

Estranged from her family, an easily intimidated woman meets a family who invite her in; but when her domineering brother interferes with her new relationship, she must go after what is hers before she loses what's most important.

Family Matters

By Valerie Buttler

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A dark, moody photograph of a woman with her hand covering her face, suggesting distress or grief. The lighting is low, highlighting the texture of her skin and the shadows of her hair.

VALERIE BUTTLER

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MATTERS

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Chapter One

Sylvia

For five months a commercial dumpster had been filling up on the contents of Sylvia Johnson's mother's house at 36 River Road in West Newbury, Massachusetts. That day it was gone.

As soon as Sylvia saw the empty driveway, she made her fiancé David Hudson stop his jeep. They got out and followed the scrape marks to the spot where the dumpster had been.

Sylvia clenched her teeth. "Even her stuff had to be dragged out of there."

She stomped across the lawn toward the cedar shingled saltbox with a two-story addition. The afternoon sun, low over the gardens, reflected in the windows giving the illusion that inside lights were on.

When she reached the front door, she turned the knob back and forth, then pulled on it.

David came up from behind her. "What are you doing?"

"I want to go in." The door had been painted red one of those years she had not been around. She smacked her hand against it.

The holly bushes growing along the front of the house were thick and pointy, but she carved her way through them and

peered in a kitchen window. No table, nothing on the shelves. “It’s empty.”

“He’s been taking stuff out every weekend.”

She pushed past David to the porch off the checkered room, her mother’s addition to the house. That door was locked. Shades covered the oversized windows. She leaned her forehead against the cold glass of the door, resting it there a minute.

“You knew he was going to do this.” David put his hand on her shoulder, rubbing it a little. “Come on, let’s go.”

Halfway to the jeep Sylvia turned and looked at the house again, the Merrimack River shimmering behind it. “He’s taking everything.”

“There’s nothing you can do, Syl.”

“He has no right.”

David didn’t argue with that, but he could have. It went without saying. Her brother Blake had every right to do whatever he wanted with anything that was their mother’s.

“You need to let it go.”

How many times had he said that to her, had she said it to herself? But she could not. She should not have to. Let it go? She needed to be inside, where it had been about family, where she had been family.

Sylvia kept her eyes on the river as they passed by her mother's house. They drove up Church Street past the cemetery where her father and grandparents now were, then down Main past the Post Office and Food Mart to Garden Street. Just before the dead end, David pulled in beside a two-story fixer upper that was in the process of becoming their home.

The outside needed painting and maybe a porch, but they were concentrating on the inside for now. Wood floors had been refinished and new linoleum put down before Sylvia moved in a month ago. She wasn't supposed to be living in the house until they'd furnished it, but she couldn't bear to be an hour away in Needham with David here in West Newbury. She'd quit her job taking care of adults with developmental disabilities and now spent her days scraping, sanding, and painting.

They went in through the side door leading directly into the kitchen. Sylvia carried the pots and silverware and David the dishes they had borrowed from his place, setting them on the marred counter. The wallpaper behind the sink was only partially scraped and maple cupboards lay along the floor in the pantry waiting to be mounted. The stove was a serviceable GE electric. She knew David preferred gas burners that allowed him more temperature control. He was used to his roommate Ray's Bosch, designed for serious cooks, as both he and Ray were.

"You sure you don't mind cooking in here?" she asked.

"It'll do. I'm not making anything fancy."

"Do you need to get started? What do you want me to do?"

“There’ll be plenty of time when I get here tomorrow.” He went to the as-yet-to-be-replaced refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of Hidden Cove Summer Ale. “Help me finish these so we can get something more seasonal.”

They went into the living room where David started a fire in the corner wood stove. It sat behind the kitchen counter which would become a snack bar now that the wall had been removed. Sylvia brought over the only furniture in the room, two blue camping chairs, and sat in one. She studied him as he rumbled newspapers and tossed in kindling. The light from the fire made his angular face more chiseled and his smile line deeper.

Still crouched down he turned to her. “You all right about your mother’s place?”

She nodded, but she wasn’t. All she had been thinking the whole time they’d been riding here was how to get inside. It had occurred to her that the cellar door might not be locked.

David placed a few small logs in the shape of a tepee, threw in more kindling and latched the stove door shut. Red and yellow flames shot up behind the glass. He sat in the other camping chair. “We can live somewhere else. I can work anywhere. It doesn’t have to be in town.”

“What, and give all this up?” They laughed but she was serious. “I like it here, in this house.” He had chosen it for them, for their life together. She could already picture their future as a family in it. “Plus, you’ve got Ray here and if he and Bonnie work out then we’ll all be together.”

“It’s just, you seemed pretty upset. If you’d waited until I could move in, you wouldn’t be driving by your mother’s so much.”

“Seeing the dumpster gone, it hit me, that’s all.” It meant Blake had emptied the house and was ready for the next step in his plan. Everything had gone too quickly, her mother taken out of her home and then all her things. Sylvia was not ready for the house to be sold. The last time she had been in it was when her mother went into the hospital. “Guess I got my hopes up when they had me come help with Mom. After years of being away it was starting to feel like family again.”

Things had not always been strained. She and her mother used to do things together, rummage through the clothes racks in Marshalls, eat seafood by the windows in Michael’s Harborside. There had been some good times, like the day they stood laughing in the Home Depot parking lot in Seabrook. Must have been four or five years ago. They had loaded enough mulch to winterize her mother’s numerous gardens into her Toyota 4Runner and their arms and legs ached. As they leaned against the bumper for a minute, her mother mentioned the fact that she’d told a young worker they didn’t need his help loading the bags. Then she burst out laughing. It was so like her. Before they took off, her mother reached under the floor mat and handed something to her.

Sylvia gasped. “I have a key.” She jumped up. “I have one.”

David frowned.

“To my mother’s house. I can get in. We’d been shopping and—”

“You can’t use it.”

“Why not?”

He came over and put his hands on her shoulders. “Blake’s in charge of the house now. Key or no key, you’d be trespassing.”

“So?”

He shook his head and held out a hand. “Maybe you should give me the key.”

“I don’t know where it is. I just remembered that I had it. It could be in one of my boxes.” There being no furniture to put things on or into, she’d left most of her stuff unpacked, lining the boxes along the walls in the rooms upstairs.

He smiled. “Not to worry then. By the time you find it the house will be sold.” He went over to the wood stove, opened the door, and pushed around inside with a poker. “Want to get started on the stairs?”

They were planning to finish painting the stairway tonight. Maybe she could remember where the key was while she was working.

When David was done with the wall, he suggested they stop and eat. Painting the posts, which he pointed out were technically balusters, was tedious, and she was happy to leave the four remaining ones for tomorrow morning. They brought the painting supplies into the kitchen and started folding the tarp.

David paused, his face puzzled. “Why would she give you a key? Doesn’t sound like your mother.”

“Right? I wondered the same thing. If she needed anything Lily was seven minutes away and Mom would have called Blake anyway.” She pictured her mother laughing in the parking lot. “Maybe she felt close to me that day, forgot we didn’t always get along.”

David squeezed her arm, kissed her cheek, then went to get them pizza from Pizza Company on Main. She cleaned the roller and paint tray, wrapped her brush in plastic, and put them away in the pantry with the tarp. She still could not picture where the key was. Where had it been in her apartment?

They finished eating and David folded the pizza box into the kitchen wastebasket. He told her that Ray would be helping him hang the cupboards next Wednesday. “Then we shop for my desk and shelving. Get that set up and I can move in. No more going back and forth past your mother’s.”

He apologized for leaving early but they were both tired and she could use the time to think. He put on his jacket, saying he’d be back around noon.

He pointed a finger at her, smiling. “I know you. You’ll be rummaging through those boxes as soon as I leave. If you find that key, don’t use it.”

She made a face and gave him a hug. She pictured moving her boxes out of the room that would become his office. It was

when he kissed her that she saw it, in one of those boxes, among the headphones, jacks, and cords.

The doors to her mother's house may be locked, but she had a key.

Chapter Two

Blake

The morning sunlight shone on Blake Matthew's family as they settled around the kitchen table. He did not need a sign to indicate how this day was going to go, but he took it as a good one.

His wife Sara cut the tomato and Gouda omelet she had made, placing more than half on his plate. Their daughter Caroline, who thought omelets looked like mistakes, was pouring half and half on her Rice Chex. He didn't approve of the added fat, but he'd speak with Sara another time. Today was not the day.

Instead, he said, "What are my two girls planning for this evening?"

"Caroline is having Rebecca Mason over. She's the new girl in dance class we told you about."

"Mommy is ordering us pizza and letting us watch at least two American Girls."

At ten, their daughter was already on her way to becoming an adolescent Sara, slender, tall for her age, with long blond hair she vowed was going to stay that way. His mother once suggested to Caroline that she cut it in the fashion she wore hers, short and spiky. Caroline adored her grandmother but said she would never cut it as long as she was dancing. "Who ever heard of a ballerina with short hair?" She may favor Sara in

looks but in personality she was all him, sure about what she wanted and focused on getting it.

He smiled at her. “Wish I could be here to meet your friend. Is she as wonderful as you?”

“Oh, Daddy.” Caroline got up, rinsed her dish and spoon, put them in the dishwasher and said she was going to get her things for school.

Sara poured herself more coffee, holding the pot up to see if Blake wanted some.

He shook his head. He had barely touched what he had. “I have big news. After all those weekends of sorting through things in my mother’s house, it’s finally empty. I have one box of papers and a table left to take out. That’s it and then I’m done.”

“Honey, that’s wonderful.” Sara came over and hugged him, leaving behind the clean scent of her Rain Day perfume.

“I’m leaving the office early so I can do a final walk around the property while there’s still light. Tomorrow I meet with the realtor and put the house in her hands. Then I’ll visit Mother and come home. After that, no more nights away.”

Caroline came back into the kitchen, backpack on, holding a piece of paper. She handed it to Blake. It was a drawing of a cat with a short body and a big head. “Tell Grandma I love her.”

“I will, Sweetie.” He kissed her cheek. “What do you say we celebrate tomorrow night and go out for dinner?”

He was looking at Sara, but Caroline asked, “What are we celebrating?”

He did not want his daughter to know that he’d been emptying out her grandmother’s house so that it could be sold. She was already sad that Grandma was living in an unfamiliar place without her cats. She would not understand how hard he’d worked for this day, how many difficult decisions he’d had to make. His mother was now well taken care of and her needs more than met in her apartment at The Port. Her house had been cleaned out and was ready to go on the market. There should be no problem finding a buyer. It was a beautiful old home in a quaint Massachusetts town. It would sell itself.

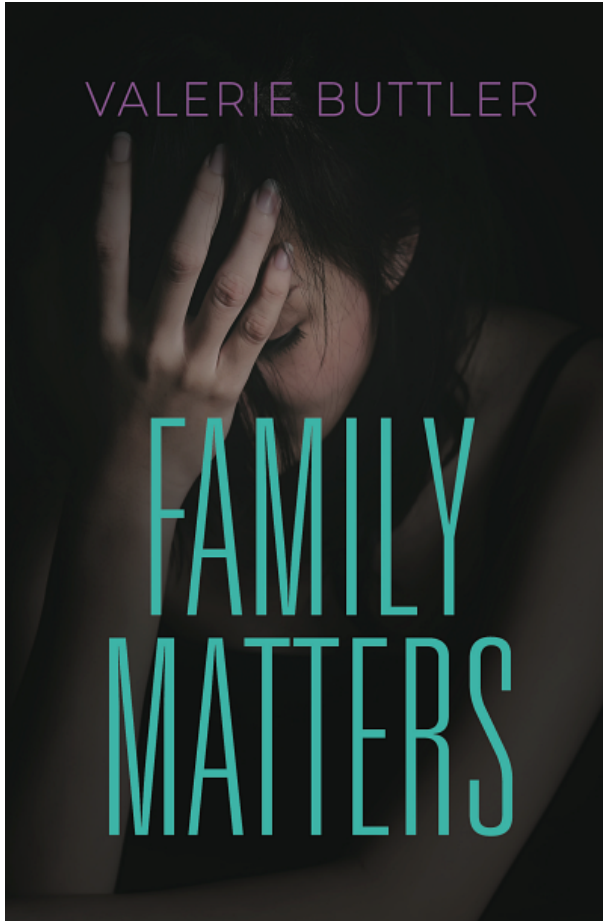
But for now, Caroline did not need to know that. Blake never lied to her, but he could omit some truths. “We’re celebrating Daddy’s having helped a family get their house ready to sell. I’m all done, which means I won’t have to be away anymore. I think that calls for a night out, don’t you?”

She agreed and started making suggestions as to where they should eat. “Papa Razzi, no, Margaritas, or Tennessee’s for ribs.”

All her Framingham favorites.

Sara beamed at him.

This was a great start to what would surely be a great day.



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