

Suck It Up, Buttercup

Stacie Brown

(Dena Layne)

Chapter 1

“Stop messing with that!” I shouted at my two-year-old son as he reached for the stack of bills on the kitchen table.

“What’s gotten into you this morning? Hey, why don’t you go see if you can find Elmo in the living room?” I had to try something to redirect Cory’s troublemaking. I was busy sorting through a stack of old papers I had gotten down from the attic. Mostly, they were bits of crumpled paper: a line here, a paragraph there. These were stories that lay unfinished, abandoned in my youth for more exciting things. I had been trying to figure out a way to pull the pieces together to come up with some semblance of a book. You know, one of those things people like to read that has a beginning, middle, and an end. Hopefully it had a gripping storyline. That’s important. That’s what sells books. That’s what brings in the dough. And we could really use some dough right about now.

My boyfriend, Kevin, was out working at a steel yard just outside of town. It was backbreaking labor, but it was honest work—and, besides, it was usually enough to pay the bills. We were scraping by on his meager salary just fine.

Oh, who am I kidding! I knew better than anybody that this time was different. We have a child to think of! Cory means the world to us. At times, it seems he is all we have keeping us together, binding us to each other, because he was what made us a family. He is what matters.

And yet, we still have many other things to worry about. Money is always our main concern. Where would it come from? How in the world will we ever have enough money to pay off the debt we had accumulated in the past year? To top it off, the house is a bottomless money pit. It creaks and groans all the time; the floorboards are coming up in places and are loose in others. Water damage left behind from a busted pipe slowly rotted away the floor under the kitchen sink. The house has no foundation—just some cinder blocks propped up underneath the house. It's like the house is holding the cinder blocks upright, instead of the other way around. The blocks may be the only thing in the entire house that's level, at least on the vertical plane. But this dilapidated old house was all that Kevin could afford at the time to keep his new family sheltered, and it had sufficed.

Kevin bought the house a year ago in April, when Cory was a year old. I told him Cory and I were moving whether he liked it or not, and he could come with us or not—it made no difference to me. Of course it did, but that's not how I made it appear. I was hoping to get the ball rolling just a little bit faster, hoping to light a fire under his ass so we could finally have our own place to put down some roots and make a life together. So, I suppose I was elated when Kevin bought the first house in Gatson that came on the market. We had all been living with Kevin's mother, but it was becoming a nightmare I just couldn't stand to be a part of any longer.

Tammy Perkins was the type of woman who acted one way with one person, and completely another way with the next person. Take, for instance, the time Kevin told her she was going to be a grandma. He and I were only dating at the time, and not exclusively each other. Kevin had moved back in with his mother a few months before due to lay-offs at his previous job. I had been visiting more frequently, so when I showed up at their house that day, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Just another date Kevin was going on with “that Dena Layne girl.”

“Mom, please s-s-sit down. Dena and I have something to tell you. It’s imp-p-portant,” Kevin stuttered. Kevin didn’t normally stutter.

“W-we are gonna . . .” Kevin deeply sighed and looked at me for reassurance. I nodded for him to continue.

He took a deep breath and exhaled, “We’re gonna have a baby, mom. You’re gonna be a grandma!”

There was a moment’s pause as something that looked like disgust or contempt briefly flashed in Tammy’s eyes, and then she put on a big smile. While gaining composure, she exclaimed, “Oh, sweetie, that’s wonderful news! Congratulations!” Hugs all around.

Sure, Tammy looked loving and supportive—to everyone else. Even her own son wasn’t wise enough to recognize her folly. I, however, noticed the flicker in that woman’s eyes. It kept playing over and over in my mind, like one of those old records that had a skip. It made me so nauseous and I had to sit down. Of course, I blamed it on the hormones.

Setting my papers aside for now, I brought my coffee into the living room and glanced over at Cory. He found Elmo behind the chair and started toddling around the room singing

“Elmo loves you! Elmo loves you!” Someday soon we have got to teach that kid a real song. Regardless, Cory’s mindless chatter left me to marvel at how, even though completely surrounded with trials and tribulations, he seemed not to notice them at all. I know that’s all a part of being a child, but it must be nice to not have a care in the world. It’s easy to not care when someone else worries about stuff for you. Cory’s lightheartedness made me think back to my own carefree days before a mortgage and responsibility, before my solid relationship with my “almost” husband, before Cory cinched us together as a family.

Chapter 2

It’s funny the things you remember. Way back in High School, I began writing. I would write about my day in my diary. I would write poems about my boyfriends. I would write about anything and everything I deemed important at the time. I was just an ordinary teenager, searching hopelessly and endlessly for myself. Through this process, I often found myself hopelessly and endlessly in love. I changed boyfriends like I changed my underwear. My dad often called me fickle, though I didn’t really know what he meant by that until after he died. I had never given it much thought.

High School is a tough place with many new things to discover. Besides the mountain of homework, a kid is constantly bombarded with social pressures. While I stayed on top of my studies, I was slowly learning that I was awfully naïve where it came to boys.

I grew up in a small town, much like Gatson, but several thousand people smaller. So as to not be bored out of our minds, all the local kids would load up and go to the next town over in

search of any kind of fun. My long time best friend, Alana, my sister, Maddie, and I decided the dance in Wesley was the place to be that Saturday night.

Of course we had all brought our “boyfriends” along. Upon arrival in the dancehall parking lot, the other four scrambled to get inside. Billy and I stayed in the backseat of the truck, making out and re-creating a scene from *Titanic*. Making out hot and heavy, Billy wanted more.

I didn't.

I was still a virgin—only 15 at the time! I was even on my period! Why he thought sex was going to be “a go” while I had a tampon inside is a question I still, to this day, often wonder about.

Raging hormones or not, there was no excuse for not stopping when I said no. Though it wasn't rough, it wasn't hateful, it wasn't *forced*, no means no—regardless of how or when it is said. Before I knew what was happening, the dance was over and Alana, Maddie, and the boyfriends were at the door to the locked truck. Thinking that everything was consensual, the boys made light of the situation while the girls freaked out.

“How could you, Dena? You said you were going to wait, Dena. Why did you do that, Dena?” As if I wanted this to happen. As if it was my fault. As if I somehow made them less virtuous.

Trust is something that has to be earned, and once broken, is hard to get back. I thought I was in love—I loved Billy, and so I trusted Billy. Lesson learned.

What the hell is love anyway? Just another four-letter word people everywhere struggle to find meaning to. I had my share of “love.” What I really needed was *love*.

In keeping with the common theme of my life thus far, I got out of my hometown as fast as I could, searching for a concept yet unknown to me. Always running, pushing forward, I never looked back. Until I met Kevin.

(Kevin Perkins)

Chapter 3

That goofy broad is gonna be the death of me. She's always whining about something. Don't know what it is she's chasing. I can't figure her out.

Sure, our house is crappy. At least we aren't homeless. Sure, we're short on money. At least we're not destitute. Sure, we're not married yet. At least we're together. Life isn't always sunshine and roses, but we're still alive. Can't Dena just be happy about that at least?

I guess Dena has always been sort of unsettled, pessimistic, fitful, unbalanced. We met when she was in her senior year of high school at a mutual friend's party. Back then, time just stood still for me. Life was an easy ride, not the roller-coaster it is these days. I owe that, in part, to Dena. Cory helps with the craziness too. That kid is just like his momma.

Before Dena came along, I was working and doing my thing—cold beer on Saturday, maybe a party, maybe fishing, maybe at Gatson Bar shootin' some pool. On one chance outing at the bar, in walked Miss Hollywood Dena Layne. She had gone off to get a degree and find a man, I guess. Low and behold, there she was back in Gatson! I would have sworn she'd never come back after her dad passed away.

But there she was, sidling up to me at the pool table with a beer in one hand, cigarette in the other. Sure enough, we picked up where we left off. Growing up, we had always hooked up after one or the other's break-up. Most times, one of us wasn't single, but we got together anyway. Old habits die hard. Besides, there was always something about her that intrigued me. Maybe it was the light in her eyes, the fire in her soul, or her bizarre sense of humor. Whatever it was, I could never say no.

One thing was different about this time though. We were both single. Maybe that's why we ended up hanging around each other more and more often. We were each trying to fill the void of loneliness with someone who was comfortable. But no matter how much you want something to work, if you force it to happen, it will probably end up breaking. After dating a couple months, I was exhausted by her fitfulness. She wanted more than I could give her, so I planned to break up with her on a Sunday. I wanted to get back to my normal care-free life. Dena told me she was pregnant the Thursday before.

(To be continued . . .)