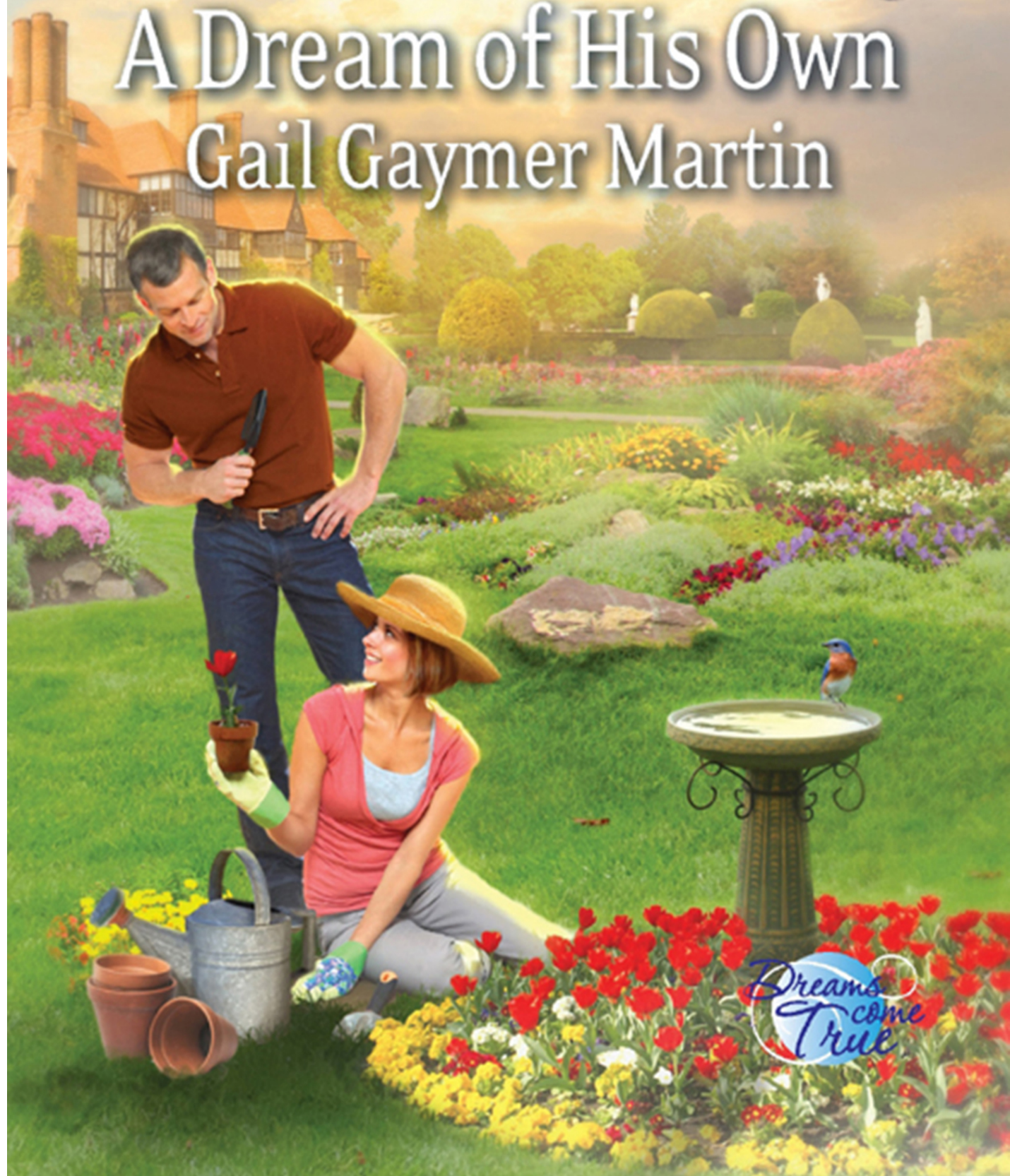


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Dreams Come True

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A Dream of His Own

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Second-chance family

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"I missed being here." His eyes searched hers. "And I missed seeing you."

The temperature rose. Her cheeks burned as she gazed at him, not knowing if she should say thank-you or toss out a lighthearted comment. Before she could move, he slipped his arm around her.

"What's Brandon up to now?"

The change in topic caught her off guard. "Resting. No school until next week, but he's fine."

"I'm relieved." He brushed her cheek with his index finger.

His eyes searched hers, making her uncomfortable. She didn't understand the touch or his embrace. Her mind spun. "Did you see the living room?"

His head jerked back as if she'd surprised him. "No. I came in through the garage."

She struggled for breath. "Come take a look." She beckoned to him, trying to keep her hands from shaking. She needed to get a grip.

He followed her lead, and when he reached the archway, he stopped, his gaze sweeping the room. "Wow! That makes a difference."

"Do you like it?"

"I do, but..."

She hung on his voice, waiting for him to finish the sentence, but he only gazed at her. "But what?"

Quinn drew closer and slipped both arms around her. "But I like you more."

GAIL GAYMER MARTIN

A former counselor and educator, Gail Gaymer Martin is an award-winning author, writing women's fiction, romance and romantic suspense. This is her forty-seventh published novel, and she has over three million books in print. Gail is the author of twenty-eight worship resource books and *Writing the Christian Romance* released by *Writer's Digest Books*. She is a cofounder of *American Christian Fiction Writers*, a member of the *ACFW Great Lakes Chapter* and a member of the *Faith, Hope & Love Chapter of RWA*.

When not writing, Gail enjoys traveling, speaking at churches and libraries, presenting writing workshops across the country and singing as a soloist, praise leader and choir member at her church, where she plays handbells and hand chimes, as well. Gail also sings with one of the finest Christian chorales in Michigan, the *Detroit Lutheran Singers*. Gail is a lifelong resident of Michigan and lives with her husband, Bob, in the Detroit suburbs. Visit her website at www.gailmartin.com. Write to Gail at P.O. Box 760063, Lathrup Village, MI 48076, or at authorgailmartin@aol.com. She enjoys hearing from readers.

A Dream of His Own

Gail Gaymer Martin



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Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,
where moth and rust destroy,
and where thieves break in and steal.

But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.

—Matthew 6:19, 20

Thanks to my Facebook group,

Readers of Gail Gaymer Martin's Books,

for their support, ideas and amazing comments and reviews. Without readers, an author's books would

sit on shelves. Thanks to the Michigan Secretary of State for providing detailed information on the process for obtaining a driver's license. Today the rules are very different from my day. Thanks also to Wendy at B&B Collision for answering my many questions about accident repairs. And always, my deepest thanks go to my husband, Bob. Without his support and love, I wouldn't be the writer I am today.

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Chapter One

Quinn O'Neill shifted in reverse as he checked his rear and side view mirrors at ACO Hardware. He lifted his foot from the brake and inched backward from the parking spot, his mind filled with

the numerous repairs needed to return his home to what it must have looked like ninety years ago when it was new. Too bad repairing himself wasn't as easy, but money wouldn't fix him.

Quinn's thoughts were interrupted by a thud, and a crunch of metal jarred his SUV. He slammed on the brake and jammed the gear into Park, then bolted outside eyeing a car embedded in his back quarter panel, the shiny black paint gouged and buckled against the woman's dark red sedan.

She glared at him from the driver's window, her eyes narrowed as determination set in her jaw. She pushed open her car door with a dramatic sweep, stepped out and slammed it. "Look what you've done." Her arm swung toward the damage. Shattered glass from the taillight dotted the asphalt, and her trunk lid had sprung loose from the lock.

Trying to monitor his frustration, he shook his head. "It wasn't my fault. I checked my mirrors." He peered back at her. "More than once." Yet in the back of his mind, he knew he'd been distracted by his thoughts. Could he have been careless?

She bustled closer. "Do you think I don't check my mirrors?"

"I have no idea, but—" Seeing tears collecting in her eyes, he felt less inclined to argue. "Are you okay?" He skimmed her frame, noticing beyond her distraught expression how attractive she was.

Her eyes snapped from him to her sedan. "I'm fine, but I can't be without a car, and if I report the accident, my insurance rates will go up. I can't afford—" Words rushed from her like air from a pricked balloon. Once she recovered, she waved her hand in the air. "Never mind. It's not your problem." She paled and pressed her hand to her heart, her fingernails painted the color of a ripe peach.

He eyed her hand. No wedding band, and probably a one-car family. Ice slid through his veins. He didn't allow himself to make mistakes. Not when it came to driving. He pulled out his wallet for his insurance information. "We should call the police."

Panic struck her face. "Police? For what? They don't care about fender-denters."

Despite her alarmed expression, he chuckled. "You mean fender-benders."

She evaded his eyes. "Whatever."

"I suppose. The police have enough to do. Neither of us is injured."

She gave a decisive nod and strode closer to her damaged sedan. When she tried to force down the trunk lid, it resisted.

"Let me help." He moved past her and forced it downward, but it refused to catch. He eyed his quarter panel damage. It fared better than her sedan. "I might have something in my car to tie it down."

When he lifted his trunk lid, a horn tooted. He gave the guy a shrug as he pointed to the damage. The man made an obscene gesture before he backed up and moved off. Quinn shook his head. What happened to kindness and compassion?

After scouring inside his trunk for a piece of rope, anything to secure the lid, he found nothing. Discouraged, he straightened. "You didn't happen to purchase something in the hardware store we could use, did you? String? Twine? Tape?"

She shook her head. "No. Only O-rings, gaskets, washers, pipe joint compound and a wrench."

Plumbing supplies. His brow tugged upward, his curiosity spiked. What did she know about O-rings?

She leaned into her trunk and came up shaking her head. Moisture hinted in her eyes. "I'll run inside and buy—"

His chest constricted. "Let me." As he opened his wallet to pull out some bills, a blue strand beneath his backseat caught his eye. He reached in and drew out a bungee cord. He held it up. "No need. This will work."

Though she'd accepted his help, the woman remained cautious and hadn't given him the hint of a grin even though she'd made him chuckle. Still he'd spotted her smile lines traveling from her full cheeks to her well-shaped lips, the same color as her fingernails. He'd love to see her smile and to ask about the plumbing supplies. Instead, he focused on the situation, winding the cord around

the bumper and through the inside workings of the trunk until he secured the lid. “I’ll follow you to a body shop.”

“A body shop?” She closed her eyes, the strain evident on her face. “I have no idea where one is.” She shook her head. “I’ll...I’ll drive home and call a friend.” She glanced at her watch. “Lexie should be home.”

Quinn’s jaw slacked, hearing the uncommon name. “Lexie Fox?”

She drew back, her eyes widening. “Do you know her?”

“She and Ethan are members of my church.”

Her eyes glazed as if unable to comprehend what he’d said. “Really?”

“Really.”

She gazed at him without a response, her face taut.

He rubbed his hands together, sensing he had to do something to relieve her stress. “I’m here. There’s a body shop a few blocks from here on Main Street. Randy will give you a free estimate.”

“Free?”

“No charge.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why are you doing this?”

Something about her tugged at his heart as he managed to grin. “I’m a nice guy.”

Her suspect expression melted. “I guess you are.”

Quinn had to look away to stop his pulse from racing. “It’s on my way home.” He eyed his SUV’s damage, his heart sinking. “I’ll follow you to keep an eye on your trunk. If it pops up, pull over.”

Her shoulders lifted in a sigh. “Thanks.” She rotated her wrist and looked at her watch. “I’ll be late getting home. I should call my son.”

A son. Blurred memories raced through his mind.

She delved into her handbag, pulled out a cell phone and pressed a couple of buttons.

Though he stepped back, her voice reached him.

“Bran. This is Mom.” She pressed her lips together as she listened. “You want to what?” The corners of her mouth pulled down. “Okay, but be home by eight. No later and no excuses.”

Quinn’s lungs constricted as the boy’s baritone voice murmured from her cell phone so like his son’s.

“No. I’m running a little late. I didn’t want you to worry.” She paused as if ready to disconnect. Instead she pulled the phone back to her ear. “Did you take your pills?” She nodded. “Good. Now remember. Eight o’clock. And no excuses, Brandon.” She clicked off and slipped the phone into her handbag.

Quinn waited, a multitude of questions rattling in his head—questions about her son, about the medication and about her and the hint of tears.

She looked into the distance and said nothing.

Silence pressed against his ears. He’d lived with silence and had accepted it as a way of life, but this was different. He wanted to know her.

“Why do problems always come in a row?” Her voice caught him off guard, and when he looked at her, her eyes said far more than her words.

“I don’t know.” His guilt-riddled thoughts intensified as he reviewed checking his mirrors. Since the tragic accident, he’d become overly cautious. But had he been today? “Problems multiply.” His certainly had.

As if the wind had been knocked out of her, she nodded. “My son is bugging me about his learner’s permit. He’s completing his classes, and every day he asks and whines about why I’m not enthusiastic. Once he starts driving, my insurance will...” Her brows furrowed.

He suspected she’d picked up on his distraction. He struggled to dig himself from the deep crevice. “Teens can be persistent.”

His feeble response hung in the air as he diverted the conversation by giving her directions to the body shop. In the driver's seat, he pulled forward to give her room to back out while the sound of grating metal assaulted his ears.

She maneuvered the sedan into the lane and drove ahead, her trunk lid bouncing with each bump in the road.

When they reached Main Street, she followed his instructions and turned left. Quinn eyed her short brown hair glinting in the sunlight through the rear window. He had to admit she was attractive with skin like cream, not one blemish, and intense hazel eyes. He liked her independence. She didn't jump at his offer to help. She'd considered it first, eyeing him with suspicion. She'd been smart to question his motives and probably questioned why a stranger would offer to help.

She'd given evidence of being a single mom. The burden of decisions about her son's driving, the cost of insurance and even a trip to the hardware seemed to rest on her shoulders. He tried to picture her doing her own plumbing. Her feminine frame looked sturdy enough to handle a wrench, but her manicured nails and slender arms didn't fit any plumber he'd seen. Then again, not wearing a wedding band didn't negate being married. But why not call a plumber? That's what he did.

Quinn's thoughts snapped back to the situation at hand. He concentrated so much on her trunk lid he'd forgotten the damage to his own vehicle. He needed an estimate, too. The who-was-at-fault issue dug deep in his mind, but seeing her financial concern and the difficulty of being without a car, he wondered if he should take the blame. It was an accident.

Without warning, the word cut to his heart. Accidents should never happen. Everyone knew that. They were excuses for carelessness and for...

Quinn grappled with his frustration, Frustration meant defeat, and he was done with that. He clamped his jaw, his grip tight on the steering wheel as if the action could control his indecision.

A red light caught him unaware, and he jammed his foot on the brake, thanking the Lord he didn't hit the back of the woman's car again. The woman? He cringed. They hadn't even exchanged names or information. His preoccupation had gotten the best of him.

The light turned green, and he drove through the intersection. Ahead, he could see the B & B Collision sign. She saw it, too, since she hit her right signal. He slowed and stopped behind the sedan, waiting for traffic to clear.

* * *

Ava could see the man through her rearview mirror. His mouth was locked tight. He would be a prime example of why she'd hesitated to add fathers to the Mothers of Special Kids support group, but the women had voted to let them join anyway.

At the newly named Parents of Special Kids organization, she'd branded herself the inquisitor. She wanted to view all sides of an issue, and often she served as the devil's advocate. Not everyone liked that, she knew. And now that men were part of POSK, she'd realized she'd been wrong about most men's unwillingness to talk about their problems, but not incorrect about this man. She'd never met one so closed off.

Something in his introspective eyes had ignited her inquisitive nature, yet she didn't know him well enough to pry. Didn't know him at all, in fact. They hadn't introduced themselves, and she should have asked for insurance information. The accident was his fault she was certain. Or quite certain. She'd checked her mirrors.

Ava wondered if the man realized he didn't know her name. Maybe she could be as closed-mouthed as he was and remain a nameless woman. He apparently liked to be in control, but he'd met his match today. Ava Darnell wasn't easy to push around. She sighed, dismissing her ridiculous thoughts.

His knowing Lexie and Ethan had eased her mind, but she'd been distracted by his good looks. The streaks of gray contrasting with his wavy dark hair had raised an age question, but studying his features, she suspected he wasn't too far from her almost thirty-nine years. And he'd looked at her

with those eyes—gorgeous eyes, blue ones that seemed to search her soul. Or was he searching his own? She may never learn a thing about him. But two could play the silent game.

Traffic cleared and Ava veered into the parking lot with the SUV following behind her. A body shop made her miserable. She didn't have the money to deal with a damaged car. Making ends meet was enough of a challenge, especially with her steep mortgage. With the mention of her house payment, her thoughts flew to the financial mess Tom had left behind.

She gazed at the shop door and cringed. What did she know about cars and repairs? Yet seeing the nameless man slip from his SUV, her confidence lifted as he approached her. She spun around with false assurance and headed for the entrance.

Before she reached the door, he dashed ahead of her and held it open. She headed for the counter. So did he.

From the garage, the sound of a static-filled radio station was punctuated with clanks of metal and intermittent thuds. A man glanced in from the garage and held up his index finger, and in moments, he charged through the doorway, wiping his hands on a dirty rag. "Quinn, what are you doing here?"

Quinn. She gave a sidelong look at the man beside her. Irish name. He looked Irish—the dark Irish with the amazing blue eyes and raven hair. He reached forward and grasped the man's hand with a shake, and then nodded toward her. She wanted to give her own nod toward him. He'd caused the accident.

Quinn preceded to tell the story, chuckling as he called it a fender-denter, directing another nod her way.

Finally she gave her own nod. "He backed out of the parking spot into me." She put a little emphasis on the he and me, hoping the man Quinn had called Randy got the point.

Randy gave him a flickering grin before looking at her with an unsuccessful attempt to appear serious. "So you both need an estimate."

She pushed her way closer to the counter. "Yes, it's my trunk lid. It has a dent and now the lid won't lock."

He pulled out a form and grabbed a pencil. "Name?"

So much for being nameless. "Ava Darnell." As she spoke, she dug into her bag and pulled her driver's license from her wallet, then slid it on the counter.

He glanced at it. "Phone number?"

She eyed Quinn, but he was looking at her license. She wanted to cover it with her hand. "You won't need my number. We're going to wait."

"You're welcome to wait." He tilted his head, his pencil poised. "But I still need your phone number."

She drew up her shoulders and gave him her number.

He pulled out another form and jotted Quinn's name at the top. She couldn't read the last name, and Quinn spied off his telephone number. The area code was local, but she expected that.

"I know you have insurance, Quinn." He turned to her. "How about you, Ms. Darnell?"

She reached for her wallet again. "I have insurance." Her stomach churned knowing she'd still have a deductible. Where would she get the money?

"No." Quinn's voice startled her.

Randy scowled, his eyes shifting from her to Quinn. "Which is it?"

"I have insurance." She delved into her bag.

"The accident was my fault."

Quinn's admission stopped her cold. "You admit it?"

Quinn ignored her and looked at Randy. "I'd prefer to pay for whatever she needs. Pretend she doesn't have insurance."

His meddling heightened her irritation. She attempted to save money, but she wasn't a pauper if that's what he thought. "Please, I have—"

His eyes captured hers. "I know, but allow me to do this."

Added, she slipped the strap of her bag onto her shoulder and studied him.

Randy dropped the pencil on the counter. "Whatever you say." He pointed to the garage. "I have a job to finish. It'll take another twenty minutes or so. You can wait here if you want. I'll get to your cars as soon as I can." He motioned to the chairs in the waiting area.

Ava strode across the room, sank into a seat and closed her eyes. When she opened them, Quinn stood beside her. She scrutinized him a moment. "What's wrong with you?"

He drew back, his eyes widening. "What?" He shook his head and looked away. "I'm trying to be conscientious."

"I have insurance."

He sank beside her. "And a deductible." His head lowered as if he were looking for a further response on the floor.

Though the deductible was correct, Ava still didn't understand his determination to pay. "I have a job." The income wasn't great, but it was a job. "I don't need charity."

He lifted his head, his expression darkened by her judgment. "I know you aren't looking for a handout, and I'm sorry it came across the wrong way."

Her teeth clamped over the inside of her bottom lip, and she wished she'd kept her mouth shut. "I'm sorry. I—" She straightened her shoulders. "We haven't been introduced properly. I'm Ava Darnell." She extended her hand as much for goodwill as for her introduction.

Quinn peered at it a second before grasping it. "Quinn O'Neill."

Definitely Irish. She gave his hand a firm shake. "Let's hear the estimate before you make offers, okay?"

Though his eyes darkened, he nodded and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He seemed to find the floor interesting.

She settled into silence, trying to understand this man. His offer to pay for her repairs seemed odd, but it took all kinds of people to make up the world. Maybe he was a staunch Christian compelled to show kindness or generosity. Whatever it was, she hoped he wasn't a scam artist. She flinched, realizing her attitude stemmed from her late husband Tom's financial problems. She had to be more trusting. He said he knew Lexie and Ethan. Still, being a single woman always put the fear of being ripped off in the forefront of her mind.

* * *

Quinn watched Ava in his peripheral vision. Her determination to resist his help drove him crazy. On the other hand, he admired her, too—her pride and her self-assurance. He couldn't help but notice how she'd charged from her car after she'd parked outside. She walked with a decisive manner, her head high and her solid frame giving her an air of knowing what she was doing.

Lydia had a way of carrying herself that showed her confidence and her receptiveness. That's what had attracted him when he met her. She'd made a perfect wife for him, the owner of a prestigious business. She knew how to plan excellent dinner parties and how to add elegance to even the simplest event. He couldn't imagine meeting another woman like Lydia, and yet today those attributes weren't as important as they had been. After her death, he'd readjusted his priorities. His old life had been self-centered, more driven to earn status and wealth. Now other things were more important.

When Ava shifted in the chair, her knee bumped his. He lifted his gaze to her face, aware she had something on her mind.

"It's difficult being a single parent."

One of his questions had been answered. She was single as he suspected. "How old is your son?"

"He turned fifteen a few weeks ago."

His lungs drained of air. His son had been fifteen when he died—full of life, strong and ready to tackle the world and often his father. The trait had grinded Quinn, and his own determination grew to show Sean who was boss. He'd done it the day Sean and Lydia died in the horrendous car crash when a drunk driver hit them head-on.

The day burst into his mind. Tired of jumping to Sean's every whim, he'd said no to his nagging about taking him out to practice driving. The new learner's permit burned in Sean's hand. Despite his son's insistence, he'd refused, but Lydia determined if he wouldn't take Sean for a driving lesson, she would. He didn't stop her. The old ache knifed his chest. If he'd given in and gone with Sean that day, the accident may have been avoided. He would have been quicker to grab the wheel than Lydia. She rarely drove.

His lawyer insisted on suing, and they'd won, but the money meant nothing to him. It couldn't buy back his wife and son. It couldn't fill his empty heart. It couldn't replace everything that was precious. That's when he realized that his business, his wealth, his success meant nothing at all. He'd cursed God. A God who promised to be faithful. A God who assured His children He heard their prayers. For so long those empty promises controlled his life. But time healed even the deepest wound, and he'd made restitution with the Lord, clawing his way up from darkness into the light of faith. He would never have survived without it.

Quinn's thoughts cleared, and he noticed Ava looking at him. How long had he been silent? "Fifteen. They can be difficult at that age."

She studied him a moment as if curious about his silence. "You must have experience with teens."

Her comment tore into his heart, and he couldn't speak.

But it didn't seem to matter. For her, talking seemed more urgent. "Teens get to a certain age, and they think they know everything. I'm sure you've experienced that?"

"Teens are teens." He didn't want to encourage the line of conversation. As Ava studied him, his skin crawled.

Then she fell silent for a moment. But after taking a lengthy breath, she turned to him again. "Brandon has Hodgkin's lymphoma."

A knife ripped him again. Though he wanted to say something kind or wise, he couldn't find the words.

Yet her voice brightened. "But he's in remission. I'm so grateful."

She waited for his response, but he still couldn't go there. His own loss weighted his mind. Finally he managed a "that's great." But not wanting to continue the conversation, he did the next best thing. He tried to lighten his tone. "So you purchased washers, O-rings and a wrench at the hardware." It wasn't exactly a question, but he wanted an answer.

"Of all things, my kitchen faucet leaks." She offered a fleeting grin that sent his pulse skittering. "I plan to fix it myself."

His heart rate escalated as her smile lines deepened. "You'll fix it?" Grateful for the new topic, his mind wrapped around a dimple flickering in her cheek. He tried to picture her repairing the leak. His only involvement in repairing a faucet had consisted of paying the plumber.

Her brows lifted. "I read articles on how to do plumbing repairs on the internet. It's not hard, and it saves money."

Hearing her reference awakened his regret. He had more money than he needed. She had to tighten her finances while dealing with a seriously ill son. Her courage amazed him.

Quinn studied her profile, his gaze lingering on her ear decorated with a small jeweled earring, the stone the color of a leaf budding in spring. She wore her hair short but with a slight wave curving at her neck. On the left side, she tucked the strands behind her ear.

As his thoughts sank in, Quinn cringed and glanced away. He needed to get a grip. Why would he feel so much concern for a woman he'd only met an hour ago? His emotional reaction irritated

him. Yet unable to control his thoughts, he let his gaze drift back to Ava. Proud, strong and capable seemed a good description. A grin played on his lips. He could never picture Lydia shopping at a hardware store and fixing a faucet.

Her eyebrow arched as if she'd noticed his half grin. "You think women can't do plumbing?"

He was the one who couldn't. "No. I think some women can do anything they set their mind to."

"You have more faith in me than I have, but I'm going to do my best."

His stomach churned as he witnessed her brave admission. "I'm only a novice, but could I help?"

Her head jerked upward with question.

"Maybe I could give you a hand...that is, if you run into problems." Air streamed from his lungs as he faced the dumbest suggestion he'd ever made. What did he know about plumbing? He shrank into a chair. "I'll give you my phone number, and you can give me a call." And he could contact a plumber. His shoulders relaxed.

"Thanks. You're too kind."

"Ms. Darnell?"

Quinn's attention shot to the doorway.

Randy strode forward. "I'll need your car keys."

She grasped her handbag and dug out a small ring of keys. "Here you are."

When she dropped them into his hand, Randy turned to him. "I might as well take yours, too."

Quinn pulled the keys from his pocket, and Randy vanished through the garage doorway with the sets of keys as Quinn sank back into the chair wishing he had a magazine or anything that would stop him from offering to do plumbing and feeling his pulse skip each time Ava looked at him. He stretched his legs in front of him, folding his arms over his chest and closing his eyes. Maybe if he concentrated he could get a grip on his wayward emotions. Sean and the accident surged in his mind and was only distracted by the image of the attractive woman beside him, saddled with too many problems.

He remained silent, trying to ignore the waves of Ava's presence. When she shifted in the chair, her arm brushed his and the hairs on his arms rose. His eyes jerked open. "Sorry about the long wait."

"It's not your fault." She shrugged. "I wish I'd brought in the magazine I picked up at the hardware store. It's on home decor."

Quinn pictured the outside of his once lovely home that needed trim work, and the inside rooms as drab and colorless just as his life had been.

"I love decorating. That would have been a great career for me." The comment sounded as if she was speaking to herself.

His mind ticked with ideas while his heart stretched beyond his belief. He was drawn to this woman in a strange and unexpected way—somewhere between esteem and curiosity. She was different and admirable.

He opened his mouth to speak, but she'd sunk into thought again, and if he allowed it, he'd never learn more about her. "Why didn't you pursue a career in home decorating?"

She turned her head and looked out the window with a shrug. "I married young. My husband had a good job and preferred my staying home."

"So that ended your dream."

Her head swivelled toward him. "I put my energy into my home. I made it my own little showplace."

Pride rose on her face, and he realized she hadn't appreciated his comment. "That's a good use of talent."

Her expression changed. "Thank you, but then you haven't seen my home." Her tone softened. "It's a little worse for wear without the income...the time to keep it up, but I do my best. Most things fall on my shoulders at home. I'm a widow. My husband died a few years ago—five years actually—

when Brandon was ten.” She drifted away for a moment. “Coronary thrombosis right before my eyes. I asked him if he’d like a cup of coffee, and he said yes. Before I turned my back, he was gone.”

Quinn’s lungs emptied. “That must have been awful.” He had forced the words from his throat. Sean’s and Lydia’s death had been as swift, but he hadn’t witnessed it. Two police officers had come to his door with the horrible news.

“It was a shock.” Her voice infiltrated his thoughts. “Tom was young. Only thirty-four. He never knew about Brandon’s illness. He’d been gone two years before Bran was diagnosed.”

Quinn shook his head. He was forty-five. He couldn’t imagine his life ending eleven years early. Sean slipped into his thoughts again. At fifteen his life had ended.

They both sank into silence, and he pondered what to do to make life better for Ava.

Randy reappeared and stepped to the counter. “Damage could have been worse.” He bent over the counter and wrote notes on the quote form he’d filled in earlier with their information.

Ava rose first and grasped the form he handed her before Quinn could get a look at the quote. She gazed at it, her eyes losing their color. She pulled out her wallet and slid him her insurance information. “I’ll need to use my insurance.”

Quinn shifted beside her. “I thought we were going to talk about it.”

“No need to talk.” She folded the form and slipped it in her purse. “How long will it take to repair?”

Randy glanced at the calendar and then through the garage door as if sizing up the jobs they had. “Maybe three days. Two if we’re lucky. If you want, you can bring it in Monday. But you’ll need to call your insurance company because they may want you to get another estimate.”

Her head jerked toward Quinn and then back to Randy. “Why?”

“It’s policy. And if you need a loaner car, I’ll call you when one’s available. I only have three.”

Her downcast look constricted Quinn’s chest. “Give us a minute.” He linked his arm in Ava’s and pulled her across the room. “I accepted the blame for this, and I want to pay for the damage. Let me see the estimate.”

“It’s too much.” She didn’t budge.

“Please, let me decide.”

She inched her hand into her purse and pulled out the yellow paper. He opened it and shook his head. The amount meant nothing to him and so much to her and it would affect her insurance rates. “I’ll cover this. And forget the insurance company. You don’t need the hassle.”

Confusion churned in her face. “But why? It’s too much money. Why would you do this for me?”

He held the estimate firmly in his grip and searched her face. “Because I can.”

Her cheek quivered as tears brimmed her eyes. “I don’t accept charity. I told you that, but for some reason, I think this is as important to you as it is to me. So thank you.”

Quinn stepped backward, stunned by her awareness. She had read his heart, and it frightened him. Where was he being led and by whom?

Chapter Two

Lexie came through the doorway into the meeting room of Parents of Special Kids at the Royal Oak Senior Center and strode to where Ava was sitting. “You’re here. Where’s your car?”

Ava shifted her eyes to see if others heard. “I have a loaner.”

Lexie sank into the seat beside her. “What happened to your car?”

“I had a little accident.”

Lexie eyes widened. “Were you hurt?”

Today Lexie asked probing questions, and it made Ava understand how irritating that could be. She didn’t want to talk about her dumb accident. “No. I’m fine.” She thought of Lexie’s son and grasped the opportunity to change the subject. “How’s Cooper?”

“He’s doing well. We’re so grateful.” Lexie gestured toward the parking lot. “So give me details.”

Ava gave up. “It was stupid. I was leaving the hardware store, and as I was backing up, we hit each other.”

“You backed into a car?” A grin washed away her concern.

Her voice reverberated through the room, and Ava was grateful only a few people overheard. She glanced toward the small group of women. “It was nothing.” She waved her right hand and chuckled.

They studied her a moment and then continued their conversation. Keeping her voice soft, Ava told Lexie what happened. Why let everyone else know she’d been careless?

“Was it a guy?”

His image appeared in her mind as a stream of air huffed through her nose. “Quinn O’Neill.”

Lexie drew back. “I know him.”

“He told me, and to set the record straight, he backed into me.”

She eased forward. “Really.”

Ava provided her with all the details except that he paid for her repairs. That upset her even more as she thought about it. Lexie’s “you backed into a car?” comment made an impact. Her car had hit the side of Quinn’s SUV, not the other way around, and she’d let him pay for her damages. More than a thousand dollars. She shouldn’t have allowed him to pay. She hadn’t even offered him a proper thank-you, and now she felt beholden. She pictured his telephone number still on the back of the hardware receipt where he’d jotted it down.

Lexie eased back when she’d finished. “I’m surprised he knew our names. Quinn sort of sticks to himself. I only know his name, because he helped with some computer issues, and I happened to be in the church office that day working on a mailing. We were introduced.”

“You think he’s unsociable?” Ava hadn’t picked up on that. She’d deducted he wouldn’t accept no for an answer.

“Not unsociable really, but on Sunday he’s in and out of church. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him stay for coffee hour after the service.”

“With me, he was quiet but very kind.” And had piqued her interest whether she liked it or not.

“Time to begin.” Shirley Jackmeyer’s voice rose above the hum of private conversations.

Ava leaned against the chair, relieved that she didn’t have to continue the conversation. She hadn’t stopped thinking of Quinn since she’d said goodbye at the body shop. Was it his generosity? Or was it unanswered questions? Warmth spread through her as the truth became clear. An unexpected attraction had drawn her to the man, but a man would only complicate her life. Even a friendship wouldn’t work.

The chair rattled, drawing her back from her thoughts. Kelsey and Ross Salburg slipped into the chairs beside her. Ava gave them a smile, still amazed to see that a number of faithful men had joined the organization after the women voted to become POSK, a parents’ organization. Ross had initiated the change with his desire to be part of the support group.

“Today before we do our sharing, Ross Salburg would like to say a word.” Shirley beckoned to him.

Ross rose and strode to the front. As always, his smile brightened the room. “Ethan Fox couldn’t be here today, and his wife, Lexie—” he swung his arm toward her “—suggested I deliver his news about the Dreams Come True Foundation. So here I am.”

Titters scattered the room.

“Ethan and I were talking about our kids. All of them doing well, by the way.” Rousing applause halted his presentation. “Thanks.” He gave a nod. “Anyway, Ethan asked me to remind you of the opportunity you have to bring one of your children’s wishes to life at no cost to you. Our kids have suffered with their illnesses a long time, and this organization offers them a very special experience. A dream trip for the whole family. Meeting one of your child’s favorite heroes. Even something as simple as spending the day with a fireman and riding in the fire truck. The anonymous donor of

these funds recently added a healthy contribution so we want to let others in the community know about this great opportunity. Please spread the word. This fund is available to the special kids in all of South Oakland County.”

“Ross?”

His head snapped to the right. “Maggie?”

“Is this foundation really from a single donor?”

Ava chuckled. She knew the answer.

“Yes. One person.” Ross sent a grin to his wife, Kelsey.

Maggie raised her hand again. “Do we know who it is?”

Ava sputtered at the question. She, too, had been insistent on knowing who it was, but the secret remained. Ethan Fox would be the logical person to know all the details since he represented the Dreams Come True Foundation, but he denied knowing and remained mum.

Ross reiterated the details of the donor for the sake of the newer members, but not knowing the name of the donor still drew everyone’s curiosity as it did hers. Members often speculated. She’d done it herself. The reason why the donor remained anonymous was always her next unspoken question.

While Ross returned to his seat, Kelsey leaned over and asked Ava about her car. Her red sedan must stick out in the crowd of cars outside, because she didn’t expect both of her friends to notice it was missing. She whispered minimal details about the accident and when the meeting concluded, Kelsey had already told Ross. Both stood beside her asking a multitude of questions. She chuckled to herself. If they kept being so insistent, they would certainly steal her “inquisitor” title.

Kelsey gave Ross a poke. “Was the guy nice?”

The memory rushed over her. “Yes. Very.”

“Good-looking?”

The sensation turned to heat. “I’d say so.” She could say more, but they would only pry with more questions.

Ross grinned. “Did you get his name? His phone number?”

Emotions rattled her as their toying looks made her aware of their thoughts. “Quinn O’Neill, and yes, I have his number.” It burned in her handbag.

“Quinn O’Neill?”

She didn’t like Ross’s expression. “What’s wrong with him? He goes to Lexie’s church.”

He shook his head and chuckled. “Nothing as far as I know, and it’s Kelsey’s and my church, too. I just thought it was a coincidence that he called yesterday about looking at some work he needed done on his home. He lives in an English Tudor not far from the zoo. I think the street is York.”

Ava’s interest piqued. An English Tudor. She loved those gorgeous houses with turrets and all kinds of interesting rooms. An English Tudor would be easy to spot. One of these days, she might take a ride that way.

Her pulse skipped. What in the world had she become? A stalker.

* * *

Quinn checked his watch and noted he had time before his appointment with the contractor. His mind had been on Ava, and he’d hoped she would call about the plumbing, but she hadn’t. He wondered if Randy had given her a loaner. He plopped into his desk chair and hit his keyboard spacebar. The monitor came to life, and he typed “white pages” into the search engine and pulled up the page. His fingers poised over the keys, questioning his motive. Then he swallowed and typed Ava Darnell, Royal Oak, Michigan into the search bar. He clicked the cursor, and her name appeared on Blair in Royal Oak—not only her address and phone number but a detailed map to her house. He studied the details, grabbed a pencil and jotted down the information.

When he leaned back and looked at the notepad, his jaw tightened as he tried to comprehend what he was doing. Since the accident, he relived the sound of crunching metal and the thud. He

thanked God the accident had been a simple fender-bender. Fender-denter. Ava's phrase made him smile.

Her face hung in his thoughts, and the emotions troubled him. Ava heightened his senses. She made his blood course with her insistent questions. She'd whetted his interest. With her, he felt alive rather than embedded in the past as he'd been for the past few years. On top of it all, she was attractive, not model-beautiful but very appealing. Quinn pictured her full lips curving into a fleeting smile and her eyes twinkling with curiosity when she talked. Ava demonstrated pride, and he admired that. He'd upset her with the insurance issue, and she'd finally allowed him to redeem himself.

In addition, he'd offered to help with the plumbing, but again paying a plumber took no effort on his part. He thought it would be a nice way to make life a little easier for her. She had a sick son. The knowledge humbled him. How would he have reacted if Sean had been diagnosed with a horrible disease? How would he have coped if Sean had lived through the accident and had become paralyzed or brain-damaged or...? Ava's strength awed him.

Quinn pushed himself away from the computer and rose. His head pounded with what-ifs. What if he'd taken time to convince Sean he'd let him practice driving later? What if he'd demanded that Lydia not take him on the road? What if he'd agreed to take Sean for the driving lesson?

The questions had assaulted him since the day the police came to his door. The same responses billowed in his mind. If he'd been in the car, his quick action might have saved his son. He had more experience driving. How many times had he veered away from a near-accident by some thoughtless driver wanting to pass on a dangerous stretch of highway. Life was far more precious than saving a few minutes by being reckless.

He stood in his home office and shook his head. Let it go. Let it go. No thoughts or what-ifs could change what had happened. He knew his wife's wishes. Lydia wanted him to live fully. She'd supported him in every way—his preferences, his career and his dreams. She would want him to move on with his life. Instead he'd run away. He'd sold his tremendous home too filled with memories, left his day-to-day business in his brother's hands and moved across Michigan to this small town where he was unknown and bought this house.

As Quinn scanned the room, he admitted it needed paint. He'd meant to fix the place when he'd moved in. Instead he'd blended into the beige walls, had run his company from long distance and sank into regret. No more. Change meant moving ahead, and that's what he wanted to do.

Having purpose for once, he turned off the computer, stepped into the hallway and headed for the kitchen. The late April weather decided to play a trick on spring. A chill clung to the air. He filled the coffeemaker and snapped the on button. In moments, the pungent scent filled the room. As he reached into the cabinet for a cup, the doorbell rang. Quinn veered around and headed for the door.

Ross Salburg, with his sturdy frame and smiling brown eyes, stood on his porch. Quinn greeted him, then stepped back, allowing him to enter. At that moment, he realized Ross's visit was the first in many months. His last visitor had been an electrician he'd hired to upgrade his fuse box. He'd kept to himself, a box locked tight and covered in cobwebs. Pitiful. He shuddered.

Ross scanned the foyer, his eyes shifting to the staircase rising to the second story. "Nice." He ambled to the dining room, gave a nod of approval, and then strode across the foyer and gazed into the living room. "Nice Adam's fireplace."

"I don't use it." The admission darkened his attempt to lighten his mood.

"No?" Ross turned to face him. "This was...is a lovely home."

"That's the operative word—was. I've let things get out of hand. When I bought the place three years ago, I planned to update a few things. Now I've let things get shoddy."

A frown slipped to Ross's face, and he turned a full circle, then took a step forward, peering past the staircase to the family room beyond. "You live here alone?"

An ache rose in Quinn's chest. "Yes."

"This is a lot of space for one person." Ross grimaced. "Sorry. I didn't mean to imply—"

“Don’t apologize, You’re right. It’s more room than I need.” Quinn envisioned the first-floor master bedroom with its double walk-in closets, roomy bath and vaulted ceiling. He figured most women would love it. “A five-bedroom house is wasted on me.”

“Never a waste. You don’t know your future. One day you may share it with someone.”

Quinn eyed Ross. The man had echoed his own recent thoughts. “I made some coffee.” He flagged him toward the family room. “Would you like a cup while we talk?”

“Sounds great. I’ll take it black.” Ross tucked his hand into one pocket and carried his clipboard in the other as he followed Quinn past the staircase. He faltered in the family room, typical of a contractor who appreciated quality architecture.

Quinn veered into the kitchen, and in a few moments, Ross followed. Quinn motioned him toward the table as he rounded the counter to the coffeemaker. After filling the cups, he headed back to the table, well-lighted by the bay window. He enjoyed his morning coffee there, better than anywhere else in the house. The birds played outside flitting between the trees and the birdbath centered in what should have been a flower garden. The only things that grew now were a few straggly perennials that still had life in them.

He set a cup in front of Ross and then sat across from him. Since he’d called the construction company, he’d wrestled with why he’d contacted it and what he wanted them to do. For so long life seemed empty, almost hopeless, but a renewed urge had appeared egging him to make a difference in his life and in his home.

“Okay, then.” Ross took a sip and set down his cup. “You mentioned wanting vinyl trim.”

“Right, and new windows throughout. And I’d like an honest opinion regarding the roof shingles. I think they’re original.”

“Any leaks?” Ross bent over his clipboard taking notes.

“None that I’ve seen.” Quinn’s focus shifted to the interior. “I’d like the rooms painted, but I’m not sure about colors. I’ll have to give it some thought.” His mind flew to Ava who’d mentioned she loved to decorate homes. “I might like a decorator to give me some color ideas. I have no eye for color.” He pictured Lydia bringing home paint and fabric samples.

“We can arrange that.” He lifted his cup again and took a drink. “By the way, I heard last Tuesday you had a run-in with Ava Darnell.” Ross chuckled.

Quinn squirmed. “Right.”

“Ava’s a nice lady.” Ross tapped the pencil against the clipboard. “She’s had some real trials. I suppose that’s why she was distracted.”

“She mentioned her son has Hodgkin’s.”

Ross nodded. “It’s been up and down for her.”

“Ava told me she enjoyed home decorating. . .” Quinn didn’t know how to phrase the question.

“Kelsey mentioned how attractive her home is.” Ross swung his arm wide. “Nothing like this place though.”

Quinn nodded, his mind running rings around his growing apprehension. The size of a home was insignificant. The important thing was the love inside. His thought triggered questions. If that were so what difference did it make what color his rooms were? He wanted them clean, that’s all. And making contact with Ava might not be his best move. He should forget her. Forget he even thought about giving her a call.

Ross took a final swig of the coffee and slid back the chair. “I’ll go outside and take a look at your trim, and I’ll send someone over to check the shingles. We can talk colors when I bring over some samples.”

“Sounds good.” But trim colors and shingles didn’t linger in his thoughts. Ava’s image hung there instead. Options? Did he really have options when it came to her? She’d worked her way into his mind from the moment he saw her.

* * *

“Mom. What are you doing?”

Ava’s head snapped up from beneath the kitchen cabinet and bonked against a pipe. She grimaced at the pain, lowered the wrench and rubbed the spot with her left hand.

Brandon’s face loomed in front of the cabinet door. “You’re not trying to do plumbing, are you?” His face registered disbelief.

Surprised at his reaction, she bristled. Who did he think did all the repairs around the house? She ducked out from under the twist of pipes. “I repaired the light switch and the doorbell.” Although what she thought would be an easy job hadn’t been.

A frown wrinkled Brandon’s face. “But plumbing? That’s always hard. If you mess with one thing something else goes wrong.”

She twisted to face him. “Since when do you know so much about plumbing?”

“Mike’s dad’s always botching a job.” His frown spread to a crooked grin. “We just laugh.”

“Stop laughing at people’s attempts to save money, Bran. You need to think about that yourself. I’m not an ATM machine.” She pushed one knee to the floor, grasp the sink rim and rose. “Why are you late? I’ve been home from work for an hour, and I’m at the school longer than you.”

“I watched baseball practice.” He looked away, his expression growing belligerent. “I’d be playing ball if you’d get off my back, Mom. The doctor’s have more faith in me than you have. I’ve been great for two years. I got energy, and—”

“Then how about helping out around here.” She swung her arm toward the backyard. “The flowers will never grow underneath all those autumn leaves that you were supposed to rake last October.”

Brandon pivoted on his heel and marched through the doorway into the dining room. “Forget it. You’ll never understand.”

She listened to his footsteps thump down the hall followed by the slam of his bedroom door. Lately they’d been at odds, and no matter what she did, according to Brandon, was wrong. Her income working in the high school office didn’t buy them steaks and designer jeans. She’d learned to budget and watch her pennies. Brandon expected her to be his financier and housekeeper. When Tom died, life changed. Not only had she lost her husband, but Brandon had lost his father. She understood girls. Boys, she didn’t.

Ava sank onto a kitchen chair, eyed the wrench and set it on the table. Now that she started the plumbing job, she wished she hadn’t. Brandon had been right. She’d resolved the faucet leak, but now water dripped under the sink. She felt stupid. If she’d taken Quinn’s offer, everything would be fixed. But taking advantage of his kindness wasn’t her way.

Pulling up her shoulders, she rose and headed down the hall to Brandon’s room. She stood a moment before giving the door a tap. “Bran. Let’s talk.”

“Thanks anyway.” His deep mumble penetrated the door.

Her little boy had vanished a year ago, maybe last summer between his fourteenth and fifteenth birthdays. He’d shot up three inches, and she had to look up at him now. He used to let her kiss his cheek and give him a hug. That ended with the growth spurt. All she got now was “Mommmmm” spread out as if the letters were on grease. She missed the affection.

Her pulse tripped again as Quinn’s face dangled in her thoughts. She’d tried to push it aside. Life kept her too busy to deal with a man. A woman needed enough time and energy to develop a relationship with someone. She shook her head. What made her think the man had an interest in anything other than helping with her plumbing. Why had she stressed she tried to save money? She didn’t want Quinn’s pity.

“Brandon.” She knocked harder. “Open the door.”

It flew open, startling her. Brandon glanced at her, then pointed toward the window. “There’s some guy looking at the house. I’ve been watching him.”

“Some guy?” She followed him across the room to the front of the house, and when she looked out, her heart stopped. “Oh, my.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I know him.” She dropped the edge of the curtain. “That’s the man who backed into me.”

“You mean the fender-denter?”

She wanted to wash the smug look from his face. “I meant bender and you know it.” Why did she keep calling it that? And why was Quinn out there? Her pulse clipped to a trot.

“He’s probably a nutcase.” He strutted for the door. “I’ll tell him to get his—”

“Brandon, no.” Her heart knotted in her throat. “I’ll take care of it.”

He spun around. “Look, Mom. I’m the man in this family and—”

“And I’m your mother. Thank you, but I’ll take care of it.” She strode toward the door, then stopped. “And he’s not a nutcase.”

“Right.”

She ignored his sarcasm and continued to the front door, but when she grasped the knob, she paused. Seeing him sitting in his car at the curb had sent her over the edge. With her lungs on overload, she gasped for air. Focus. Focus. Her mind raced to find a logical explanation as to why Quinn had parked in front of her house. It wasn’t a coincidence. That she was certain.

Plying her courage, she pulled open the door and stepped onto the porch.

As soon as he noticed her, Quinn stepped from the SUV and headed up the sidewalk. “Sorry. I should have called.”

“How do you know where I live?” She forced her voice past her constricted lungs.

A frown broke on his face. “Well, I…”

His discomfort caught her off guard.

“I looked… There aren’t any other Ava Darnells in the white pages.”

“You looked in the phone book?” Her pitch had raised a notch. “Why?”

He evaded her eyes for a moment, then gave her a direct look. “I wondered about your plumbing and about your car. I see you got it back. It looks great.”

“It does. Thanks.” Ava tugged on the hem of her blouse. “Quinn, I… That wasn’t a very warm greeting. You surprised me.” Her emotions had waged a war between temptation and concern. “I’m glad you stopped in. I repaired the leak, but now I have another problem.” She grasped the knob. “Would you like to come in?”

He faltered. “Is it okay?”

She nodded and opened the storm door, beckoning him inside.

As she stepped in behind him, Brandon stood in the hallway door, scrutinizing their guest. “This is my son. Brandon, this is Mr. O’Neill.”

Quinn extended his hand while Brandon eyed it a moment before accepting his handshake. “So, you’re the guy who ran into my mother.”

His accusatory tone seemed to throw Quinn. He did a double take, his gaze searching hers and then flying back to Brandon.

“Bran, apologize.” She tilted her head toward Quinn. “It was an accident.”

Belligerence darkened his face. “I’m sorry you hit my mother’s car.” He spun on his heel and headed into his room.

Ava’s jaw sagged, and she stood gaping at the empty doorway before regaining her wits. “I apologize for my son. He’s in a little snit today, and he’s taken it out on you.” She stepped toward the hallway. “I’ll tell him to—”

“Please, don’t.” He peered past her. “Is the kitchen that way?” He gestured toward the dining room archway.

She nodded. “Follow me.” Ava strode ahead of him, wanting to barge into Brandon’s room and give him a piece of her mind, but Quinn had asked her to drop it. She’d handle Brandon later.

Quinn walked to the sink and eyed the faucet. “I don’t see the problem.”

His relieved expression confused her until she realized he hadn’t heard what she’d said. “It’s a new situation. I’m afraid I did something wrong when I repaired the faucet. Now I have a drip under the sink.” She opened the door and motioned inside.

He stared at it a moment before crouching down and peering in.

She sensed Quinn didn’t want to get dirty, because he only reached inside to feel the pipes. Finally he shoved his head beneath the sink farther, then knelt and reached back into the cabinet. “I think I spot your problem.”

“Really?”

“Did you use the sprayer recently?”

She studied him, not understanding his question. “I often use it to rinse dishes or the sink.”

“I’m sure it’s the hose on your sprayer. That’s where the water’s dripping.” He drew his head from beneath the cabinet, accomplishment filling his face. “Probably a small hole or crack in it. After you use it, you’ll find the water.”

Her heart melted. She’d never seen his full smile, his blue eyes twinkled and lines crinkled above his cheeks like George Clooney.

“Listen.” He rose from his crouch, his smile fading. “I have to be honest.”

Honest? She froze. What would he spring on her now?

“I don’t know a thing about plumbing, but I do think it’s the hose. They’re flexible tubing—plastic, I think—and I suppose they wear out in time.”

He didn’t know a thing about plumbing? The admission threw her. “But you offered to come over and take a look.”

He shrugged. “I wanted to help.”

Embarrassment heightened his skin tone, and it made her smile. “Thanks for spotting the problem. That should be easy to fix.”

“You think so?” He gave her a questioning look.

“I can fix it.” Brandon’s voice surged into the room before he appeared.

Quinn jerked his head toward him. “Great. It’s nice your mom has a man to help around the house.”

Brandon’s eyes narrowed as he studied Quinn. “Yeah, I am the man of the house, but can you convince her of that?”

Once again, Brandon had stopped Quinn in his tracks. The boy needed a little fatherly discipline. He rubbed his hands together, then shoved one in his pocket. “I suspect your problem is solved.” He took a step toward the kitchen door. “I should go.”

Before Ava could stop him, Quinn gave a wave and strode toward the front of the house. She spun around to face Brandon, then swallowed her anger, but by the time she recovered her footing, Quinn had reached his vehicle and climbed in. She returned to the kitchen to speak with Brandon, but he had vanished, too.

She sank into the kitchen chair again, trying to sort out what had happened. Brandon could be mouthy with her, but she’d never seen him act that way with others. The incident roiled in her mind until the reason struck her. Brandon resented Quinn in the house. She’d never anticipated that kind of reaction from him. Never.

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