfort being a euphemism?"

"Oh yeah. I asked him where he was when I needed actual comfort, when my mom died..." She didn't realise she was crying, but her tears poured out.

"Oh honey, I'm so sorry. He was a jerk, wasn't he? You can do so much better."

Bailey sniffled. "I don't know. I'm not sure what I want or need anymore. I think I've changed since I've been here."

"I think you have too. But breaking up isn't easy, even if you're the one who wanted to do it. Your life is different all of a sudden, you need time to adjust."

"I told Doug that and he got angry. He says I'm thinking too much, but I'm just so confused."

"I'll talk to him."

"No! Please don't tell him everything I told you."

"Okay, okay," Sarah agreed. "But you need to talk to him."

"Not yet," Bailey sighed, more confused than ever.

* * * *

Doug was frustrated, angry at Bailey and pissed at himself because Bailey was angry at him. He was in his loft working on another beer when Sarah knocked later that night.

"Hey little brother," she rubbed his back as she walked in. "I've just been getting filled in on the details—sounds like it was a heck of a weekend."

"That's putting it mildly. On the bright side, I got most of the shingles off. I worked like a madman all day."

"Quite noisily, I'm guessing."

"Maybe." He gave her a look. "So how much did she tell you?"

"Some, and she asked me not to tell you that we talked. Unfortunately, she and I never pinkie-swore with real blood

that we'd always watch out for each other. So I'm going to have to tell you what she said."

He listened as Sarah told him.

"You should be proud of her," his sister added. "She asked the guy where he'd been when she needed *real* comfort. He wasn't here for her when her mom died."

"She said that?"

"Yep. She was going to say more but she was crying pretty heavily by then."

He winced again. "She was crying?"

Sarah nodded. "A lot."

He looked down. "I wish I could talk to her about this."

"It appears that you both want the same thing."

He looked at her. "What did she say?"

"Mainly that she needs some time. Things are changing for her and she's trying to figure it all out."

"She's spending all her time thinking about *that lawyer* leaving," he said contemptuously.

Sarah smiled. "No, she's not. Did you realise that *she* broke up with *him*? It was late, so she suggested he spend the night in Missy's room. He was leaving this morning, anyway."

"Oh shit!" Doug slapped his forehead. "Why didn't I stay out of it?"

"That's what she's thinking about. She thinks you didn't trust her. We talked about it some—she's coming around. She's thinking about you, anyway, and not him. That's a good sign."

Doug leaned back in his chair. "So what should I do? I'm begging ya here, my way has failed miserably."

"Give her a little more time. But stop fighting with her, for Pete's sake! Don't let her push you away."

"She's stubborn."

"You knew that the first time you met her."

"Yes I did. Okay, she needs time. I'll back off, finish shingling the house and get ready to start painting the inside."

"It'll be awfully close quarters when you're in there." Sarah grinned.

Doug stood. He leaned down and gave his sister a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you. I think I'll be able to sleep now. Good night, Sarah."

"Good night, baby brother." She stood and gave him a quick hug before walking out.

* * * *

Doug slept in Monday and didn't go to Bailey's house until nine a.m. It was an unspoken peace offering and he hoped she noticed and appreciated it. He dropped Mandy off and went straight up to the roof where he worked all day without so much as a glimpse of Bailey. He didn't need to see her. Her image was burned in his mind. Long dark hair spilled over her shoulders on the bed above him as she rode his cock. Her full, round titties bobbed in the air, begging to be kneaded and sucked. Envisioning her caused his prick to harden and he shifted it in his jeans.

He recalled bending her over in the shower and fucking her tight ass. They'd both enjoyed that position—he ached merely remembering it. When the hammer flew by his thumb in a movement too close for comfort, he drew his attention back to the job at hand. He had work to do. He promised Bailey time, and by god, he was going to give it to her.

After three full days on the roof, he was finally completing the shingling. He'd made a deal with himself to leave Bailey alone until the roof was done, and tonight he intended to talk with her.

Sarah brought pizza and ice cream to celebrate the exterior of the house being done, and they gathered in Bailey's kitchen.

"The house looks lovely," Sarah told Doug. "I think you did a fantastic job."

"Glad somebody thinks so." Doug glanced from her to Bailey.

"It's great," Bailey said. "I hope the realtor likes it."

He stared at her. "What do we care if she likes it or not?"

She shrugged. "It might help sell the place. I don't know, I've never sold a house before."

The room got quiet and Mandy finally said, "You're still selling it?"

"Of course," Bailey looked at her. "That's been the plan all along."

Tears filled the girl's eyes as she said, "I thought maybe you'd changed your mind."

"I'm sorry, sweetie," Bailey started to comfort her but Mandy ran into the bathroom. She turned to Sarah. "I'm sorry. I thought she understood."

Sarah wiped at the corner of her eye. "It's okay. I guess we just got comfortable with things as they are." She sniffed and tried to dry her tears. "Gee, if you had another bathroom I might run into it."

Doug pushed himself back from the table and stood up. "Might as well make it unanimous." He paced around the kitchen a moment and then checked to be sure Mandy was still out of earshot. "After everything that's happened, you're still planning on leaving?"

"Why wouldn't I?" she asked defiantly. "Chicago is my home." She glanced around. "This is—well, it's never been home. I need to get back to the real world."

"Where you belong?" He echoed the words Marc spoke to him.

"Yes," she replied, still defiant.

"And you really think you belong there?" He crossed his arms. "I thought you said you've changed."

Bailey looked at Sarah, who blushed and shrugged a little. "Sorry..."

"It's all right." Bailey waved her off. "I know you two talk a lot. I just *don't know* what's going to happen. If I have to deal with one more decision right now, I might burst. Maybe if I take one day at a time, things will eventually work out."

Doug paced the room angrily. "Wouldn't want you to take one step out of your comfort zone, that's for sure. Just stay in there where life's nice and easy."

She stood up. "What do you know about my life?" She motioned around. "This is playing house. This is a fairy tale. This is not my life."

"I guess we're all seeing that now," he said, and to Sarah, "I'm not hungry anymore. Excuse me." He walked out the back door.

* * * *

"Doug!" Sarah called after him, but he kept walking. "Oh, my." She looked at Bailey.

"I am so sick of this!" Bailey wailed. "I just want to go home." She sat back down in her chair.

"Is that what you really want?" Sarah asked quietly. "Or is that what seems easiest?"

"It definitely seems easiest. This place fills me with turmoil."

Sarah stood. "Wonder why that is? I'm going to go get Mandy. We need to eat."

"I'm not hungry," Bailey pouted.

"I don't care." She left and returned with her daughter. "Now everybody sit down. This is ridiculous."

They ate quietly and Mandy finally said, "Did Uncle Doug leave?"

"Yes," her mother replied.

"Do we have to wait for him to eat the ice cream?"

"Go ahead," Sarah chuckled. "He leaves, he loses out." She looked at Bailey. "That's the way life works sometimes."

Bailey didn't speak but looked at her plate and sighed. She was wrong when she thought she needed to end things before either of them got hurt—it was too late for that.

She didn't see anyone the next day, phoning Sarah and explaining she needed to be alone. She spent her time brooding and looking through the last of her mother's things. For what felt like the millionth time in a matter of weeks, she wished she could talk to her mom. It still felt strange knowing she couldn't anymore.

But Bailey knew her mother, and wondered if she was able to speak with her, what advice would she receive? Melissa evidently liked Doug, would she ever have tried to fix him up with her daughter? Probably not, Bailey decided, because Doug and Bailey lived in two different worlds. Her mother might have thought Doug could do better than a snotty, stuck-up magazine editor.

She didn't feel like that person anymore. Maybe it was because she didn't *want* to be that person anymore. Bailey wished she knew who she wanted to be.

She went for a run but even that didn't clear her head. After a quick shower and a few bites of dinner, she talked to Sarah one more time that evening and assured her she was fine, just trying to sort everything out.

It was a quiet night, warm and peaceful as the sun slowly set in the west. Bailey walked around the house outside, admiring the job Doug had done on the exterior. She strolled back to the garage and saw he had stacked the leftover paint cans on a shelf, and the roofing trash was all cleaned up. Leaning against the garage door, she sighed.

It was painful standing here at the site where they first made love. She recalled the feel of her bare skin pressed against the rough workbench. Doug's strong hands touched her everywhere, his warm mouth did the same. It had been an exquisite encounter, one she'd remember as long as she lived. It was her choice to break things off with Doug, but thinking about him made her feel sad and very lonely.

She wandered back into the house and stopped in the bathroom to brush her teeth.

"Was I supposed to give your key back?" Doug slipped in behind her and spoke softly.

Bailey jumped. "Shit, you scared me! Don't do that!"

He leaned against the door and smiled. "Guess I can't do anything right these days. Sorry."

She rinsed, spit and wiped her face on a towel. "I don't know about that." She looked over him in those damn, sexy, tight jeans and yellow T-shirt. Yellow suited him. She kept her observations to herself and said, "The house looks wonderful. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. You did a beautiful job."

"Thank you. I'm pleased with how it turned out. I hope the new owners appreciate it."

"Doug—" she started to explain.

He took a step towards her. "Shhh," he put a finger to her lips. "I don't want to argue with you. We've done enough arguing for a lifetime."

Tears fell down Bailey's cheeks as he pulled her into his arms. "I don't know if you're going or staying, and I don't want to think about it. We never said we were talking about forever—I guess I just hoped."

Bailey snuggled up next to him. "I'm sorry." She sighed. "I knew this was a mistake and that's why I've been pushing you away. Once I start loving you I may never want to stop."

He grinned and looked into her eyes. "That's what I'm counting on."

"But—"

"It's okay. We don't have to nail down all the particulars. Why don't you try not to think about the 'what ifs'? Just shut the thinking part of your brain down and open the feeling part of it up." He kissed her neck.

Bailey squirmed to get closer to him. "Consider it done."

"I want you," he murmured, one hand sliding up her shirt to caress a breast.

"Oh god, I want you too! Right here, right now."

They kissed frantically and fumbled removing each other's clothes. Doug swung her around and leaned her against the bathroom counter, raising one of her legs so her knee rested on the cold marble.

"Oh god," she moaned when she felt his cock behind her, pressing into her already wet opening. "Yes." She leaned over further, aching to feel his hardness inside her.

He entered her gently, the new position stretching her pussy tightly. They both groaned in agreement as his cock found its home, delving in and out.

"This is incredible." Bailey gasped at the intense sensation, and when she raised her head she caught a glimpse of them in the big mirror over the sink. She gasped again, her arousal increased by the view.

Doug glanced up to see what she saw, and smiled seductively. "Oh yeah." He drew his cock out slowly and said, "Watch, Bailey," as he slid it back in erotically.

She gasped and groaned again, putting her head down and closing her eyes to refocus.

"No," he reached around and raised her chin with one hand. "Open your eyes and watch."

She looked at him in the mirror and they maintained eye contact for a few minutes as he drew in and out of her slowly. He continued to hold her face, while his other hand slid down her front. Massaging each breast firmly, he pinched and squeezed her nipples until they were more crimson in colour than pink. Doug's hand made its way between her legs and found her clit.

Bailey breathed in sharply and tried to close her eyes.

He held her face firmly and whispered in her ear, "You want me here?" He circled her clit with his thumb.

She almost sobbed her reply. "Oh, yes!"

He licked around her earlobe, kissing wherever he could reach. Their eyes were locked on each other through the mirror, looking away only long enough to watch the coupling of their bodies.

"I'm going to come," she whispered, watching the reflections of his hand and cock pleasuring her.

"Come on, then," he replied.

He sucked her shoulder roughly until Bailey couldn't tell the difference between pain and pleasure. Waves washed over her and it was all she could do to hang on to the counter and hope Doug could keep her standing.

When she finally opened her eyes, he told her, "Bailey, look." He brought both his hands beneath her and parted her folds.

She had a clear view of his cock plunging into her, and she moaned loudly as his balls slapped her ass.

"I'm going to come now, sugar," he rasped to her.

She lost all composure and control as he spewed into her, quivering with his release. Bailey cried out and came with him, her body wracked with tremors like she had never experienced before. They landed sprawled out on the counter, neither of them able to speak for several minutes. They could only pant and try to resume normal breathing.

Finally Doug pulled out of her gently, lowering her leg to the floor. He put his hands on Bailey's waist and turned her around slowly to face him.

She couldn't look at him. She felt vulnerable and exposed, like he had seen down to her very core, and it was awkward.

"Bailey," he whispered, and raised her chin to look in her eyes. "I love you."

"Don't." Tears streamed down her face.

"I can't help it. You might as well tell me not to breathe." He kissed her gently, using his thumbs to wipe away her tears. "I want to stay with you tonight."

She nodded, not knowing how much more time they had together, but wanting to make the most of it.

* * * *

Bailey was surprised to get a call from the realtor the next day with an offer on her mother's house. "It's not even listed

yet," she protested. She wasn't one hundred percent sure she wanted to sell it.

"This is a small town, and as I told you, your neighbourhood is desirable. It's a very good offer."

"Oh my," Bailey murmured, unsure what to do.

"Why don't I come over tomorrow and give you the details? Would one o'clock work for you?"

"Yes, of course. Thanks." Hanging up the phone, she was in turmoil. She dropped onto her sofa, and a loud knock at the front door startled her.

Before she could get up, Doug stuck his head in. "Can we come in?"

"Hi, sure. You'll never believe who just called."

He stepped in holding a bouquet of flowers and wearing a big grin on his face. "I might."

Sarah and Mandy followed, both smiling as well. Bailey looked up at them, confused. "What's going on?"

"You first," Doug said. "Who called?"

"The realtor. Someone made an offer on the house."

"I know." He smiled at her then offered the flowers. "These are for you."

"But why?" Bailey took the bouquet and sniffed them.

"They're beautiful, thank you, but what's the occasion?"

Doug sat on the edge of the sofa next to her. "I just made an offer on a house."

Sarah and Mandy giggled in the corner, trying to be quiet.

Bailey stared at him for a moment before speaking up.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I'm almost thirty and that's too old to be living in my sister's loft. I think I'm ready to settle down, you know ... with a house and a family."

She continued to stare at him.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a diamond solitaire ring. "I'm not getting down on one knee because if I know you, you're going to want to discuss the hell out of this, and we need to be face to face." He held the ring up to show her. "Bailey Montgomery, will you marry me?"

She looked at the diamond and back at him. "Marry you? We barely know each other."

He chuckled. "We know each other better than some people ever do. I know I love you. I know you're stubborn, ornery as hell, and will probably be a great pain in my ass." He glanced at his sister and niece. "Pardon my French." Doug looked back at Bailey. "I wouldn't have it any other way. I intend to be exactly the same to you."

"You call that a proposal?" She snorted, crossing her arms.

He waved the large, sparkly diamond in front of her face.

Bailey eyed it hungrily, but attempted to show restraint. "It's going to be tough with you here and me in Chicago."

He dropped his hands to his lap and looked at her. "I reckon they need construction supervisors in the big city, same as they do here."

Bailey blinked her eyes. "You'd do that for me?"

He nodded. "It's not my first choice, but yes, to be with you, I would. No condo, though. We'd have to find a house, maybe in the suburbs somewhere..."

Smiling, Bailey threw her arms around his neck. "I can't believe you'd move three hundred miles away from your family for me."

"You're my family now," he whispered in her ear.

"You're sweet, but I couldn't do that," she whispered back. Doug pulled away and looked at her.

Bailey grinned. "I was getting a little restless with my job, anyway. Suppose there are any interesting jobs available in Perry?"

Grinning, he grabbed her and squeezed. "Is that a yes?"

"Can't breathe!" she squealed, and he loosened his grasp.

"Yes!" Bailey grinned. "Now give me that ring!"

He slid it on her left hand ring finger and it fit perfectly.

"It's just beautiful!" Bailey exclaimed, and laughed when Sarah and Mandy rushed at them for hugs.

"This is so exciting!" Mandy cried.

"It's wonderful," Sarah agreed.

"Yeah, it is." Doug hugged everyone and then pulled Bailey on his lap sideways, nuzzling her neck.

"But you can't buy this house," she told him.

"Why not?" He stopped nuzzling.

"Because we already own it, silly. Save your money for the expansion. You mentioned extra bedrooms and another bathroom, I believe."

He groaned and closed his eyes. "And I was dreading *painting* the interior."

Bailey ran a hand through his hair. "We'll need room for the children. I think two is a nice number, what about you?"

Sarah and Mandy squealed again.

Doug grinned. "Two is a very nice number." He kissed her temple and whispered, "I love you."

Bailey looked in his eyes and saw the love he spoke of reflecting back at her. Everything she ever wanted was here in her arms, she was sure of it, and as she gazed at him all her doubts, fears and questions melted away. She thought briefly of her mother and got a happy feeling in the pit of her stomach. Melissa loved this family, and somewhere she was pleased that her daughter was becoming part of it. Bailey smiled at Sarah and Mandy and then turned back to Doug, running a hand over his rough chin.

They were going to argue, there was no doubt about that. They would love passionately, there was no doubt about that, either. The future looked as bright as the gleam in his deep, dark eyes.

"I love you, too," she said softly, wiggling her ass into his crotch. She murmured in his ear, "I can't wait to get you alone. I'm going to drain you dry. You'll be too weak to walk."

He grinned and whispered back, "You think so? We'll see who's too weak, once I've had my way with you. I'm gonna love you all night long."

She moaned softly. "I like the sound of that. Kiss me one more time, then we'll go celebrate with our family. You and I will celebrate privately, later."

"Oh, yeah." Doug smiled at her, and they kissed.

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About the Author

Jamie Hill was born and raised in the Midwest, where she continues to live with her husband and two sons.

She juggles her spare time to include writing every day, freelance editing, reading as she finds time, tinkering on the computer, listening to country music, as many naps as possible, and watching movies (especially scary movies) with her family.

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