

*We were a normal couple once; bought beers on Friday nights or caught a ball game or movie on Tuesdays. We made love when the kids were fast asleep. We lived in a small town that was— for the most part—friendly.*

*We didn't know we had it so good.*

## PART ONE

### Chapter 1

April 2009

The man needs a job.

It's Monday, I'm due in at Dalton's Food Company at one o'clock and for my hourlong walk to work, it drizzles outside. I check the cracked front hall mirror to make sure I've pulled my blonde curls tight and severely enough into a ponytail before I call out the back door, "Mr. Wilcox, I'm outta here."

Sean removes his cap. He still manages to get hat-hair though I clip his sandy hair to an inch each month. "Try to get on produce tonight, Dot," he says, releasing his warm breath into the March air. He wipes the sweat off of his brow and squints up. "I need some more tomato seeds. And see if you can score a strawberry or two."

I want to say something about the ground still being half-frozen according to Pastor Mike, but it wouldn't do any good. Sean says turning over clay soil is his gym membership. Cracks me up, but at least this garden keeps him busy—that and our boys—but there's been times this winter I could have strangled him, feeling so sorry for himself.

I leave Sean with our mucky boys to play while I grab my mother's old yellow slicker and my church donation boots then say my good-byes before I'm on my way.

An hour walk to work in these heavy boots is my gym membership. After the beat of my steps on the pavement fade to the back of my mind, I think of my mother, Alice. My birthday recently came and went without her notice, but at least Sean sang happy birthday to me and melted Hershey's Kisses over bananas, topped with ice cream. That's something. There's rumbling in the distance, and a train horn blasts nearby.

Closer to town, I pass the deserted subdivision where my boss Cody lives. For-sale signs dot the not-so-new development which Sean worked on before they laid him off with the rest of the country. Cody's now the only one living there. I pass Burger King and just before I get to DFC the sky darkens, and it begins to rain. This is when I discover a leak in my church boots.

When I arrive, Peggy greets me from a cash desk with a, "Lord above, Dot!" A bleached blond chunk of hair escapes down her cheek while the rest stays obediently on top. "You're squelching like a bullfrog in June in those things. Do me a favor and bring the mop back with you. I'll clean this up before my guy comes for me."

"Sure thing. Thanks Peggy. Where's John Wayne?"

"You mean Richie Rich? He's back there counting all his money," she tells me with a wink. We have all sorts of nicknames for Cody, not ones we'd ever say to his face though.

When I reach the stockroom, he sits with his back to his desk, and faces me at the door. "Hey Cody. Can you believe the cats and dogs out there?" I remove my wet slicker and sweater and hang them up on a hook.

Cody's quiet. I figure he's calculating or something and when I look up, he's staring at the back wall. I shrug, and remove my soaked socks, slip on some dry ones and Alice's comfort shoes. Good grief, they're ugly.

Cody eyes me.

"What is it, Cody? Did something happen?"

"Yes, something happened, or didn't. Don't you remember?" His mouth clamps tight so his barely existing chin disappears. The chair scrapes as he stands and kicks it back then moves between me and the doorway to the store.

My mind races to my till. It wasn't short. Or maybe I didn't wipe down the conveyer belt just so.

Cody lifts his eyes to the ceiling. "Un-fucking-believable."

"What? What is it?"

"Who the do you and Sean think you are?"

And then I remember and look behind him to the shop floor.

"You suddenly too good for me, Dot? You can't even say hello to your old friend and boss when you pass by?" His shoulders hunch, like one of those stray dogs at the town dump. To be honest, I forgot all about seeing him yesterday as we walked home from church and here I make the stupid mistake of walking in here all pleasant.

"Geez Cody, you were up on a ladder. Don't you know you shouldn't yell out to someone on a ladder? They could fall and break their neck." I tie my apron on fast. "Do you think I want to put you into a wheelchair? You know Sean is Mr. Safety. And, besides, I see you almost every day."

"Well, Sean doesn't."

“Sean doesn’t want you to break your neck either.” Though, if Sean knew Cody got fresh with me at work, he’d break Cody’s neck with his own two hands.

Cody’s mouth drops open, and before he can say anything, I step right past him. “I’ve got to get to work, Cody.” As I head to the front, I know he watches my every move. When I see the wet floor and Peggy, I realize I’ve forgotten the mop, but there’s no way I’m going back there.

When I get to the stockroom the next day, the back door’s open and a truck engine’s humming outside. I hear Cody talking to someone.

I remove my coat and grab my DFC apron pronto and rush to the front before he sees me. As kids, we came into the Food Company, though back then they called it Dalton’s Grocers of Missouri—DGM, when it was Cody’s dad’s store. Cody used to steal potato chips and brag about how he could take anything and not get into trouble. He always had Jaw Breakers or Double-Bubble and used them to bribe kids at school. He once asked me to kiss his wiener for a chocolate bar. I never wanted an Oh Henry *that* badly.

Sometime later, I’m in Aisle Five stocking mac and cheese on sale when Cody rolls his cart down. He’s toting crackers, which go in Aisle Three, so why is he here? “Make sure they all face forward, Dot, no upside-downers,” he says. “You hear about the lay-offs at GM? Five thousand,” he clamps a toothpick between his teeth, “...history.”

“No, I did not hear that.” He knows we don’t own a TV or buy newspapers either. We can’t afford them, plus Sean gets on his pity pot when he reads about all the layoffs. “Gee, that’s really too bad, Cody.”

“Well, Dot, consider yourself fortunate.” He sidles up close enough I can smell cigarette smoke on his breath, as he says, “Your ole buddy here has no plans to de-employ you.” His hand

lands across my back and squeezes my shoulder as his groin presses into my hip. As I shriek, he's off again, pushing his cart out of the aisle.

My friend and co-worker Gracie alerted me to Cody's pervy habit of watching me through his CCTV, and then I caught him spying on her. Said he was doing his own security work and thought Gracie was stealing candy—which she was, and still does. He once told me that if he caught anyone stealing, he'd not only fire their asses but also announce it up on the road sign where he advertises the week's top deals. I can't help thinking he'd do this for less. It's my job to change the letters and prices and most weeks I just want to spell out CODY'S AN ASS, but I need this job and four more like it. Love it or not, I'm stuck working for Cody Dalton at DFC—Dumb F####ing Cock—as Sean calls it, 'scuse his French.

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The next day, a Tiffany-style light glows in Cody's front window meaning he could be home and, thank heaven for small mercies, not at the store. It's the only light on in the abandoned development. Cody's dad bought him the house after Cody's grandmother died. Nice for some people. It's spooky though, with no neighbors. Last year's mortgage crisis took care of that.

I pass by DFC to pop into McNally's pub a few doors down where Alice works. Eighties tunes pulse through the ceiling speakers. I find her behind the bar talking to a regular and when she sees me, she pulls an envelope from her purse and saunters over with it, dropping it in front of me on the bar counter.

“Thanks.” I rub my hands warm then reach for the envelope and look up to Alice. She lifts her chin, meaning, g'head, open it. Her sloppy writing reads Happy Birthday, Dorothy May. Love your Mom. It's two weeks late. I open it to find my annual fifty bucks.

My mother taps her fingernails twice on the bar top to get my attention. “You’re supposed to thank a person after you open their gift, not before,” she says, her voice shot from the hundreds of cigarettes she’s smoked with over the years. I used to put my hand through her smoke rings when I was little, catching them like some kids catch bubbles. What a joke.

“What difference does it make?” I ask as she walks away but then she turns and raises an eyebrow.

“What difference? It’s like you expect a gift when you thank me first.”

I sigh. “It’s the same every year but thank you again. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re goddamn right you appreciate it. I just put food on your family’s table. Now get the hell outta here and get to work.”

I stuff the envelope into my back pocket and leave Alice to the McNally’s gang. She’ll warm up around eleven when she’s had a couple. At least I have enough for groceries this week and next.

At work, I tidy the bags wondering what’s taking Gracie. She finally returns from the stockroom with a cart and says, “Cody wants you back there. Has more for you to stock.”

I roll my eyes and take my sweet ole time.

The delivery truck is gone, and Cody’s leaning against the open back door where the sun beams in. The April air is chilly, but the stockroom could stand some circulation.

“Life’s good, Dot, and summer’s coming,” he says, the cigarette in his mouth bouncing. “For Easter, I’ve been thinking of taking some flowers and shit out to the front again like last year. It brings people in.” I know all about last year. Gracie and Peggy always on the outside and me stuck on cash with Cody bagging, giving him all sorts of excuses to brush by me.

He had a sale on lilies. You'd think everyone in town was buying lilies the way I rang them in one after the next. The smell of those things gave me an awful migraine. Well, at the end of my shift, Cody went outside to fetch one of those damn things for me and wished me a happy Easter. I didn't know what to say except, "Thank you Cody, but I'm allergic," which I figured explained the headache.

He stormed back outside then returned minus the lily. "You can leave now, Dot."

"But I've got another two hours." And I needed the money. Every damn penny.

"I got it. You can take off."

I couldn't argue. I mean, he's my boss, but you know, he docked two hours off my pay because I didn't accept that stupid lily. At the time, it was all I could do to stop Sean from walking down there and clocking him one for it. These days, I'm more careful with Cody's fragile ego. I can't afford to tick him off—OR Sean, who will find anything and anyone to blame for his unemployment. Last week it was Obama. This week, it's Fox news. He can't make up his mind who to blame. So, I don't comment about Cody's flowers.

"Gracie says you have some more stocking for me to do."

Cody hauls on the last of his cigarette, squinting through the smoke before flicking it outside. He steps over to his fake wood desk against the wall and grabs paper towels and Windex from the shelf above. I know what he's going to say. "I wasn't happy with the streaks left on the glass at the deli counter last night, Dot."

I noticed them too. "Have you told Rick? It's his deli counter."

"I know, I know, but Rick doesn't have a fucking clue. Now, I don't know if you're any better, so let me give you a little lesson." Cody pushes the papers on his desk aside and squirts Windex on the fake wood. He rips off some paper towel, bends over the desk, and says, "It's all

in the pressure. See how dirty my desk is, mm?” He wipes the paper towel back and forth. “I want you to put your back into it, Dot. Like this.” I want to laugh at how he’s scrubbing like there’s glue on his desk, but I keep a poker face. “Now, you try it.”

Well, this takes me aback, and I say, “I think I’ve got it, Cody. You want a little elbow-grease.”

“Yeah but let me see you do it. I have to know you understand my expectations.” His brown eyes bore into me. He hands me the paper towel and steps aside with a flourish of his arm.

I have never felt more ridiculous, but the expression on his face tells me it’s not up for debate. “Ok-a-ay.” I pick up the Windex. “You want me to do the rest of your desk?”

“No, just the same spot.”

I check over my shoulder before squirting the Windex on the same spot and then start wiping. It’s a pointless exercise until I see my performance review on top of his papers. I read the comment: *Dot has a lateness problem.* Then Cody’s behind me, leaning into me. I whip around. “Cody Dalton! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Relax.” He leans over again and takes a can of Pepsi off the shelf. “I was only reaching for this. What the fuck did you think I was doing? Now, put some elbow grease into it, damn it!”

I shift to the side of the desk to keep him in my sights and then finish with three more wipes. Controlling my voice, I say, “Is that good enough for you?”

He pops open the Pepsi and laughs, then walks off into the store leaving me in my fury.

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The next time he touches me inappropriately, I let him have it.

“For God’s sake, Cody, leave me the hell alone!” It was only a month ago I got Windexing lessons, and I’ve been fuming ever since, imagining all the things I could have done

or said. “This has gone too far, Bucko!” I don’t even know what ‘Bucko’ means. I’m just pissed as all-get-out after bending over for bags and you-know-who is at my backside again.

“I was just reaching for the keys you left out again. I’ve had just about enough of your bullshit, Dot. What the flying fuck do you think is going on here? I have a business to run. I have bills to pay, for crying out loud. What the hell is on your mind, huh? Do you think I’m about to risk everything rescuing you from your morbid life? Do you really think I want the headache of a chick with two babies? I don’t need this bullshit!” He stomps off.

What the hell just happened? Did I attack him, or did he attack me? Did I back into him, or did he step in my way? I’m worried now and think, damn it, Dorothy May, what did you just do? No sooner does this enter my mind than Cody returns and says, “Dot, get your stuff and get the fuck out of here.”

“What the...?”

“Your heard me. Get your stuff!”

Loser! I meant WTF. I know I’m fired, though he hasn’t outright said it.

Now what’ll we do?

At the back, I stuff all my crap into my backpack, sling it over my shoulder and return to the front. Cody’s there with his chin up and arms crossed. Peggy’s beside him. “You may think you can maul me and fire my ass, Cody Dalton, but you know there’s laws against jerks like you in this country and don’t think I won’t make a complaint about it either. Everybody here knows how you treat me.”

Peggy’s eyes pop out of her head. Cody looks at her. She doesn’t say diddlysquat, but she knows. She knows all right. It was her warning me all this time, and now she stays silent? I

suppose she has a job to hold onto as well and she'll probably get my hours too now that my fat butt is toast.

"You haven't heard the last of me, Cody...or from Sean."

He shifts. "This has nothing to do with Sean, Dot. You can't go accusing the boss of impropriety. You're imagining things."

"I *imagine* that your sorry ass is going to get the pulp beaten out of it, you dumb f-ing cock!" There. I said it. "You heard me. That's what you are—D. Dot. F. Dot. C. Dot." I regret saying the 'dot' for obvious reasons, but I'm on a roll now. "You can take your grimy hands and shitty job and shove it up your slimy ass!" I head to the produce section and pick up a quart of strawberries, a cucumber, peppers, all three colors, and kale; might as well. I march to the doors, and flip Cody the bird. Then Peggy clacks toward me in her heels, arms outstretched, and I hesitate before stepping onto the automatic door opener.

"Dorothy May Wilcox, now you come over here," she says, and like a pathetic dummy, I go to her. She embraces me, or at least tries to with my arms stuffed with stolen groceries. I'm desperate for my mother's arms right now but accept Peggy's instead. "Now, now there, Dot. Let's not all be rash about this. You both need to calm yourselves the heck down."

I look over her shoulder at Cody. His head's down, his long locks hanging limp over his face. As if he senses me, he lifts his head and calmly says, "Get out, Dot. I can't have you here."

I push away from Peggy and her cloying perfume and leave, not even sure that I have all my belongings, but pride is telling me to march.

On my walk of shame home, I see kids in the backyards of the deserted homes where Cody lives, the homes no one can afford. They've obviously broken into one, as they're now coming out the front door. Unfortunately, it's not Cody's. Because I'm out of my mind with

anger and feel something needs to be put right in this world, I call out, though I wouldn't normally. "You boys ought to be ashamed. Haven't you got something better to do?"

"Fuck off," they call back at me in semi-unison, a beat apart. Each emboldened by the one who spoke first, and then following.

"I know who you are and who your parents are. You better get moving along. Go do your homework or something." I cry. Right now, with my arms full of stolen food, I'd like nothing more than to be doing homework...at college; Sean and my babies with me, of course. As if that was all that I'd ever have to worry about. What a bozo I've been.

In Grade 12, our teacher handed out college applications. I made an off-handed comment taking my application: "Fat chance I'll ever get there."

Mrs. Hanson turned back to me and said, "Dot, if you shoot for the dirt, you'll always be there on the ground. But if you shoot for the stars, you may not reach them, but you'll see all those beautiful stars and a view from above."

Well, that was the most ridiculous thing I've heard. What if you can't afford the trip on the spaceship?

Later that day, she sought me out. "Dot, is there a reason you don't want to go to college?"

Well, she had me there. I mean, there *is* no good reason and if I had my druthers, I'd fly off to California and study English Literature while I look for my dad or I go to New York and study fashion or cosmetology. "I'm really not sure," I told her. "It's not like I can afford it."

She handed me a bunch of brochures like she had them ready, knowing how pathetic my life was. Her hand landed on mine that held the brochures. "There are tuition-free schools, Dot.

Don't let money hold you back. If you see anything that interests you, come and talk to me about it. I'll help."

You know, I pinned them to the bulletin board in the trailer, but Alice said my brain was too small to fit in all those big words that colleges will want to stuff in there. That, and she wouldn't pay for it, but it didn't stop me from dreaming.

Then Sean happened.

The boys ignore me and go back to their vandalism, or whatever they're doing, and in that moment, I swear that my boys will never be disrespectful to adults, as long as I can help it. That thought bolsters me as I trudge home to deliver the groceries and news to Sean. How will I tell Sean without putting Cody's life in danger? I can always say Cody fired me for stealing, but then this produce wouldn't still be in my hands. Why Cody let me out of the store with unpaid goods today is anyone's guess. I suppose I need Sean to know the truth, so he won't be upset with me for losing my job.

I reach our road and the heavens open up again. I'm drenched. That's what I've forgotten, my boots and raincoat. It's okay though; the rain hides my tears. It's about 4:30 in the afternoon and Benny and Franklin will be napping, I hope.

The doorstep creaks with my arrival and I step in, dripping on the mat. I remove my sopping shoes and hear Sean in the kitchen. It smells like soup.

"Hey," I say quietly, as much not to wake the babes as to come in unnoticed. Sean reaches the kitchen doorway with a sunny smile. My heart melts a little and then the tears well up.

“Hey, yourself. You look a little wet. Where’s your coat?” I follow him as he returns to the stove and stirs the soup. He turns the burner down and faces me.

“I forgot it at work.” I checked the cat clock to avoid his gaze, 4:37 by the swing of its tail.

“And why are you home so early? Thought you were closing tonight.”

I clear my head. The less info the better. “I was, closing, Sean, but,” I can’t finish. I don’t know how to tell him. He places the spoon on the counter and comes over to me, concern washes his face.

“Why is your face so red? Come here.” He wraps his arms around my wet body. “What’s happened, mm?” He kisses my forehead. My home is more in his arms than in this house.

I place my hands on his chest and weigh my words carefully. I have to say this, so he doesn’t fully flip right out. “Something happened at work today and...I’ve...been fired.”

“Whoa, fired?” He steps back and gawks at me. “What happened, Dot? Hey, have you been crying?”

“Well, yeah. I just got fired.”

He cocks his head, hands to his hips. The familiar blue vein swells on his forehead while his neck turns pink. Not good. “Did Cody do something to you, Dorothy May?” God, he sounds like Alice.

“Sean, please don’t freak. It could have been my mistake. I may have overreacted about something,” I say this, but know that it was Cody’s untoward actions that got the worse of my temper. Part of me thinks I didn’t react enough. I tried to keep my job and give Cody a piece of my mind, but if I knew he was going to fire me, I might have clocked him one myself.

“Out with it, Dot.” Sean’s hands still hug his jeans and there’s no way I can say anything but the truth. Half the town will have heard about it by now anyway. It’s better he hears it from me.

“Cody got too close. I thought he rubbed up against me from behind. I was sure at first, and I screamed at him for it. He told me to get out and said I was imagining it. That he was leaning over me to get something.”

“Again? Jesus!”

“Sean!” I glance to our boys, not wanting them to pick up their daddy’s blaspheming.

“Jesus H. Christ, Dot! How long has Cody been doing this to you?” The pacing begins. He scratches his head and strokes the back of his skull. “Was this the first time?”

“What? You think I wouldn’t notice until now?” God forgive me for lying.

“Dot. Tell me everything.” He leans against the counter with his head dropped between his arms.

I’m afraid to say anything more.

When we lived in Texas for Sean’s work, some guy flirted with me in a bar while Sean was in the restrooms. When Sean returned and spotted this guy sitting with me, his chest puffed out like a rooster. He got down into the man’s face and told him to move along if he wanted to live another day. The guy sort of laughed. Sean grabbed him by his collar and pulled him out of the chair. He then dragged the guy outside, and no one else interfered, Sean being the size of an ox during those construction years.

“Well, I don’t know. It wasn’t the first time, but I dealt with it each time.”

“Each time? Dot, turn the soup off.” Not what I was expecting him to say, but I head to the stove. As I stir the soup, the front door slams.

I run to the door and fling it open. Sean's already a couple hundred feet down the road in the rain, sprinting towards town. "Sean! Come back here!" He's too far gone, and the rain dampens my yelling anyway. A train clacks across the field to my left. I slam the door then Franklin wails a lungful of startled tears.

Joanne Steel Yordanou