

SHE'S TIRED OF RUNNING.
NOW IT'S TIME TO START FRESH...

FROM SCRATCH

C.E.
HILBERT

1C Heroic landlord
1C woman in danger
Mix ingredients
Bake at 325 until HEA

From Scratch

C.E. Hilbert

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

From Scratch

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Dedication

To my family of friends...God blesses me each day
through you.

1

The aroma of chocolate, intermingled with caramel, melted into Sean's senses as he crossed the threshold of Only the Basics Bakery. The scents of the little shop enveloped him like a warm sweater in the middle of winter and he suspected any of the dozens of cookies, cakes, and pies on display would vanish as soon as they found their way onto a plate in front of him. He wished he could make the shop's owner, Maggie McKitrick, disappear as quickly.

"Have a look around. I'll be right with you."

Echoing from the backroom, the voice was faceless, but Sean would know its lilt in his deepest sleep. It sent chills up his spine each time he pressed play on his answering machine. He was certain said voice, and the petite body housing it, had nagged nearly an inch off his over six foot frame in the last few months with complaints, threats veiled as needs, and ridiculous upgrade suggestions for the building the voice's owner rented from him.

"I'm so sorry you had to wait," she said as she pushed her way through the swinging door that separated the cozy café from the cramped kitchen. Her eyes focused on the floor as if she needed to measure each step. Wiping hands on her flour-covered apron, she lifted her head—lips stretched wide with a smile, and stopped just behind the counter.

Only the glass display case separated them.

Her eyes locked on his face, sliding her bright grin into a tight-lipped frown. "Oh, it's you."

"It's me." Sean couldn't stop his lips from lifting at the corners.

Maggie might be an annoying tenant, but she was picture-postcard pretty. With her long mass of curly, dark brown hair tied in a messy mound on the top of her head, she appeared nearly an inch taller than her petite five foot three. The only flaws on her face were a few small smudges of what looked like a mix of flour and chocolate on her left cheek. She crossed her arms and leaned against the back counter. "Did you come to fix the back door, or are you just looking for more money, Scrooge?"

Matching her stance, Sean propped his hip against a small café table. The table legs squeaked against the floor with his added weight. "Ms. McKitrick, I must remind you that you haven't paid your rent for the last two months. If you don't pay, I'll be forced to evict you and take you to court. I'm sure you don't want to lose your little business."

She shoved away from the counter. Her hands landed on top of the display case with a thud; her knuckles whitened. The fire shooting from her gaze made Sean thankful for the small barrier the refrigerated case provided. "Don't patronize me, you big bully. I haven't paid my rent because you haven't fixed one thing on my list. In my lease agreement, it clearly states that if the owner, that's you and your never-seen brothers, refuses to keep said property in good condition then the tenant, that's me, has the right to refuse payment. Nothing that needs fixing has been fixed." In one seamless motion, she pushed off of the case and began counting on her fingers. "I have a leaky

toilet. The ventilation in the kitchen is spotty, at best. And, you agreed to put an additional deadbolt on the back door when I signed the lease six months ago. I believe the door is still deadbolt free, using the toilet might officially be a medal event in surfing, and I am contemplating seeing the doctor about an inhaler. So, I refuse payment."

Sean raked his hand through his short, blond hair, sucking in a deep breath to soothe the two-headed beast of anger and annoyance rising from his belly. "I've sent handymen over several times in the last two months to fix all of your requests."

"And yet," her arm swung in the direction of the kitchen as her voice shifted from annoyance to what Sean could only classify as exasperation. He recognized the tone. Most of the conversations with his mother during his teen years and after sounded remarkably like Maggie at the moment. "I still have a leaky toilet, bad ventilation, and a lack of proper security. How do you explain that?"

"Perhaps, it's because each time I send someone over to fix your problems, you smile at him, hand him a muffin, a cup of coffee, and offer him a seat in your café." He stepped to the counter, resting his palms on the smooth, cool surface.

She resumed her position against the glass case, mere inches from his face. Releasing a slow breath, her voice lowered an octave. "Well, I was only being hospitable. And it wasn't as if you sent dozens over. Each time, you've sent over Mr. Thompson, who is on the near side of ninety. Aren't you worried he might break a hip or something? Is he the cheapest guy you could find, Scrooge?"

"Taylor." Silently he prayed for calm.

Her head tilted slightly to the right, freeing a piece of her crazy hair. "What?"

"My name is Taylor. Not Scrooge or Big Bully or Meany. It's Taylor. Sean Taylor."

"I know."

"Then I'd appreciate you using my name."

"Whatever," Maggie muttered. Turning from the display case, she began wiping an undetectable mess on the back prep counter.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, he let out a long sigh. "And, I sent over Mr. Thompson, because he goes to my church and I know he can use the money. He would be too proud to simply take a gift, so I gave him the opportunity to earn some of the money he needs doing something he's done most of his life."

Her hand slowed and her shoulders slumped. With the towel stretched taut between her hands she swiveled to face him. "I didn't know."

Gone was the anger and fierce Irish temper. Instead, her face held true compassion, her heart reflecting in her eyes. "I gave him coffee and a muffin every time he came because he looked so worn out." A slight smile touched her lips. "The last time he was here, he told me about his wife, Martha, and how she used to make a homemade pie for dinner every night. He was wiping his eyes with his bandana and I just didn't have the heart to ask him to crawl around on the floor to fix the toilet."

"Martha was great. She gave me and my brothers piano lessons, but we had a hard time staying still long enough to learn anything more than 'Heart and Soul.'" Their gazes met and for the first time in over two months, he saw Maggie. Not his frustrating tenant. Just Maggie. *Focus, Taylor. Rent. Business. Landlord. Any of*

these ringing a bell? He took a step back from the counter, shook his head and laced his arms. "Ahem," he cleared his throat. "Ms. McKitrick..."

The entry bell jangled announcing a new customer.

Sean shelved the speech he was preparing in his head. No need to have the whole town gossiping about his landlord-tenant issues.

Maggie's expression sparkled as she looked past him and greeted the new distraction. "Hello, Mr. Mayor." She skirted around Sean. Reaching the mayor, she shook his hand.

He was surprised she didn't tug the good ole' boy politician into a bear hug, spreading flour across the crooked tie and rounded belly of Gibson's Run, Ohio's fearless leader.

Sean tightened his arms across his chest as he watched her exuberant greeting. She seemed to love everyone. Everyone but her landlord.

"Good morning, Miss Maggie. How're you today?" The mayor said with a nod of his head and a chuckle in his voice.

"Oh, I'm OK, Mike, except for some... umm...difficult customers." She rolled her eyes toward Sean. "How'd you like a blueberry-lemon muffin? They're cooling in the back. I made them with organic sugar, unbleached flour, and substituted butter with Greek yogurt. So Beth should be all right with you having a little treat for breakfast." Without waiting for his answer, Maggie scurried to the back kitchen leaving Sean and the mayor alone.

"Chief..." the mayor said with a slight tip of his head to Sean.

"Mayor Donaldson, how're you this morning?"

"I'm just fine, Sean." He took a step toward the display case. Rubbing his belly, he perused the decadent contents. "I hope you aren't harassing our sweet Maggie. Seems as if that might be against the law and a conflict of interest." He turned his head and winked a single eye toward the badge Sean wore on his work belt.

"I think it's the other way around, Mayor." Sean leaned against the small café table. This was business. He wasn't leaving without his rent.

Mayor Donaldson twisted away from the display counter and gave Sean a politician's placating grin. "Give her a break, Sean. She's a new business owner. A little lady out on her own without any family support. We here, in Gibson's Run, we need to be her family."

"I appreciate supporting small businesses, mayor. But, it's a business, not a non-profit. She needs to keep up her end of our contract."

Before the mayor could respond, Maggie breezed through the connecting doorway with a small brown box tied with raffia ribbon. "Here you go. I threw in a couple mini-carrot muffins for the assistants at the office. Ask them to stop by and tell me what they think."

"Thank you, Maggie. I'm sure the ladies will love them." He lifted the box from her hands. "I'll take a black coffee, as well, and then leave you and the chief to..." He looked from Maggie to Sean and back to Maggie. "Chat." He handed her a few dollars to pay for his muffin and coffee.

Maggie worked quickly, retrieving the mayor's coffee and his change from the register. "Thank you for supporting the bakery. Have a great day."

Taking the coffee, he smiled. "I'll see you

tomorrow, Maggie." He gave a slight nod of his head. "Chief, would you mind opening the door for me? My hands are a little full."

"Certainly," Sean pushed off the table. "Have a good day, mayor." The tiny bell jingled as he shoved the glass door open.

"You can follow him," Maggie said over her shoulder as she fiddled with the mugs on the shelf above the back counter.

"Ms. McKitrick, we haven't finished our conversation," he spoke to her back. "I don't want to be tough on you, but you aren't giving me much of a choice."

Waiting for a pithy retort, he took in the full length of her for the first time in weeks. From her slightly gaunt frame to the frayed hem of her chef's coat, Maggie would never be confused with a carefree socialite. Concern bubbled in his chest. *We are her family.* The mayor's words rolled through his mind as a vision of his mother, twenty years earlier wiping down the tables in this very space, superimposed over Maggie. He took a slight step closer. "Are you having money problems? Is that why you haven't paid your rent?"

She spun toward him, the color rising from the base of her neck to her hairline. "I am not having money problems." She tossed the dirty rag in a bucket. "I just don't think I should have to pay when you aren't fulfilling your part of our contract."

He felt heat burn at his collar and his stomach twisted.

She was right.

Sean hadn't been following through with his responsibilities. His brothers trusted him to manage

the properties they shared. The other stores and apartments in the strip of buildings the Taylor brothers owned were self-sufficient. Except for the occasional water leak or furnace filter, all he needed to do was collect the checks each month. But Maggie's building was the oldest in their holdings and often needed the most attention. Her complaints were valid. He hated that she was right.

He released a slow sigh. "OK." He raised his hands in surrender. "I give. I'll make you a deal. You close at seven and I'm off duty at eight. I'll meet you here tonight, I'll fix the toilet and the lock, and then you'll give me two months' rent. I promise I will find someone in Columbus with exhaust experience to come in to give an estimate in the next week or two. Deal?"

"Deal," Maggie said with a twinge of a smile in her eyes.

He must have been mistaken. She shared smiles with everyone except him.

"See you tonight." Sean nodded his head in what he hoped was an authoritative manner. Shoving open the front door to exit, he prayed that the woman never committed a crime. He would likely allow her to convince him that he had forced her into the felony.

~*~

Maggie hoped the warmth of the shop hid the flush spreading across her cheeks as she watched all six foot three inches of rugged masculinity, with a dimple-cheeked smile and dark brown eyes the color of pure cocoa, walk with purpose toward the police station. How could one man make her angry in one

breath and with the next inhale turn her heart into a puddle with his kindness towards an aging friend?

After six months, she would hope her reactions, good or bad, to be simple and straight forward; like nice, sweet vanilla. But when it came to the good chief she was all Rocky Road. “Ugh,” she moaned a grunt of frustration.

She slammed open the swinging door connecting the bakery with the kitchen and retrieved the cup of coffee she’d been sipping earlier. Setting amidst the cooling racks of her Better-Than-Your-Momma’s Chocolate Chip cookies, her fourth morning jolt had been interrupted by the jingle announcing the chief. Now the coffee cup was cold to her touch. She poured the stale contents into the stainless steel sink as she flipped the switch to start her personal coffee maker. The machine popped and spurted as she rinsed out her mug. No reason to dirty another dish. She would have plenty by late afternoon when various groups from the high school huddled around her café tables.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the stack of mail she’d abandoned with the arrival of the chief. Placing her cup on the long prep table, she sorted through advertisements, offers to win a million dollars, a notice from her bank, and a small sample of shampoo promising to make her hair gleam like diamonds.

The fragrance of the nutty Colombian blend filled the cramped kitchen and drew her attention. She filled her mug, lifted it to her lips for a tentative sip and glanced at the clock. Her interns wouldn’t arrive for at least another hour. The time for a leisurely coffee had exited with the chief.

Grabbing the mail, she pushed the door open with her hip as she swallowed another deep drink. She slid

onto the tall stool behind the register, continuing to sift through the various sizes of envelopes, throwing junk in the recycling bin and what she needed to review later in a stack on the back counter.

At the bottom of the pile was a wide envelope with a Florida postmark. Her mug slipped from her hand and crashed to the floor. She ripped open the package with a single tear and peered inside. A folded strip of paper slithered from the opening. With shaking hands, she unfolded the note. Her vision blurred as tears pooled, but the scrawled letters across the middle of the page were clear as crystal.

HE'S OUT.

2

An hour after closing, Maggie was lifting one of the last cakes from the display case when she caught sight of Sean crossing the street toward the bakery. Her palms began to sweat. Steady girl.

The note had her jumping at her shadow most of the day. If she wasn't careful, her worries and her inexplicable attraction to him would be a neon sign of confession glowing all over her face, and her landlord would switch into cop mode.

Cop mode translated into attention. Attention meant that her game of hide-and-not-quite-see would end with her as the loser. *Focus on all of the reasons why you don't like him. Why you can't even think about a relationship with him or anyone else.*

A chill slammed through her body as the image of a pair of thick, black glasses flashed in her mind's eye. Swallowing deeply, she shook her head. She hip-checked the swinging door and set the cake on the stainless surface of the prep counter with a soft clink. Yanking off her splattered apron and well-worn chef's coat, she dusted her hands down the front of her sweater and jeans, sweeping off any stray flour or powdered sugar. She tossed the apron and coat into a plastic clothes basket on top of the day's used towels. With a quick scan of her reflection in a drying cookie sheet, she shrugged her shoulders with a sigh. *Guess it'll have to do.*

She lifted one hand to the door and the other hand to her head, releasing her heavy curls from the makeshift bun she'd erected earlier in the morning. As she walked through the doorway, a soft sigh melted through her body with the wave of tingles rolling over her scalp. For sheer mass, her hair deserved its own zip code. She wasn't always the prettiest girl in the room, but her hair definitely made a statement: Beware Trespassers.

She wasn't too concerned that her curls would frighten the good chief. Despite what she was loathe to call a "moment" earlier today, Sean barely noticed her beyond her rent check, or lack thereof, and she was fairly certain he'd never think of mixing business with pleasure. Not the perfect police chief.

Shaking the weighty bulk with her fingers, she took one additional step into the café to avoid the door tweaking her in the back, and gave herself a pep talk. *Remember, he's your landlord. Not your friend. He's...come on! Think of a reason. There were a thousand this morning. He's mean. Well, except for his kindness to sweet Mr. Thompson. And, renting this building to someone with cash, but no credit history. No. No. No. He's mean. He's a bully. He's the landlord. Tonight is business. Stay on the offensive. He's a cop. You can't trust anyone — not even cops.*

The chief walked into the café and her heart dropped to her stomach, crushing all of her arguments with a thud.

~*~

Sean pushed open the front door. The jingling bell announced his arrival. His gaze shifted to the connecting door and he froze. Reflexively, he tightened

his grip on the handle of his toolbox. The vision of Maggie, hair down and no apron, hit him like a prize fighter in an opening round. Swiping the back of his hand across his mouth, he couldn't tear his gaze from her.

She was catch-your-breath stunning, but her saucy mouth usually curbed her appeal. In the six months he'd known her, he had not experienced the full force of the waterfall of tresses framing her gorgeous face. Seeing her hair flowing around her shoulders made him yearn to tangle his fingers in her curls. He said a silent prayer for God's strength and willpower. Tonight would be a challenge.

A sweet twist of her lips matched the twinkle of welcome in her eyes. She stopped just inside the narrow walkway connecting the dining area and the sales counter. The smile seemed genuine, free from her typical nasty bite.

Maybe they'd made a breakthrough this morning as they'd bonded over Mr. Thompson?

"I really appreciate you coming," she said.

"Well, I'd like to pay the mortgage on the building..."

Her smile bent to a snarl. Pivoting on her heel, she said, "Oh, yes...the rent." She rammed open the door and let it swing back, nearly slamming into his face.

He sucked in a deep breath and then released air slowly through tight lips. He slid his hand up the smooth wood and pushed the door forward with the barest touch of his fingers. *Thanks, Lord. That helps.*

She waited for him by the first of three prep tables, her arms crossed. Her foot tapped to an impatient rhythm. "I have my checkbook handy. As soon as you finish up, I'll write you a check for three months' rent.

How'll that be?"

"No need to give me more than the two months' rent."

She turned toward the back of the kitchen.

He followed as she expertly wove through a delicate obstacle course laid out in the shoebox-sized kitchen, stopping just to the left of the back door. Memories of running through the door to sneak a warm cookie off of one of his mom's trays floated across his mind and squeezed his heart. Closing the final two steps to the rear entrance, he set his tool box on a wooden crate and crouched down next to the door to inspect the existing lock. He risked a quick glance over his shoulder.

With her arms hugging her middle and her brows lowered in a questioning glare, she exuded the intimidation intensity rivaling his former partner.

He suppressed a chuckle. "I can take it from here. You don't need to supervise, unless you don't trust me?"

"Of course, I trust you." A tiny sigh slipped through her lips and her arms dropped to her sides. "I guess if you don't need my help, I'll wrap up the kitchen." Glancing back towards the bathroom, "Please, don't forget the toilet. One of the interns nearly wiped out on the growing lake in there today."

He nodded. He caught the shimmer of water pooling around the base of the toilet. If he wasn't careful, he could be replacing an entire floor rather than tightening a few nuts. "Gotcha. Lock, then toilet."

She opened her mouth as if she wanted to add a comment. But silently, her lips slammed shut as she twisted away from him and scooted back toward the kitchen. A silent Maggie was definitely more attractive

than the speaking version. When she stepped out of his view, he rose and shifted back to project number one, replacing the dead bolt. Staring at the door, he struggled to concentrate on the simple steps he learned from Mr. Thompson when he and his brothers first inherited the building. *Come on Taylor. Get with the program.* Running his hand down the outside edge of the wood, he zeroed in on the existing lock. The facing was severely damaged. He wouldn't be adding an extra lock tonight. He would be replacing one.

He unhooked the latch on the toolbox. Metal clanging against metal echoed off the walls of the tight space as he shuffled various tools. Shoving aside loose nails, tiny screwdrivers and two pocket knives, he found a pew pencil hidden under a receipt for the paint he'd purchased to spruce up the building three doors down from the bakery. He lifted it from the cubby, marked a few spots where he would drill the cylinder for the deadbolt, and then dropped the pencil back into the tray.

Pulling the tiny metal rack from the box, he released a soft sigh at the sight of his coveted and very expensive drill. God definitely wasn't in favor of a love affair with inanimate objects, but this drill was high on his "like" list. He turned the drill in his hand and fit it with the best bit for the job.

In two swift moves, he yanked the old lock from the casing. He scrutinized the damage. The deadbolt was a mess. Someone had broken into the bakery. He glanced over his shoulder.

Maggie was scrubbing a cookie sheet and swaying to the soft sounds of jazz floating in the air. Why hadn't she reported the break-in? Was she unaware? Or maybe she was reluctant.