

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

A Husband for Christmas

Gail Gaymer Martin



Gail Martin

A Husband For Christmas

«HarperCollins»

Martin G. G.

A Husband For Christmas / G. G. Martin — «HarperCollins»,

Spending her holidays in picturesque Lilac Circle, Michigan, is the perfect place for Nina Jerome to start anew. She's determined to put her painful divorce in the past and focus on the future. She hadn't planned on being distracted by her sweet neighbor, Doug Billings. The successful businessman and temporary dad is clueless when it comes to taking care of his little niece. Getting help from Nina is the perfect setup—but something about the pretty new nanny makes him think about the unthinkable: having a wife and a family of his own. Can he convince Nina that she's worthy of a second chance at love—just in time for Christmas?

The Bachelor Next Door

Spending her holidays in picturesque Lilac Circle, Michigan, is the perfect place for Nina Jerome to start anew. She's determined to put her painful divorce in the past and focus on the future. She hadn't planned on being distracted by her sweet neighbor, Doug Billings. The successful businessman and temporary dad is clueless when it comes to taking care of his little niece. Getting help from Nina is the perfect setup—but something about the pretty new nanny makes him think about the unthinkable: having a wife and a family of his own. Can he convince Nina that she's worthy of a second chance at love—just in time for Christmas?

"You're quiet tonight," she said.

Doug looked at Nina as they danced. "Just thinking how happy the bride and groom look."

"They'll have a great marriage. In sickness and health—that's important."

Her words jarred him. Was Nina sick? Is that why she said marriage for her was impossible? Possibilities spiraled in his mind, but he didn't pursue them. "They'll make tremendous parents. You know, a guy at work told me that no one's prepared for parenthood. It's learn as you go."

"I've been trying to tell you you're wonderful with Kimmy. You should be a dad. You're the sweetest man I know."

He saw sadness slip across her face. "Don't you want to have a child?"

She hesitated...only a second...but he caught it. "Very much."

So why did she pause?

He had to find out. But he knew pushing her would make her put up a wall. Instead, he'd be patient.

The woman in his arms was worth waiting for.

GAIL GAYMER MARTIN is a multi-award-winning novelist and writer of contemporary Christian fiction with fifty-five published novels and four million books sold. CBS News listed her among the four best writers in the Detroit area. Gail is a cofounder of American Christian Fiction Writers, a keynote speaker at women's events, and she presents workshops at writers' conferences. She lives in Michigan. Visit her at gailgaymermartin.com. Write to her online or at PO Box 760063, Lathrup Village, MI, 48076.

A Husband

for Christmas

Gail Gaymer Martin



www.millsandboon.co.uk

She became his wife. Then he went to her,
And the Lord enabled her to conceive,
And she gave birth to a son.

—Ruth 4:13–14

Many thanks to the helpful residents and store employees who answered questions and welcomed me to Owosso, Michigan, the setting of this novel series. Much love to my husband, Bob, who supports me in this career in a multitude of loving ways. He is my inspiration for the love, joy and faith found in my novels.

Contents

[Cover](#)
[Back Cover Text](#)
[Introduction](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Title Page](#)
[Bible Verse](#)
[Dedication](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#)
[Chapter Thirteen](#)
[Chapter Fourteen](#)
[Chapter Fifteen](#)
[Nina's Creamy Corn Casserole](#)
[Dear Reader](#)
[Extract](#)
[Copyright](#)
[Chapter One](#)

“Why did I say yes?”

Nina Jerome looked out her front window at the neighbors toting folding tables and chairs or picnic tables for their annual end-of-summer block party. She'd tried to refuse the invitation, but her neighbor Angie Turner wouldn't listen, and Angie didn't give up.

Retracing her steps to the kitchen, she opened her refrigerator and eyed her pasta salad. It looked a bit bland so she sprinkled sliced ripe olives and slivers of red peppers on top for color. She would attend whether she wanted to or not so no one would think of her as antisocial.

She shrugged. Who would care? In the few months she'd lived on Lilac Circle, she'd gotten to know very few people, but she preferred it that way. Or did she? “Face it, Nina. You can't be a recluse. You need to meet your neighbors.” She spoke aloud to herself, and then chuckled. She had become a master of having great conversations with herself—or should she question her sanity?

The sound of the doorbell drew her from the kitchen. When she opened the door, she wasn't surprised. “Hi, Angie. I—”

“You're joining us, aren't you?” Technically it was a question, but Angie's expression was only allowing one answer.

“I sure am.” She tried to brighten her voice. “I just put some finishing touches on my salad. It's ready.” She opened the front door wider.

Angie stepped in. “Can I help you carry something? You don't need a table. You can share ours, but you might want a lawn chair.”

Nina motioned for Angie to follow her to the kitchen. Angie carried her salad, and she grabbed a lawn chair in one hand and a plate of cookies in the other.

Angie led the way across the street and down the block. Cars lined her end of the street where they'd been moved to make space for the food tables.

Angie's soon-to-be stepdaughter, Carly, played on their front lawn with three other children. One girl, Nina suspected, was the niece of the single guy she'd heard about. It was probably that information which had discouraged her from attending the event.

When she'd first met Angie and admitted she was divorced, Angie had mentioned the single man who was caring for his young niece. Nina sensed an ulterior motive, and any reference to matchmaking stopped her cold. She'd had enough of men. Todd had walked out of their marriage at the worst time in her life without an apology or even an attempt to offer a sensible explanation. She had to provide one for herself. And she didn't like what she'd come up with.

"You can put your food down there on the tables." Angie pointed toward a row of long tables behind the sawhorses. "We'll be eating soon."

Following Angie's direction, she worked her way around the lawn chairs, giving a nod to those she hadn't met. When she found a spot for her pasta salad and shifted items to make room for her cookies, an elderly gentleman appeared beside her. "You've made a friend today, neighbor."

She looked up and couldn't help but smile, a real smile, at the man's glinting eyes and friendly greeting.

He extended his hand. "Everyone calls me El."

"El must stand for something." She grasped his palm.

"Elwood Barnes." His eyebrows lifted. "And you are...besides being the lady who brought cookies?"

"Nina Jerome. Everyone calls me Nina." She chuckled, captured by the smile in his eyes. For the first time since she'd moved, she felt comfortable with a stranger. "I also brought a pasta salad." She pointed toward the selection of dishes. "With olives and red peppers on top."

"I'll be sure and try some." He motioned toward a man sitting alone on a lawn chair. "Come meet my neighbor across the street."

While he steered her closer, she tensed, suspecting she was about to meet the single man on the block. He was good-looking with light brown hair and one of those five o'clock shadows that gave him an attractive rugged look, yet he appeared bored, as if someone forced him to join the party. She almost chuckled, aware of the similarity to her attitude.

"Doug, this is another new neighbor, Nina." El shifted his focus. "Jerome, is it?"

Doug rose and jammed his hands into his pockets, his expression polite but stoic.

She eyed him without making a move.

"Nina, Doug Billings and little Kimmy over there." El pivoted and motioned toward the children. "They moved here a month or so before you did if my old brain recalls."

Doug glanced toward the children. "I'm sort of caring for my niece."

She pressed her lips together, hoping not to laugh. "Sort of caring?"

He shook his head, as if waking from a bad dream and finally looked at her. "I do my best."

He looked more uncomfortable than she felt. "Nice to meet you, Doug." She detested the meaningless phrase. "I'll head back before Angie thinks I ran off. Thanks, El, for introducing yourself and for..." She motioned toward Doug. "I'm sure I'll see you both around." She strode away, monitoring her legs to keep from running.

Avoiding meeting people had become a new problem. Though never outgoing, she knew how to be civil and welcoming. And she liked El. He was a sweet grandpa-type.

"There you are." Angie looked at her, a hint of coyness in her grin.

Nina grasped her lawn chair and pulled it open. "El is a real gentleman. He introduced himself." She slipped into the chair.

"He is." She arched a brow. "Meet anyone else?"

The telltale look on Angie's face gave her away, and Nina squirmed. "You must have seen El introduce me to Doug Billings."

Angie grinned. "I wondered where you'd gone so long, and then I noticed you with him."

"He's worse than I am, Angie. Either he's very shy or he's preoccupied."

Angie shrugged. "I suppose he's worried about his sister. It has to be hard on Kimmy to be away from her mom so long. It's already been over a month. I think Doug had planned to watch her for a week or so while his sister and her friend went on a trip, and then the accident happened. Now she can't travel or do much for herself with her injuries. Two broken legs plus he mentioned something about a torn retina."

Nina shook her head, unable to imagine what it would be like in that situation and stranded from her child.

Stranded from her child. She felt that way at times. Having a physician tell her she could never carry a child to term and, in fact, might never get pregnant again sliced through every nerve. Her husband's lack of compassion, his turning his back on her and walking away at a time she needed his love, had destroyed her trust and hope of being a wife, let alone a mother.

"Nina?"

She jerked her head upward. "Sorry. I was empathizing with Doug and his sister, I guess." She shifted her gaze, wanting to drop the topic. "The kids seem to be having tons of fun."

Angie nodded. "I hate to stop them." She motioned toward the tables. "But it's nearly time to eat." She swung back, a question in her eyes. "Did you receive your wedding invitation?"

"I did. Thank you." Envy stabbed at her heart. "Sorry. I should have mentioned it."

"No need to apologize. A cousin called a couple days ago and said hers hadn't arrived. I know I sent it so I'm a bit antsy now."

"It was most likely a fluke, Angie. Mine came three weeks ago. I wouldn't miss the wedding. Carly's your flower girl, right?"

A glow filled Angie's face. "She is, and she'll look beautiful. I adore that little girl."

"I know you do." She swallowed. "I'm ashamed to say that sometimes I envy you."

"Why? It could be you one day, Nina. Love happens even when you least expect it, and it covers all the flaws and fears we've carried into our lives. Everything worthwhile deserves a second chance."

Angie's words sank in, and though she loved the idea, it seemed impossible. "You might be right." She scrutinized the tables overflowing with casseroles and platters. "I think you're definitely right about the food. I see people heading that way."

Angie looked again. "Then we should round up everyone, I suppose."

"Can I help?"

"I was thinking about inviting El to sit with us." Angie gestured toward his house. "Do you mind asking him?"

"Not at all." She bounded from the chair and retraced her steps toward El's front yard. As she approached, Doug crossed the street with a dish, set it on the table and approached her.

"Hi." He gave her a hangdog look. "I'm afraid I hadn't been very welcoming when Mr. Barnes introduced us." He tucked his hands into his pockets again.

Was that a nervous habit or a way of binding his hands to keep them out of mischief? She grimaced at her thought. "You're forgiven. What's in your dish?"

A faint grin curved his full lips and she spotted a different side of him emerging. "Baked beans. You know. I open a can, pour them into a casserole, add a dash of Worcestershire sauce, dice up onions and cocktail wieners and bake. It's one of my limited bachelor dishes."

Her pulse skipped, wondering how this nice-looking man escaped getting caught up in wedding bells. She often wished she'd made a wiser choice. "I don't think marriage is for everyone."

His eyes narrowed slightly until he shrugged. "Maybe, but in my case life got in the way, I suppose."

Digesting his words, she realized life had got in her way, too. “And you have Kimmy to care for. You must be a special uncle.”

“Not really. Love motivates.” He looked downward as if embarrassed. “Speaking of Kimmy, I hope she’s at Angie’s. I forgot the beans and went inside for a few minutes.” He shrugged.

“She was playing ringtoss in the front yard.”

He craned his neck to check for himself. “She’s in good hands. When you go back would you ask her to come home? It looks about time to eat.”

“Sure will.” She turned toward El, noticing he had a card table sitting with two chairs on his front lawn.

El smiled as she arrived.

“Angie asked me to invite you down to her table to eat.”

He gave her a wink. “Tell her thanks, but I’ve already made plans with Birdie. Angie’ll understand.”

“Birdie?”

He grinned as if she were in on a joke.

“Okay, I’ll tell her. See you later.” She headed back to Angie’s, curious about El’s sudden friendship to Birdie.

When she told Angie, her eyes widened like a full moon. “You are kidding.”

“No. He said you’d understand.” She anticipated an explanation, but Angie only stared at her with her mouth agape.

Finally Angie chuckled. “Birdie has been one of those neighbors everyone’s tried to ignore.” She released a long breath. “But you realize El has a loving heart. One day, he asked me to befriend her because he suspected part of her problem was loneliness.”

“He asked you?”

“Me.” Angie rolled her eyes.

“Why?”

She shrugged.

“I’m not sure since I was the one who called her a gossip. I felt ashamed, but I did it because he asked. I baked cookies, of all things, and went to visit, but she wasn’t home. I praised the Lord for the reprieve.”

Nina couldn’t help her chuckle. “And then what?”

“Birdie appeared at my door a couple days later saying she’d heard I’d been snooping around. When I told her why I’d come, she actually apologized in her own way, and softened a bit. She even had a bounce to her step when she left.” She lifted her shoulders. “Maybe she’s been thinking about her behavior and realizes she’s chasing people away rather than making friends. I have no idea but something happened.”

“Good for you.”

“Have you met Rema?”

Nina checked the direction of Angie’s gaze and spotted a woman heading their way. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Then it’s time you two meet.” Angie flagged her over. “I thought you were missing the party?”

“No, I goofed. I thought my casserole was warming in the oven.” She shook her head. “But I’d forgotten to turn it on.” She lifted the cover. “I hope I’m not too late.”

“People have just begun to eat.” Angie motioned toward Nina. “Rema, I don’t think you officially met Nina Jerome.”

Nina extended her hand, and then recalled Rema was holding a heavy casserole so she let her hand drop. “I’m glad to meet you.”

Angie rested her hand on Rema’s shoulder. “If you have no other plans, please join us. We have lots of room here.” She motioned to the picnic bench and the long table she’d butted up next to it.

“No plans. I’m just being neighborly.” She gave a shrug. “Thanks for the invitation.” She tilted her head toward the food. “I’d better get this to the table before everyone’s eaten.” She turned and hurried down the street.

Nina eyed the food line and spotted Doug standing alone in front of his house. A lonely feeling crept through her. She’d been doing the same thing since Todd had turned his back on her. Alone. Her memory kicked in, and she snapped her finger. “Doug asked me to tell Kimmy to go home so she can eat.”

Angie eyed the line and then turned toward Rick. “Time to eat.” She pointed down the street.

Carly bounded across the grass with Kimmy on her heels. “Can Kimmy eat with us? We have room.” She gestured to the long folding table.

Angie looked down the road. “Kimmy, you need to ask your uncle Doug first. If he says yes, tell him we have plenty of room at our table and he’s invited, too. I don’t want him eating alone. Okay?”

Kimmy nodded, and Carly jumped in on the task.

Angie grinned. “Okay, you can both go, but wait down there. We’re going to get in line, too.”

“I’ll go with them.” Before Angie responded, Nina followed behind the children. As she neared Doug, she scrutinized him in a way she hadn’t before. When they met earlier, she’d noticed his good looks but not his physique. He had to be nearly six feet with a lean waist and a great set of shoulders. She liked his executive haircut that seemed to have a mind of its own.

Doug stood as she neared, and she hoped he hadn’t noticed her steady gaze. By the time she arrived, the girls had already given him the invitation.

“I’m sorry, Doug. I almost forgot to deliver your message, but here she is.” She chuckled, hoping he would smile. “You might as well join us.”

He hesitated, a thoughtful expression growing.

“I’m sitting with them, too. Makes it more of a party.”

“Please, Uncle Doug.” Kimmy’s plaintive urging did the trick.

“Why not?” He shrugged, and again his hands vanished into his pockets.

Nerves or a habit? She longed to know which.

When Angie arrived, the kids joined her, and then she and Doug fell into line.

When Nina spotted Doug’s baked beans, she took a big spoonful and he gave her a smile. Surprised, she grinned back, liking that he’d finally let her see a new side of him. The man was too attractive to not smile. She completed her plate with a slab of ham, but chuckled when the girls headed for the hot dogs. Kids and hot dogs.

“I’ll check out desserts later.” She tilted her head toward the array of goodies and maneuvered her way back to Angie’s table with Doug’s smile the sweetest treat of all.

* * *

Doug stared at his plate, wishing his appetite would return. He’d become overwhelmed by too many things. He’d always been a responsible person, sure of his decisions and able to roll with the punches. Not lately. He’d weighed the reasons, and the best answer he found was Roseanne’s accident and feeling unprepared to be a temporary father figure. Though he could handle a multifaceted career, he had no idea how parents kept up with a child’s energy and needs. No wonder he’d hesitated looking for a wife.

He looked at Nina. Something about her captured him. Although nice looking, she wasn’t a woman most men would call beautiful, yet he saw a kind of beauty. He admired her long wavy hair, the color of a chestnut, sort of brown with hints of red. She tied it back, and he longed to see it flowing around her shoulders. Her eyes tilted downward, and though she held a direct gaze, something in her eyes seemed haunting. She had an appeal that went deeper than physical beauty.

Delving his fork into pasta salad, he stopped his musing. Women hadn’t penetrated his hardened mind for years, so why now? His job kept him busy, and he’d always tried to be there for his sister, whose life hadn’t been the smoothest. And then sweet Kimmy. That broke his heart.

He swallowed hard, forcing the pasta down his throat and following it with a long drink of iced tea.

“You’re quiet.”

Nina had leaned close enough for him to smell her fragrance, like fresh-picked fruit. “Sorry.” He managed a grin. “My mind got tangled somewhere. I think in your scent. You took me away to an orchard. I could almost hear birds singing.” A flush grew on his cheeks. “Sorry, I got carried away.”

Nina grinned. “It was a lovely compliment.” She paused while a question flickered in her eyes. “What kind of birds?”

He laughed and it felt odd. “I’ll have to think about that.”

When she chuckled, his spirit lifted. How long had it been since he’d really laughed?

Though they had been talking drivel, his shoulders had eased, and a good feeling rolled through him. He glanced toward Kimmy to make sure she was behaving. But he had no need to worry. She and Carly were talking and giggling like old friends. “I’m glad the girls have each other. I moved here at a terrible time. I’d thought Roseanne would be back by the time moving day arrived, but with the accident...” He shook his head.

“Kimmy seems to have adjusted well. You’re, apparently, doing a good job.”

“I’ve misled you if you think that. Every day was a struggle until Carly came along. I was trying to balance my work hours with child care hours. Can you imagine my telling her bedtime stories?”

“I can.” Her grin broadened. “You have a nice speaking voice, and I’m sure you can read.” She added a wink. “And, most of all, you love her. I can tell.”

His cheeks warmed with her compliment. “Thanks. I do love her.”

“You’ll make a good dad one day.”

Her comment addled him, and not knowing what to say, he changed the subject. “What brought you to Owosso?”

“I work in public relations, and I was tired of traffic and high-priced apartment rentals. I couldn’t afford a house in the city. So when I learned we had a branch in Owosso, and I could transfer, I jumped at the chance. Home prices are much better here. Payments are less than my apartment.”

“I found that to be true, too. But do you like small town living?”

“I’ve only been here a few weeks, but I think I do. It’s friendly. Have you ever had a block party in downtown Chicago? Or Detroit?”

He chuckled, but before he responded, Angie’s voice cut through their prattle.

“What are you two laughing about?”

“The weather.” Nina grinned. “About apartments in the city versus owning a home out here.”

Angie’s fiancé, Rick, nodded. “I’m with you on that one. Not so much the price but the space and freedom. Carly loves the yard. My apartment doesn’t have one.”

Angie rose. “Anyone ready for refills?”

Rick eyed the girls. “More food, ladies, or dessert?”

Kimmy bounced beside him. “Me, too, Uncle Doug?”

After he gave her permission, Angie and Rick left for the food table with the girls while he and Nina stayed behind, making small talk, but he enjoyed it. For so long he’d feared that a woman might think he was coming on to her and not just being friendly. But Nina had a way about her that gave him no worries that she was looking for romance.

More at ease, he returned to their discussion. “I’m guessing our places are similar. Mine has three bedrooms and a good-sized dining room.” He doubted she cared, and he disliked small talk, too, but that’s all he could come up with.

“Mine’s similar. Would you like to see it?”

“Sure, but let me check on Kimmy first.” He rose and spotted Angie returning with the girls. “Will you keep an eye on Kimmy for a few minutes? I’m going—”

“No problem.” She flashed a playful wink. “Have fun.”

Nina arched an eyebrow. “It’s only... Never mind.” She brushed her words away and rose. “We don’t need to explain, do we?”

“Not at all.” He enjoyed her lighthearted spirit and joined her on the sidewalk, heading to her home. Though he’d passed her house often, he’d never really noticed its homey look. It had a porch on half of the front and the other side, an overhung alcove with attractive wide windows. His home lacked the warmth and was more streamlined. Too much like him. “It has a friendly feel, Nina. Like you.”

“Me?” Her voice rose. “I’m just boring.”

“To yourself maybe, but not to me.” Hearing his honesty startled him.

“Thank you, Doug.” Her stunned expression set him back.

She opened the door, and they stepped inside. “This is the living room, naturally.”

The size surprised him. “It’s like a great room. I like the corner fireplace.”

She didn’t comment. “Dining room.” She made a sweeping gesture.

He slipped his hands into his pockets, uneasy that he had no awareness of what she was thinking. He noted the wide archway added even more space to the already-large living area.

Nina gestured to the doorway leading from the dining room. “And the kitchen.”

She stepped inside and he followed, noting numerous cabinets but minimal counter space and a pair of folding doors. “Is this a pantry?”

“I wish.” She folded back the doors to expose a washer and dryer. “This is my laundry room.” She gave a shrug. “No basement.”

“Mine is a small room off the kitchen.” He leaned his back against a counter and studied her a moment. “You have lots of room for one person. Are you anticipating finding someone to share it with?” He cringed. Why not just ask if she was engaged or dating someone?

“I’m not anticipating anything.” Her tone had an edge. “I like the space.”

He wanted to undo the damage. “You never know about the future.”

A frown shot to her face. “No marriage plans in my future, if that’s what you mean. None. Not interested.”

He drew back, wishing he’d kept his mouth shut. “I’m sorry, Nina. That sounded crude and too nosy. I have no plans at the moment, either. Once Kimmy’s back with her mom, it’s just me. That was an ignorant comment.”

Her frown faded, replaced by an unreadable expression. “Doug, I’ve been married once. I don’t think it’s meant for me. Once is enough.”

Though he reacted as if he understood, her sharp response sent a sliver of disappointment through his chest and left him even more curious.

“Back to the tour.” She strode through the kitchen doorway to a short hallway on the opposite side of the house. “Three bedrooms. Right now the smallest is sort of an office with my computer and some exercise equipment. The middle size is a guest room.” She raised her eyebrows. “Now all I need are guests. And the master bedroom is large and faces the back with a walk-in closet and master bath.”

She didn’t step inside but raced through her descriptions, gesturing as he glanced into the three rooms. Her manner had changed since he’d stupidly asked the personal question about her future plans. He’d messed up, but then he’d done that before. He mumbled something about the attractive rooms and watched her edge toward the front door.

Obviously she wanted out of the situation. He decided to give her a solution. “Thanks for the tour. I should get back to Kimmy.”

She didn’t say a word but headed for the door.

He followed her into the great room. “You have a nice place here, Nina.”

She only nodded and opened the front door.

His chest constricted. He had no doubt this was the end of their amiable relationship. And he knew it was for the best. He had nothing to offer except his preoccupation with his sister’s horrible situation and Kimmy’s needs. Then he had his own feelings, ones he disliked more than he wanted

to face. *Inadequacy* had never been a word in his life until now. But when he'd opened his mouth to repair the damage he couldn't even put a patch on it until he got himself and his head in the right place. Obviously a repair job was pointless. He'd made a mess of it, and of all things, he liked her.

Chapter Two

Despite her declaration to remain uninvolved, Doug's image dangled in Nina's thoughts like a mule's carrot. His smile, his lost look, his fleeting glances rolled into a tempting nugget in her imagination. She opened her computer to occupy her mind with something other than Doug but when she stared at the monitor, her mind segued back to the block party. For someone who could evaluate promotional programs and manage entire brands, she failed when it came to her own life.

Spending the morning with her thoughts spinning motivated her to break down the steps she used in her work to evaluate her own needs and goals. But the big question was how? How did she look with fresh eyes and see anything that wasn't tangled in her past?

She scooted her chair back and rose. Why did she waste time reliving her last conversation with Doug? She'd got in a huff, and when he left her house, she'd ushered him to the front door without a kind word, and the poor guy had no idea why. And she couldn't explain it, either. Yes, he'd brought up a bad time, but that had been years earlier. Nothing could be done, so why dwell on it?

She strode to the kitchen and poured coffee into a cup. The strong odor curled her nose so she poured it out, rinsed the cup and found a tea bag. Microwaves came in handy for a single cup of tea. Waiting, she opened the sliding door and gazed into the yard. Even though the season was late, she'd wanted to add some perennials that would come up next year. Angie's yard looked lovely with fall blossoms.

The buzzer sounded, and she headed back to her makeshift office with her cup of tea. Yet the tea didn't help, either. Her mind flew from one idea for a client to the block party. She'd met a few neighbors, saying hello or responding with "Yes, I'm new on the block," but still it was a beginning. She especially enjoyed meeting El. He embodied a rare spirit filled with wit, kindness and wisdom.

El had an innocence about him—a man who trusted his instinct and didn't question his decision to be friendly or look for motivation. That's where she had failed. Any question that delved too deeply into her personal hang-ups or sorrows invaded her comfort level and she assumed the person was nosy or prying. Doug's question had been general not probing.

Draining the last of her tea, she rose and set the empty cup in the kitchen, grabbed her house key and stepped outside. The quiet of the street spilled over her, as empty as her teacup. The block party had resounded with voices, children laughing and music playing on a speaker somewhere. A few people had danced in the circular area of the street.

How long had it been since she'd danced? Forever. She recalled Doug saying life had got in his way. She stood on her sidewalk, her eyes closed for a moment, picturing the friendly atmosphere of the Friday block party.

As she walked, she spotted El sitting on a wooden glider in his front yard. Though she regretted not having a treat to offer him, she headed that way. Flowers bloomed in his flower beds, and she wanted to ask about them. Maybe he could offer her ideas on what would be good to plant this time of year.

Thoughts returned again on her rudeness to Doug. She'd startled him as well as herself. Nearing El's, she realized her motivation for coming was feeling alone. El had mentioned loneliness once, and today it overwhelmed her, a strange emotion with no solution other than to seek company. For years, she'd avoided company after Todd left, saying she didn't care.

Her heart skipped as she neared Doug's house. His car sat back in the driveway signaling he was home, but she saw no sign of him. She should be relieved to avoid a confrontation, but instead, a guilty sting burned through her. She'd behaved terribly.

El saw her coming and raised his hand in greeting. She waved back, glad for the distraction. As she stepped onto his lawn, he rose, planting his feet on the ground while hoisting himself from the glider without losing his balance.

He grinned. “How are you this fine Sunday?”

She nodded at his welcome and ambled toward him, hoping to look casual and not unnerved. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“Couldn’t ask the Lord for better.”

The reference helped her understand El’s ways. He lived by the rules that people of the church took for granted. She’d known a few things about faith once, but she’d let her curiosity die. Had her divorce triggered her hopelessness? She couldn’t recall what ended her interest. Yet she sometimes envied those who had faith. They lived with the philosophy that life never ended. This world was only a stepping stone to something better. The idea that life held more than the here and now, though strange, had a comfortable ring to it. A spark warmed her again.

El patted the seat on the swing. “Join me a minute.” He grasped the arm and sank back onto the slats.

With her growing curiosity, she did as he suggested and sank beside him. “You have pretty flowers, El.” She twisted on her hip to face him. “You don’t mind that I call you El?”

“Mind.” He tossed his head back with a chuckle. “That’s my name, and I’m hanging on to it.”

He made her grin. “Okay, then. In case you forgot, I’m Nina.”

“Pretty name. I wouldn’t forget that one.” He gave her arm a pat. “Thank you for mentioning the flowers. My wife always urged me to plant flowers. I was smart enough to learn that urging was one of those things that women did rather than just demand their husbands do it.”

This time she chuckled. “Did your wife have favorite flowers?”

“She sure did. She loved the ones that came up year after year. That’s mainly what you’re looking at—daisies, coneflowers, asters, and those purple ones are called catmint. I added a few geraniums. They’re faithful flowers, growing in nearly every environment.” He winked. “They’re not fussy.”

“That’s one of the few flowers I know by name. But now I recognize the white daisies.”

“Coneflowers are the colorful ones there.” He pointed to a bed of daisy-like blossoms. “Pretty things in so many colors.”

“I want to do some planting. I have a few clumps of flowers in the front. I’m not sure what they are, but...” She relaxed against the seat back. “I finally have my new house organized.” She eyed him. “Sort of.”

He chuckled, his gaze washing across her face as if he had questions but didn’t ask.

“How did your meal go with Birdie on Friday?”

“Fine. I think she appreciated the company and that I accepted her invitation.” He chuckled again. “She asked if we could eat together, but she didn’t have a table or chairs. That means she sort of urged me to ask her.” His eyes glinted with his joke before he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, hands woven together. “Birdie’s been standoffish until recently. That’s a lonely life for a woman who still has years to enjoy each day.”

His words swept over her. “To be honest, El, I’ve been somewhat that way, too.”

He nodded while a faint crooked grin grew on his face. “I sensed that, Nina. You know, whatever happened in your past is just that. It’s passed. Ahead of you is a future, but you have to participate in it.” He stopped and shook his head. “This is just ramblings of an old man, but sometimes I see things and...” He sat a moment his head hanging. “I see you and sense you have regrets and sorrows that you’re clinging to. Ask yourself if they’re worth it.”

Worth it? Though his first words rankled, she forced herself to listen, and a sense of possibility hung over her, nebulous but there.

“Please forgive me. How you live your life is none of my business. Birdie got in trouble nosing around other people’s lives, and I’m doing the same thing.”

She touched his arm and squeezed. “El, you’re not a gossip. You’re not spreading rumors. You’re talking to me like a father might. That’s something I never had.” The admission spilled ice water through her body. “You’re right. I had a bad marriage, and I have other issues that formed my judgment. Marrying again is basically not a possibility. I guess the reality makes me a little empty...and what you just said. Lonely.”

“Nothing could be so bad it stops you from falling in love again. Are you sure marriage is out of the question?”

His tender look rent her heart. “I’m sure. I’m sorry, but I don’t want to talk about it. I know how I feel, and I think that’s how it will be.” Without warning, her gaze flashed back down the block toward Doug’s. Her pulse skipped when she spotted him outside with Kimmy.

“Then I’ll pray for you to find an answer to your problem, Nina. Do you pray?”

His question stopped her. She almost felt ashamed to answer him. “I’ve never learned to pray.”

“You don’t learn it, Nina. What are we doing right now?”

She eyed him, trying to decipher what he meant. Thoughts surged. They had talked about the flowers, her attitude toward marriage. “We’ve talked about a lot of things.”

“Yes. That’s it.”

“That’s it?” Her head spun. “Talking?”

“Yep. Prayer is just talking to God. Tell Him about your day. Ask Him for answers to your questions. Thank Him for His blessings. And then listen.”

“Listen? That’s the thing about prayer I don’t understand. God doesn’t speak. They say He’s there. You know, sort of like the wind is there. We can’t see it, but we feel it or we can see what it does.”

“Yep, you got it. You can’t see Him, but you can feel Him if you open your heart, but then that takes trust.”

“It’s hard to trust something or someone you don’t know.” She brushed a curl from her face.

“But it’s not impossible. Think about things that you trust even though you don’t know why or don’t have the details. You trust your employer will pay you. Why? Because he said he would.”

She shook her head. That was a given. Wasn’t it? Maybe not. “You trust the sun will come up in the morning. Even if it’s behind a cloud, you know it’s there.”

“But that’s nature. It’s always been that way.”

“So has God, Nina. He was there before the sun was made.”

A frown wrenched her face even though she tried to stop it.

“Do you have a Bible?”

Her back tensed. “No.”

“I have Margie’s. I think she’d like you to have it.”

“Margie?”

“My wife’s name. Marjorie. Most people called her Marge, but she was always Margie to me.” A tender sweetness spread across his face.

The look touched her. “El, I couldn’t take your wife’s Bible.”

“Why? She doesn’t need it, Nina. She’s sitting up there listening to the Lord, and He tells her all she needs to know. She’s in her glory.” He chuckled. “In her glory in Glory.” He nodded as if he’d settled on an agreement with himself.

“But it’s precious to you. A keepsake.”

“It’s more precious to me if someone’s using it.” He shifted on the seat, causing it to glide back and then forward. “Now I know you’re not a Bible reader, but if you have questions or if you’re curious, you can check the concordance and look up the exact topic you’d like to know about.”

“You mean an index?”

He pushed himself forward again but this time he rose. “You can call it that. It’s right inside. Hang on a minute.”

Before she could react, he headed toward the house on a mission. She'd never seen him move so fast. She lowered her head, sorting through all that had happened. Somehow she'd moved from flowers to faith without knowing how. Maybe that was one of those God things people talked about.

Guilt rattled up her spine. If she took his Bible, realizing she had little choice, what would make her read it? The possibility wavered over her.

"Here you go."

She jerked, unaware El had returned.

He extended the worn-looking Bible, and not knowing how to refuse, she grasped it. Hoping to make him happy, she opened it to the back and flipped through the topics with verses listed underneath—hardship, loyalty, prayer. She turned the pages back. Faith. She eyed the long row of verses. The first she spotted was Matthew 17:22. She eyed the preview. *He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth..."* The example stopped her cold. What? What was the truth?

"Is something wrong, Nina?"

She drew her head upward. "No. Not at all. I was thinking, I guess."

"Nothing wrong with that. I'm not rushing you. You have God's Word in your hands if you have any questions, and though I don't have all the answers, you're always welcome to ask me anything."

She rose, clutching the book, and gathered her wits. "Thank you, El. And I feel bad taking your—"

"It's an honor, Nina. Margie is smiling in heaven." His face brightened. "I know she's smiling."

How could she refuse his generous gift? "Thank you, El. May I kiss your cheek?"

"I'd love that, Nina."

She leaned forward and pressed her lips on his soft cheek. "Thank you for everything. I'll take your flower advice, and I promise... I'll keep the book handy. I'm sure one day—"

"I'm sure you will." His smile broadened. "I'm anxious to see those flowers, too."

The best part for now was the flowers. She was anxious to get to a nursery. Most plants were probably on sale, she hoped, and she'd save money as well as adorn her flower beds.

Hope. That had been a rare word in her vocabulary, but El's certainty that she would read the Bible made her grin. That was hope. And she had faith, too, but different. If she planted flowers in the fall, she had faith they would blossom in the spring or summer.

She tucked the Bible under her arm and headed down the sidewalk, aware that Doug and Kimmy were on the other side. Although her mind was as ragged as it had been when she stepped outside, a sense of peace had sneaked into her being. Though it would be short-lived, something about El gave her a sense of security and hope. Hope? She'd had so little, but today she had a touch of it.

As she drew closer to Doug, her peace sank into confusion. She could hardly ignore him, but what could she say? She marched along, wishing he wouldn't notice her.

* * *

Doug sat on a porch step keeping an eye on Kimmy working on her first school project collecting bugs. Offering science classes seemed a little early for second graders. But what did he know? He shook his head, hoping Kimmy didn't get stung or bit by something, but her search was in the name of homework so he didn't say a word.

Trying to be a good father-type for Kimmy, he usually joined her in projects, but today his thoughts weighted him down. He'd done something to upset Nina. His questions had been too personal for her, he guessed. Something...

When he looked up, his heart stopped. Nina appeared across the street like a vision, but he knew she was real. Her long hair hung to her shoulders in waves. It fluttered in the breeze, and he longed to brush it from her cheek. He faltered, unsure of what he wanted to do.

When she glanced his way, he raised his hand, a natural instinct that he hadn't monitored. Anticipating she'd ignore his greeting, his chest constricted when she crossed the street. Though curious where she'd been, he wouldn't ask. That question could be too personal, also.

“I noticed you outside with Kimmy. How are you?”

He wanted to tell her he was confused, but he changed his answer to something safe. “Good. The weather motivated me to come outside.”

She strode up to Kimmy. “What are you looking for?”

“Bugs.” She grinned.

“Bugs. Hmm? Any special reason or are you just curious?”

“School started and I’m in the second grade.”

“Second grade. And you have to find bugs.” Nina tilted her head.

“Homework.” Kimmy’s face glowed. “It’s for our science class.”

“Did you find any ladybugs?” Nina looked at the insects in Kimmy’s jar.

“Those ones who fly away home ’cuz their house is on fire?”

The girl’s face lit with a smile, and Nina grinned. “I’m sure those are the ones.”

Kimmy shook her head. “I only found two ants, a fly and something with lots of legs.” She held up her jar with air holes punched in the lid.

“I have ladybugs at my house. They like flowers, and even though I have only a few blossoms, I see insects there.”

Doug watched, amazed at Nina’s lighthearted banter with no hint of anger. Still, she was talking with Kimmy, not him. But she’d stopped by and that was something.

“Uncle Doug, can I go to Nina’s and get some ladybugs?” She gave him a beseeching look.

He couldn’t hold back his grin. “I don’t want to hinder research. I suppose you can if Nina doesn’t mind.”

Nina tousled Kimmy’s hair. “Come down whenever you’d like. I’m home for the evening.”

He opened his mouth but sat speechless.

“Doug.” Nina closed the distance and sat beside him, running her fingers through her hair. “I owe you an apology. I’m sorry for the way I acted on Friday.”

“You don’t owe me—”

“I owe you respect and friendship. You’ve been kind, and I enjoyed your company until my fortress rose to shield me. It does that sometimes without my realizing it. You didn’t deserve to be treated that way.”

Although her fortress aroused his curiosity, relief flooded him, and he released a strangled breath. “Thank you. I don’t need to forgive you, but I will. We all let our protective devices appear sometimes. I’ve done it myself. You know I question my ability with...” He feared Kimmy would hear her name so he tilted his head. “I would love to have confidence in my parenting skills. Women seem to have those built in.”

Nina’s crooked grin preceded her head shake. “We are frightened, too, Doug. Women know they’re supposed to have inborn motherly instincts, but that’s a myth. We cover up our worries and plow ahead. We read books and ask friends who won’t think we’re silly. In a way, it’s like anything new. We do the best we can. Whatever you’ve done, Doug, has been right from all I see. Kimmy seems happy and healthy. You can’t ask for more.”

As if she’d heard her name, Kimmy came skipping toward them. “Can we go now?”

“We have company, my girl.”

“But we can take her along.” She beckoned to them.

Nina grinned. “Thank you for inviting me to join you.”

Missing the point, Kimmy gave her a big smile. “You’re welcome.”

He gulped down his chuckle and patted Nina’s hand. “Sorry. I think it takes a few years for a sense of humor to develop.”

“It’s funnier that way.” Nina rose and extended her hand. “Friends.”

“Positively.”

“Good. Now I’d better go home since I’m expecting company.” She stepped toward Kimmy, but he stopped her.

“What’s in your hand?”

She glanced down as if she’d forgotten.

“It looks like a—”

“Bible.” She took a step closer. “It was El’s wife’s. He wanted me to have it since I don’t own one.”

His back straightened. “Did you mind?”

She shook her head. “I would expect nothing less from him. He lives his faith. I’ve never learned what that is, and I suppose he thought he would help me understand.”

He didn’t know what to say so he just gave a nod.

“I’ll see you later, right?”

“For sure. Kimmy has her heart set on it.” So did he.

Nina gave a wave and returned to Kimmy’s side. She gave her a pat and whispered something in her ear before heading home.

He watched her go, both relieved and confused. He couldn’t be happier to see her with the Bible, and he prayed she would look inside and grow in faith. He should do the same with all his doubts and worries. And maybe his new concern was one of those useless worries. Though something about Nina was lovely and intriguing, something else still blocked her from living fully. That’s what he sensed, and it saddened him.

Chapter Three

Kimmy skipped along the sidewalk and paused when she reached Nina’s. Doug caught up and faced the house, hoping his big mouth didn’t result in another problem as it had at the block party. Though she’d apologized, he realized his question about the possibility of someone living with her had been blunt. Rude, really. It had been none of his business. On top of that, his ulterior motive was also inappropriate. Why not just ask if she were seeing someone? Or was that also blunt? Women confused him.

“Come on, Uncle Doug.” Kimmy skipped halfway up the front walk and beckoned to him.

Before he took a step, Kimmy had already turned her attention to a few clumps of flowers in the beds along the house. He gazed at her creeping around the leaves, loving her curiosity and eagerness to do homework, hoping her attitude would last a lifetime. Having a good work ethic helped a career. He shook his head, realizing how far in the future he’d gone. Instead he should focus on his own future.

“Coming in?”

He faced Nina standing in the doorway. “Stay right here, Kimmy, and then let me know when you’ve finished.

Nina swung the door wider, and again he wished he had a larger living room. When he stepped in, she motioned toward the sofa, her only seating besides the recliner.

Still in the doorway, Nina leaned out. “The door’s open, Kimmy. Come in when you’re done.”

His senses heightened. “Something smells delicious.”

“Good.” She turned from the door. “I’m making enough for all of us, but it’ll be a while. It’s in a slow cooker. Are you starving?”

Even if he was, he wouldn’t admit it. He shook his head.

“Good.” She sank into her recliner. “I thought if I have leftovers, I’d take them to El later tonight so he will have a surprise home-cooked dinner.”

Doug couldn’t imagine having home-cooked meals delivered to his door. His own simple recipes didn’t thrill him. “You’re a good person, Nina.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Thanks. I wish—”

What did she wish? His mouth opened, then closed. He had to learn not to ask questions or make comments. She'd made it clear her life and problems were not up for discussion. "We ate lunch before we came so we're good." His eyes shifted from her to the Bible beside her.

Nina studied him, as if noticing his distraction. "You asked about the Bible earlier." She rested her hand on the black leather book sitting on the table. "I'm not a religious person. Never brought up that way." She shrugged. "El must have thought I needed to take a look. I couldn't say no, but it's all rather difficult for me."

She looked away a moment, and though he sensed he should respond, he was at a loss for words.

"I will admit that El had some solid attitudes about God and faith. Things I'll ponder, I think."

"Faith is different for each person. I think it happens in its own way. I grew up in a home where church was a normal Sunday activity. I went to Sunday school and sometimes the adult services. I believe, but even I find it easy to skip church sometimes, especially since I moved. I need to look for a home church." A rivulet of guilt ran through him. "I've passed so many here in Owosso. I think there's one on every other corner." Though he chuckled, his discomfort didn't fade. "I try to go most Sundays when I have a church family."

"Family?" She shrugged.

"It feels like a family and it's a meaningful break in the week."

"I imagine it is. Music and readings. Those things can draw a mind away from day-to-day troubles." She patted the Bible and pulled her hand away as if it had burned her. "Any news from Kimmy's mom?"

He drew his focus from the Bible to Nina, noting a look of discomfort on her face. "I talked with her yesterday." A pang of sadness whipped through him, mixed with concern. "She's in therapy now, but I don't think she can stay by herself yet even if she comes home. It sounded as if she'll go into an inpatient rehabilitation facility for physical and occupational therapy before they release her." His throat caught as he absorbed the issues continuing to grow. "Our mother lives a number of miles away but she wouldn't be much help, and I work every day."

"I'm sure a facility would be the best for her, Doug. She'll get good treatment." She searched his face, her own growing taut before she glanced out the window. "Doug, you've never mentioned Kimmy's father. Is he anywhere in the picture?"

His mood darkened. "Never. He's never seen Kimmy. I don't know if he ever knew about her. Roseanne never talks about him."

"She'd never married or—?"

"That's right. She took a chance, and Kimmy happened. She won't talk about it so I don't know a thing about him."

"That's hard." She appeared thoughtful. "Does Kimmy ever ask about him?"

He shrugged, hoping to hide his dark feelings. "I guess she has but Roseanne concocted some story. I think she said he died."

"One day when she's older Kimmy will want details. How he died. When? Did he love her? All those things we all want to know about our parents."

"I agree, but Roseanne only shakes her head and ignores me. She'll do what's right when Kimmy's older, I hope."

"I think she will. Truth from a mother with her child is important."

Letting the subject fade seemed his best move, and he gazed out the window and a grin broke the tension. "Kimmy's chasing something in one of the bushes."

Nina craned her neck to look outside "She seems to be doing well. She's adjusted. It's better for her to stay with you." Nina looked away a moment. "And you know, Doug, Kimmy's a bright little girl, and I fear she might feel too much responsibility and even guilt if she went home with her mother still needing care. I don't suppose you want to hear that."

“I’ve thought about that, too.” He forced his eyes to stay connected with hers. “But I’m worried how to work it out. I can’t take a leave, Nina. It’s not feasible. Yet I’m the only one Roseanne can count on.”

“I wish I had the answers.” A distant look filled her eyes, but then she brightened. “I realize we’ve only met, but she’s a sweet girl and... I’d be willing to help in any way I can.”

Her concern for Kimmy touched him, and he wondered why she didn’t have children, but he knew better than to even hint at the question. “I’m sure you’re right, and thanks for your offer.”

The subject weighed on him, and he opened his mind to allow another thought to slip from his memory. “Isn’t Angie and Rick’s wedding soon? I overheard something on Friday. For a while, I thought they were already married, but obviously they’re not. He always goes home at night.”

Nina laughed. “They’re ones who follow their religion, I think.” She shook her head. “But that’s wise.”

She quieted again, and he wished they could recapture the easy, casual relationship they’d had when they first met.

Finally she broke the silence. “I was surprised when I received a wedding invitation. We’ve only known each other a short time, but we clicked, I guess. I like Angie and Rick. Carly’s a doll, too. She’ll be their flower girl.”

“I thought flower girls were toddlers who cry and run back to their moms.”

She laughed. “Sometimes, yes, but this is a wonderful way to include her in the ceremony.”

“It is. I was being silly.” He grinned, glad his remark had broken the tension.

She studied him for a moment. “Do you get upset by personal questions?”

He managed to lasso his laugh, recalling her idiosyncrasy. “Not usually, but I’d say it depends on what kind of personal question.”

She sent him a half grin and glanced out the window again. “I know you’re single, but I can’t help but wonder why.”

“I ask myself the same question. I mentioned once that life got in the way. And there’s truth to that. My dad was ill for a long time, and I did what I could to help my parents. Mom wasn’t that healthy either, and Dad needed to be lifted or helped to stand. He lost both legs to diabetes.” Those horrible days resurfaced, bringing pain with them. “Dad was a man’s man. Wouldn’t listen to my mom or the doctor’s warnings. He thought he could beat all illnesses, but he couldn’t. Strange how we do that, isn’t it? We know what’s best, but we ignore it.”

Her face darkened a moment, and he feared he’d done it again. “Nina, I’m sorry if I—”

She held up her hand. “No. It wasn’t what you said. There’s truth to that. I’ve been bitter for years over my failed marriage, and yet when you said we know what’s best but we ignore it, it struck home. The divorce was probably for the best under the circumstances.”

Questions flew to his tongue but again he refrained from uttering even a small question. Her marriage seemed to cause the last bugaboo, and he’d already spilled out too much of his life. He forgot they were virtual strangers. They’d met a short time ago, and yet it seemed as if it had been forever.

She eyed him as if wondering why he’d become silent.

He buried his question. “It’s good sometimes to look back with fresh eyes. I think with most things, time clears our heads and we can face things differently. We let the blame go and focus on the result or the possibilities.”

“Possibilities. That’s sort of like hope, isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is.” He dragged his fingers through his hair. “I still hold out hope that one day in the near future I’ll find the right person.” What had he said? His mouth flapped without control. He’d spent much of his life preoccupied with everyone but himself. Where had those feelings come from?

And yet he knew. He studied her, admiring her light brown eyes that crinkled when she smiled and her intriguing wavy hair.

“For some people that’s a real hope.” She lifted a finger. “Let me check on the time. I still need to add something to the slow cooker.” She rose and hurried away.

He watched her disappear beyond the door, as if she anticipated another question from him and was dodging it. He wished he could control his mouth and his heart. Nina looked uneasy, and he wished he knew what he could do to make their friendship as relaxed as it had been before.

He rose, perplexed, and wandered to the window, amazed that Kimmy spent so much time and patience in search of bugs. He shook his head. His patience ran amok more times than not. He should learn something from his young niece.

“I’m back.”

He turned and was struck by how lovely Nina was. She walked with an air of confidence, yet she had an amiable aura. Despite her discomfort with personal subjects, she reached out to Kimmy in a sweet manner. That’s what attracted him.

Nina joined him by the window. “I suppose we could go out and look for bugs, too.”

“Or just watch. I don’t want to ruin Kimmy’s fun.”

She chuckled. “Are you one of those men afraid of spiders?”

“I’m not talking.”

With no other comment, she stepped outside to the porch, where two canvas chairs sat on the far end. He settled into one and Nina followed. “What do you do if Kimmy’s sick or if you have to work overtime?”

He drew in a breath, hating to think of those situations. “Thank the Lord, they’ve been rare, but I had to take off work or see if I could get a neighbor to step in for me. In my previous home, I had an older woman close by who usually volunteered. She was a blessing.”

“You know I can often work at home, Doug. If you ever need someone in a pinch—”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that, but thanks for offering. I just pray that she stays healthy, and I can get off work on time. They have a latchkey program at her school so Roseanne had her in that program until she could pick her up. It was only for an hour or so.”

“If you’re sure, but just in case...” She rose and headed into the house.

His jaw sagged at her quick departure. In a moment, she reappeared and handed him a small card. He glanced at it, surprised she had a business card. “I see you’re a public relations consultant. That sounds interesting.”

“That’s why I can work from home at times. It’s a lot of computer work. As long as I get it done and it’s good, that’s all that counts.”

“Can you find me a job like that?” Feeling relief, he sensed their relationship had smoothed out again. He tucked the card into his pocket, pleased to see her cell phone number on it.

“Look, Uncle Doug.”

“I see you found a ladybug.”

“Two of them. Look.”

He slipped his arm around Kimmy and gave her a hug. “Your teacher will be very happy with all the insects you captured.”

Nina glanced at her watch. “I think it’s time to get cleaned up for dinner. The food should be ready soon.”

Doug loved Nina’s manner with Kimmy. He let the two go ahead of him before joining them inside, enveloped in a cozy feeling too often alien to him. The idea of being a family and having children wrapped around his mind and left him with a sense of wholeness. The sensation gave him pause. He’d become too enamored of Nina, and he needed to sort out his feelings. Was it her kindness to Kimmy that brought up these emotions? Or was he truly altering his attitude about relationships...and marriage?

* * *

Nina hit Save on her computer and rose. Her eyes burned from staring at the monitor. She'd worked at home all day, and in the quiet, she'd accomplished one large task for her new client, but she had more to do.

She sank into her easy chair. Though things had gone smoothly on Sunday with Doug, he hadn't contacted her since. Four days had passed with nothing. She'd thought their friendship had solidified with her apology and Doug's positive reaction.

When she lifted the footrest lever, she dropped back and closed her eyes, needing to sort her feelings. The word *friendship* struck her, but something deeper inched into her emotions. Getting involved again frightened her, and she'd set her mind to stay away from even a hint of commitment. Yet, Doug had come along and the idea of companionship cheered her. It aroused a sense of hope that Doug often talked about.

Since she'd moved to Lilac Circle, she had made friends with Angie and El and maybe that was enough. But as soon as she let the thought breathe, she knew the answer. She'd regret it if she and Doug didn't become true friends.

Friends, even good friends, could enjoy each other's company without calling it a date. Going to dinner together, talking on the porch, those were pleasant events without imposing two lives into one. That's what marriage was. The willingness to give of yourself and be one. She could stand on her own without anything more than an enjoyable friendship. The idea sent tension out the window. Good friends. Best friends, maybe. Platonic. That was the word. Platonic friendship. She blew a stream of air from her lungs.

Now to believe it and act on it.

As the friendship idea drifted, Angie's wedding came to mind. Though Angie had addressed it to her and a guest, she had mailed her RSVP indicating she would attend alone. Her shoulders heaved. Being alone at a wedding made her cringe. She would feel like an elderly maiden aunt who was parked in a chair and everyone had fun around her. What could she do to get out of it now? Illness? She could fake that, but it seemed so obvious. Her shoulder twitched again, and she veered her gaze out the window.

When she shifted her eyes, they lit on the bible. Margie's bible. El shouldn't have given it to her. Giving it to someone who would use it made more sense.

Yet her eyes remained on the book, and the verse she'd spotted at El's came to mind. She flipped to the back and turned pages until she spotted the reference, and then searched through the scripture until she found the verses—Matthew 17:20.

He said: "Because you have so little faith, I tell you the truth. If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, "Move from here to there" and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

But who was the He referred to in the verse? She moved her eyes upward and found her answer. Jesus. Jesus said with the tiniest bit of faith nothing was impossible. How could that be? She closed her eyes. A mustard seed was minute, but she couldn't claim to have even that amount of faith.

Her cell phone's ringtone sounded from a distance, and she slipped the Bible onto the table, dropped the footrest and hurried to the computer table in her office. She viewed a number she didn't recognize. It persisted. She hit talk and said hello.

"Nina, this is Doug."

Her heart lurched. "Is something wrong?" Her head spun—how did he have her number? Right, the business card.

"Nothing horrible. I've been asked—that's a nice way to put it—to work overtime tomorrow. I have a meeting in the morning and a huge project to get ready. I hate to ask, but—"

"Doug." Her heart slowed to a trot, knowing Kimmy was fine. "I volunteered. I don't mind. I'm going to the office in the morning and I'll be working at home the rest of the day. Kimmy will be fine with me."

“Are you sure?” The question rang with concern.

“I won’t indulge you with a response.” She cleared her throat with as much drama as she could, hoping he recognized she was teasing him.

“Okay, I get you.” Relief sounded in his tone. “I’ll stop by tonight with the info you’ll need, and I’ll go into the school when I pick her up today and leave your name so they’ll know I sent you.”

“Good, because I don’t want to be arrested for kidnapping.”

He chuckled. “Thanks so much. By the way, I’m sorry I haven’t seen you since Sunday. Once again life happened. I had to spend time with my mother on the phone, and then Kimmy and I went there one evening. She’s having some health issues, and I’m trying to convince her to sell the house and move into an assisted living facility.”

“Any progress?”

“Mom isn’t the easiest to convince. It’s frustrating.”

She recognized the weariness in his voice. “I can imagine, and with her living a distance away, it’s even more complex.”

“Thanks for understanding.” His contrite tone had brightened. “I’ll drop by tonight.”

The conversation ended, and she headed back to the chair, grateful that her work allowed her to spend time at home. And now with Kimmy, it answered Doug’s need. A sense of purpose eased through her as she tilted back in her chair. She closed her eyes while visions of her new life spread around her. She’d see Doug tonight and spend time with Kimmy. What could be better? A platonic relationship seemed perfect.

Hearing the doorbell, Nina dropped the footrest again and bounded from the chair, startled that she’d fallen asleep. Confused, she eyed her watch as she opened the door.

“Hope I didn’t interrupt.” Angie grinned and took a step forward, anticipating being invited in.

“You didn’t.” She shifted back and beckoned Angie inside. “In fact, I’m glad you came.” Nina swung her arm toward the recliner. “I’d fallen asleep in my chair.”

“I’m so sorry I woke you.” Angie frowned. “So what’s stressing you out?”

Angie’s questioning look caused Nina to shake her head. “Nothing. Why would you ask that? My eyes were tired. I’ve been staring at a monitor all day.”

Angie chuckled. “It’s a good excuse.”

Nina ignored the comment and motioned to a chair. “Please have a seat.”

She looked behind her and settled on the edge of the sofa. “I can’t stay long, but I finally got around to checking the RSVPs and I noticed you only put down one person attending.” She tilted her head, her eyes questioning.

“That’s correct. There’s no law, right?” Nina flashed a grin, though uncomfortable with Angie’s reaction. “I’m not dating anyone, and I decided it was easier just to come alone.”

“You can, but it’s more fun when you have a friend with you. Do you like to dance?”

Angie’s question stung. “I used to. It’s been a long time.”

“It’s like riding a bike. You never forget how to do that.”

Her attempt at humor failed. “I’ll keep that in mind if the opportunity arises.”

Angie rose. “I must have sounded pushy, Nina. Forgive me. I would love to see you have fun. I really like you.”

“Thanks.” She stood and rested her hand on Angie’s shoulder. “But I think I’ll come alone.”

“Okay, but...what about Doug? He’s a great guy and a neighbor. If we’d known him better, we might have invited him, too. In fact, there’s your answer.”

Whether she came alone or with someone wouldn’t ruin the wedding reception. “Angie. I’ve already decided that I’m not asking anyone.”

Angie studied her a moment as if ready to rebut. “Okay, if you’re that determined, but I’ll put you down for two just in case.” She gave a one-shoulder shrug and turned toward the door before she wiggled her fingers in a wave. “See you later.”

Exasperation bristled along Nina's arms as she said goodbye and watched her go. Maybe Angie was teasing, but why couldn't she make her own decisions without people pressuring her?

After stepping back through the doorway, she sank into her comfy chair. Bring a date? Angie assumed Doug was the only guy she knew well enough to ask. That was true, but she had never asked anyone for a date, and she wasn't starting now.

She shook her head. As for Doug, she already had concerns about her feelings. Asking him would be truly stupid.

As she tossed herself back, she hit the footrest lever. Maybe she could fall asleep again and awake convinced that Angie's visit was a bad dream.

Who was she kidding?

She closed her eyes, and her senses returned. What was she fighting? Angie hadn't suggested a date. She'd suggested an escort. Friends sometimes did that for friends.

Friends. The word rolled around in her mind. Minutes ago she'd thought the solution had been found. Platonic friends. Then what was the problem? She closed her eyes, releasing a sigh that rattled through her chest. She could fool others but not herself. Having Doug escort her, in reality, tempted her emotions. One day, he would face his own reality and want a family. If she fell in love with Doug, he could walk away as Todd had done when he learned she couldn't bear a child. Her chest constricted. And he should walk away if he wanted a family. She couldn't chance it.

* * *

After working without a break, Nina checked her watch. One. She needed to pick up Kimmy at school between three and three-thirty. Fatigued again, and not only from the monitor. She felt plain old tired. Her sleep the night before had been restless. She thanked Angie for that. Why had she made a big deal about attending the wedding alone? Yes, she would mess up the table seating. Most everyone attended as couples, so the tables usually seated eight or ten. She'd make it seven or nine. She managed a chuckle. Maybe someone's maiden aunt needed a seat.

She made her way to the kitchen, longing for something to distract her. The refrigerator didn't pose any invitation as she gazed inside. The few cookies still in the jar she'd kept for Kimmy. Crackers? With what? Peanut butter, but she ran out a few days before. Maybe a trip to the grocery store would do it.

Instead she opened the back door and stepped outside, her eyes grazing the landscape. She'd done nothing about the perennials, and soon it would be too late. She hurried back in, grabbed her cell phone and purse and slipped into her car, recalling a garden shop not too far away. Soon she was pulling into the parking lot. After studying two rows of flowers, she spotted the coneflowers and hoisted a plant into her basket while her mind slipped to Kimmy. Time was ticking away, and she didn't want to scare her or disappoint Doug by being late. With time on her mind, she spotted a sales clerk and caught her attention. "I'm in a new house without much landscaping, and I'm checking perennials but I want to make sure it's not too late to plant. Can you tell me?"

"Sure. You have coneflowers there. It's a good choice. They're hardy flowers, and in Zone 5 the fall months are perfect for planting."

She thanked the salesclerk and then asked directions to find the daisies.

The woman beckoned her to follow. With her guidance, she set three pots of daisies into the basket. Finally she circled back and grabbed three more colorful coneflowers to brighten her garden and her life.

She paid the bill, her mind everywhere but on her purchases. After she arrived home and unloaded, she realized Kimmy would already be waiting for her. Angry at her carelessness, she dashed to her car and headed down Oliver Street.

When she spotted the redbrick building, darkened with age, she slowed and pulled into the pickup lane. Only a few children were outside waiting, a couple others were getting into cars, but Kimmy wasn't among them. Panicking, she pictured Doug's frantic face and felt nailed to the seat.

She sat a moment deciding what to do. Her only choice was to go inside. She drove to the parking lot and slipped out as her nerves set in. What would she do if Kimmy had been picked up by someone else. Kidnapped? Her carelessness rent her heart.

Breathless, she darted along the inside corridor, following the sign to the office. As soon as she reached the door, she spotted Kimmy. Her legs weakened as relief spread over her.

Kimmy's eyes widened as she ran to her. "I thought you forgot me."

"I'd never do that, Kimmy." The words reverberated through her chest. She gave her a hug, noticing tears on Kimmy's cheeks. Nina's heart wrenched. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I would never forget you." Her throat closed as she struggled to continue. "I went to the nursery for flowers and time ran away from me." She tilted her head. "But I'm here now." *Thank You* soared above her and stopped her cold. *Thank You*. Had she prayed? Warmth spread through her body as her fears flew away.

She pulled herself from the sensation, noticing a questioning look from the woman behind the counter. "I'm sorry I'm late. Doug Billings gave you my name, I think. I'm here for Kimmy. He had to work overtime today."

The woman gave her a frown and checked a list near the phone and nodded. "You are?"

"Nina Jerome. Doug and I are neighbors."

The woman nodded. "We have to be careful, and we also ask that you be on time."

"Yes, I know. It won't happen again. I guarantee." She meant every word.

The woman gave a faint nod. "Kimmy, you can leave now and have a good weekend, okay?"

Kimmy grinned. "Okay."

"And do you have all of your belongings?"

She nodded to the woman while Nina stepped away, wanting to escape before the woman had her scrubbing boards or banging erasers.

Kimmy caught up with her in the hallway "This weekend I have to find different kinds of leaves and things that grow on trees and bushes." She adjusted her backpack. "Can we find them in your yard?"

"We sure can." Nina slipped her arm around Kimmy's shoulders and guided her outside.

When Kimmy spotted the car, she bolted ahead, and Nina had a hard time keeping up. Like a father, Doug had put the booster seat into the back of her car, and Kimmy slipped in and locked the seat belt. Captured by the image of Doug with his arms embracing a child of his own, Nina's heart grew heavy. If only... Not wanting the thought to ruin her day, she headed for the driver's seat and turned the key.

On the way home, she thought about the cookies she'd saved for Kimmy, but other than those, she had no after-school snacks for her. Her mind drifted until Kimmy broke her train of thought.

"Can we plant your flowers when we get back? Carly got to help Angie plant the flowers. She told me."

Competition. Nina grinned. Though she liked the idea, today it wasn't practical. "It's late today, but let's plan it for another day—maybe tomorrow—and you can tell Carly you helped me plant flowers. Instead, let's do your homework. That will be fun, but first we'll stop at the store for a treat."

Kimmy's face brightened. "I like treats."

So did she, except for the calories. Again an image of Doug entered her mind, his smile the best treat she'd had in years.

She shook her head and pulled into a grocery store. Kimmy unhooked her seat belt, slipped outside, and they headed into the store. She guided Kimmy to healthy snacks and was pleased when she thought of string cheese. Kimmy liked those and peanut butter crackers. She selected multigrain. Another good choice.

In minutes, they were back in the car and pulling into her driveway. Kimmy lugged the grocery bag from the backseat, and they hurried inside for the snack and then the homework project.

Once in the yard, Kimmy slowed, her expression thoughtful. "Do you like my uncle Doug?"

Like? The question startled her, and her chest tightened. “I think he’s a very nice man, and I like you, too.” Her heart thudding, she studied Kimmy’s expression. “Why do you ask?”

“He’s happier since he met you. I’m glad you like him ’cuz I think he likes you...a lot.”

Heat rushed up her neck and warmed her cheeks. “Thank you, Kimmy. It’s always nice to be liked. I’m sure lots of people like you.”

Kimmy looked thoughtful. “But I think you make Uncle Doug happier.”

She made Doug happier? He made her happier, too, but this topic had to stop before she lost it. “Look there, Kimmy.” She pointed to the grass, grateful she’d spotted the pinecone. “Do you know what that is?”

“An acorn?” Kimmy eyed the cone a moment before shaking her head. “It’s the other one. A...”

“Right. It’s a pinecone. People make Christmas decorations out of them.”

Her eyes widened. “They do?” She picked up the cone and studied it. “How?”

Her brain went into gear. “I think they spray them with gold paint and tie a red bow on top. They can add artificial holly berries or other little Christmas symbols.”

“Can we make some for Christmas?”

“Christmas?” Nina’s heart weighted, doubting Kimmy would still be with Doug then. The old familiar loneliness spread through her. She drew in a breath. “We’ll have to wait and see. You might be home and busy with your mom.”

A shadow slipped across Kimmy’s face. “But I could come and visit Uncle Doug.” Hope washed away the gloom. “Then we could make them.”

“We probably could.” Nina stepped away, needing to avoid the emotions barraging her. She’d never given the future much thought, and she didn’t want to start now.

Her mind bogged with Kimmy’s questions and especially her earlier comment. If a child noticed Doug seemed happier when she was around him, wouldn’t everyone spot it? She hadn’t known him long enough to notice a change in his behavior. Her heart pressed against her chest as if it were paper and could tear through. One thing she couldn’t do was offer Doug empty hope. She bit the edge of her lip unable to face her own emptiness.

Kimmy dashed around the yard collecting leaves from shrubs and plants, even two blades of crabgrass that Nina needed to attend to. She watched the girl, caught up in her excitement and energy. Though she was only thirty-four, her energy had dropped a couple of notches each year. She’d be bedridden by fifty if she didn’t perk up and find enjoyment in life.

A sound drew her attention, and she felt her pocket. She dug into it and pulled out her cell phone. This time she recognized the phone number. “Hi, Doug.”

“How’s it going? Did you pick up Kimmy?”

“Sure did.” Her pulse kicked into a high gear. “We had healthy snacks, and now we’re doing her homework.”

Doug chuckled. “What is it this time?”

“Here, you can ask Kimmy.” She beckoned to her, and she bounced forward, a smile brimming on her face.

“Hello.”

Whatever Doug asked or said, Kimmy rattled on about the snacks and homework, along with a list of what she’d found.

Nina’s cheeks warmed again, seeing joy in the child’s face. She amazed her, rolling with catastrophes better than most adults. While her mother was miles away, badly injured, Kimmy had dealt with the situation like a professional, making the best of her time with Doug without complaint. Even without fear.

She longed to cope with upheaval as well as Kimmy. If she’d done so, today she would be ready to make changes in her life, to move on and find happiness once again. Instead, she’d clung to her pitiful past and feelings of abandonment in the way someone would cherish old pictures.

Kimmy returned the phone to her, and she lifted it to her ear. “We’re doing fine, Doug.”

“Good. I hope to get out of here by seven-thirty. Eight at the latest.”

She pictured his face, his eyes crinkling at the edges as he talked, the lock of hair that sometimes dipped to his forehead, the five o’clock shadow she found so appealing. “We’re fine, Doug. Really.”

“I owe you one, Nina. Ask and it’s yours. Anything.”

His offer sent prickles up her arms. “You might be sorry you said that.”

“Never. I’ll see you later.”

They disconnected, and she approached Kimmy with Doug’s offer ringing in her ears.

Angie’s insistence that she have an escort for the wedding had bugged her, and naturally Angie thought of Doug. But Doug had already been embedded in her mind since they’d spent so much time together. Everything had been innocent and mainly involving Kimmy. The wedding didn’t involve Kimmy. In fact he’d have to hire a babysitter. She couldn’t ask him.

I owe you one, Nina. Ask and it’s yours. Anything. Anything. But escorting her to a wedding certainly wasn’t what he had in mind. But...what had he meant? He said *anything*.

Her mind spun, and she closed her eyes. Truth was, the more she thought of it, she disliked attending the reception alone. A wedding service, maybe, but the celebration? A party? Alone would be a downer. Still asking Doug...that would take gumption on her part and even a bit of faith.

The idea settled in her mind. She’d already talked to God once today. Maybe, just maybe, another little chat might give her unexpected courage.

The whole idea spread through her like puzzle pieces. She’d always been good with them except the puzzles of her life. That was one she hadn’t conquered yet. But maybe, just maybe...

Chapter Four

Doug leaned back in his office chair and eyed the stack of paperwork that he’d nearly conquered. He rubbed the back of his neck, kneading out the knots, and checked his watch with blurred vision. He’d stared at the computer too long, and though he still had portions of the documents, he couldn’t face another moment. He had to consider Kimmy’s needs.

Nina slipped into his mind again, and his pulse snagged. He’d never met a woman so unselfish with her time. Not only had she spent hours with Kimmy already, she had volunteered to spend more. What kind of woman did that?

A grin pranced to his lips. A woman who loved children. He nodded. That was it. He’d watched her with Kimmy, and she was a natural and very creative with her. He loved that. Again, his pulse stumbled as he faced the truth. He liked Nina. Liked her a lot. More than any other woman he’d known. But then she was easy to lov...like.

And now Angie had offered him an opening. Her wedding. He’d never expected to receive an invitation with the stipulation he escort Nina. All he needed now was the nerve to ask her. The wedding would be a way to know her better and to see her in a social setting. The neighborhood outdoor party had been the only social situation where they’d been together, and she seemed somewhat withdrawn. He had so much to learn about her. Only then could he really let his thoughts take flight. He drew in a breath as he admitted his failure. They’d already taken flight without his permission. So unlike him.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts and flicked through the documents, confident he could finish in the morning before his meeting. He riffled the pages and tapped them into a neat stack before slipping them into a folder and dropping them into his work tray. As he logged off the computer, his stomach rumbled, reminding him he’d rushed through a flavorless sandwich at noon, and now eating a good meal sounded great.

Tonight cooking was out of the question, but take-home was perfect, and Kimmy loved Chinese food. Tasty food with no work hugged his thoughts. He grasped his cell phone and located Nina’s number. His heart lurched when she answered on the second ring.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.