Inspired by a real-life heroine

ROBYN CARR

SHELTERING HEARTS
Dear Reader,

Harlequin has long been a steadfast supporter of causes that are of concern to women. It is our commitment to this principle that led us to establish the Harlequin More Than Words program in 2004. As our primary philanthropic initiative, the More Than Words program celebrates and rewards women who make outstanding contributions to their community.

One such woman is Rhonda Clemons, founder of Zoë Institute in Tahlequah, Oklahoma and a recipient of a Harlequin More Than Words award. Her selfless desire to help other single mothers facing adversity provided the inspiration for this novella, Sheltering Hearts, by New York Times bestselling author Robyn Carr. Ms. Carr donated her time and creative talents to this project, and I think you’ll agree, it’s a heartwarming tribute to Rhonda and her work.

Some of our most celebrated authors—Joan Johnston, Christina Skye, Rochelle Alers and Maureen Child—have also contributed to the Harlequin More Than Words program this year. Their stories, inspired by our other Harlequin More Than Words award recipients, are available, along with Ms. Carr’s, in More Than Words, Volume 6 wherever books are sold. All proceeds from the sale of the book will be reinvested in the Harlequin More Than Words program, further supporting causes that are of concern to women.

Please visit www.HarlequinMoreThanWords.com for more information, or to submit a nomination for next year’s awards.

Now, it is my great pleasure to present Sheltering Hearts; I hope it warms your heart and inspires the real-life heroine in you!

Sincerely,

Donna Hayes
Publisher and CEO
Harlequin Enterprises Ltd.
Sheltering Hearts

Robyn Carr
New York Times bestselling author Robyn Carr takes readers back to her beloved Virgin River country in this heartwarming tribute to Rhonda Clemons, founder of Zoë Institute and a winner of a Harlequin More Than Words award.

By discovering a seed of compassion and nurturing it to effect real change, the dedicated women selected as Harlequin More Than Words award recipients make our world a better place. To celebrate their accomplishments, bestselling authors have honored the winners by writing short stories inspired by their lives and work.

This special eBook is yours at no charge because Harlequin is committed to celebrating women’s efforts and supporting the causes that are meaningful to them. By sharing Rhonda Clemons’ story, we hope to turn awareness into action and mobilize others to make a difference.

To find out more or to nominate a woman you know, please visit www.HarlequinMoreThanWords.com.
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ABOUT MORE THAN WORDS
Until April 1997 Rhonda Clemons enjoyed the perfect life in Warner, Oklahoma. She had a master’s degree, a good job, three children and a happy marriage. She had a strong support network of friends and a rich spiritual life. Then one day Rhonda’s husband, Michael, came home with tragic news. During a regular exam his dentist had discovered a small sore on the side of his tongue, and it had turned out to be cancer.

Nothing was ever the same again.

Yet amid the chaos and pain of the diagnosis, and the chemotherapy and radiation treatments, Rhonda and Michael received incredible—some would say miraculous—news. Rhonda was pregnant again with the couple’s fourth child. As Michael’s strength waned, Rhonda’s pregnancy blossomed. But despite aggressive treatments and Michael’s own strength, he died a mere eleven months after learning he had the disease. Less than three weeks later, Rhonda delivered their youngest son, Noah Benjamin.

Suddenly Rhonda was a single mother with four children to care for, nurture and feed. And although Rhonda is blessed with a natural can-do attitude and energy to burn, she was not prepared for life as a solo parent.

“I had a master’s degree and a career. I was in church and I had a good family. I was treated well, and we had life insurance. I had this pile of advantages and it was still so difficult for me,” she says today.

Through the haze of sleepless nights caring for a newborn and grief over her loss, Rhonda turned to her friends, family and faith for support. Still, she was exhausted and overwhelmed. So in a flash of inspiration fueled by desperation, Rhonda found babysitting for her children and booked a weekend alone at a cabin in the woods. She needed time to heal, write in her journal and think about what she would do with the rest of her life.

It was in that cabin that an idea came to her that would change not only her own life, but also the lives of countless other single mothers facing hardship. The idea manifested itself as Zoë Institute, a faith-based, long-term support agency for single women and their kids.

“Half of our families are trying to raise children as single moms with none of the advantages I had. They’ve never been treated well in a relationship, they have no education and no career, and I’m thinking, ‘How in the world do they do it?’” she says.

The Greek word zoë means “life,” and it’s that concept that steers everything Rhonda does.

“It’s what I want to be,” says Rhonda. “I don’t want to be a Band-Aid. I want a place where these women can come long-term and find out they are valuable, where they can be educated, mentored, encouraged and supported as they become the best family possible.”

Inspiration and dedication for single moms

Rhonda first expected Zoë, established in 2004, to run as a part-time side project to accompany her paying work as a professional grant writer. The original goal was to help 100 single-mom families that first year. But after the organization’s big, splashy launch—a well-attended conference on Valentine’s Day weekend for single moms and their kids—word spread. Soon 200 to 300 women per month were contacting Zoë for help and guidance. Today that number has increased to between 300 and 400 families per month.

Although the main concept has remained the same—offering single mothers a place to visit and connect with other single mothers, while receiving professional and personal guidance—the number of services has grown.

Today Zoë Institute offers educational programs through support groups to help women kick negative relationship patterns with abusive spouses and boyfriends and choose healthy relationships down the road. Trained volunteers give classes in parenting, boundary setting and life skills. Zoë also gives women one-on-one mentoring opportunities with positive role models. Finally, Zoë Institute operates the “Hands of Grace” warehouse, which distributes diapers, clothing, shoes, toys, furniture, appliances and hygiene products to struggling families in the area.

Under Rhonda’s leadership, Zoë’s success stories abound. For example, Zoë Institute once reached out to a local homeless family living under a bridge. They now have a house to call their own.

In another case a couple of years ago, a woman came to Rhonda clutching a two-year-old toddler and a five-week-old baby, desperate for any help she could receive. She had just left her abusive husband, who had belittled
and abused her physically for years. Rhonda’s voice softens as she describes the meeting. “She came into my office and couldn’t even look at me. She was so beaten down, all she could do was cry,” says Rhonda. “This lady told me horrible stories of abuse. Her ex-husband even regulated the number of toilet paper squares she could use every day.”

Rhonda hooked the woman up with emergency supplies and support groups to help guide her through feelings of despair and inadequacy. The charity also steered her into the Habitat for Humanity network.

Today the woman is a new person. She divorced her husband, terminated his parental rights and now lives in a new home with her children.

“She’s graduating college in a few weeks,” says Rhonda, sounding enthusiastic. “Women get into this victim mentality, but with good education, good information and a support system, they can make it.”

**Working together with a mission**

Ask Rhonda what most surprises her about these past few years since Zoë got off the ground and she’s quick to point to her sixty volunteers. Rhonda herself takes a very small salary for her work at Zoë Institute, but her volunteers are involved in everything, including running workshops, teaching Celebrate Recovery addiction groups in local detention centers and picking up, sorting and cleaning community drop-off items. She says she continues to be amazed by their dedication.

“I didn’t know people would just work for you day after day and not get paid. I didn’t know people actually did that kind of stuff,” she says.

But they do, particularly when funds are tight, as they are for Zoë Institute. Still, Rhonda is a true motivator. Often out of the house by 6:30 a.m. and back again after 9:00 p.m., she’s a whirlwind of activity and nerve.

“I have a lot of energy. I’m just one of those people who hits the ground running at 5:00 a.m. and go, go, go,” she says, laughing and mentioning that she might like to hit the motivational-speaker circuit someday. “I’m like a tornado. People are either sucked in and they get as excited about life as I do—or they’re scared away!”

In reality, Rhonda remains humble, relying on her staff, volunteers, children and her faith to keep herself grounded. She says all these elements come together to give her community a place like Zoë Institute.

“It’s not me—I’m just a vessel that God uses,” she says. “I was simply brave enough to step out in faith on this idea—and all of this exploded!”

For more information, visit [www.zoeinstitute.com](http://www.zoeinstitute.com) or write to Zoë Institute, 1009 S. Muskogee Avenue, Tahlequah, OK, 74464.
ROBYN CARR

As Dory Finn pulled her twelve-year-old Pathfinder up the drive to her little house in the country, she noticed the engine was skipping, and something was making a very ugly noise. She tried to ignore that. She had thought it was the battery because of the way the car wanted to die at stoplights, but this was something new and sounded much more serious.

The battery problem she could handle. She’d spent the past couple of days shifting into Park at stop signs and lights, and revving the engine to keep it going until she could replace the battery. Now it was apparent her problem could be bigger than a battery. “Come on, old girl…” she said to the car. “Come on…” She just didn’t have the money for a major car repair. And even a new used car was out of the question.

The little house that her uncle Joe had left her wasn’t in a regular neighborhood, but on the outskirts of Fortuna, California, in a group of fairly isolated houses. She had very few neighbors, but there was a new guy just moving in next door. Clay Kennedy. A big moving box balanced on one shoulder, Clay turned toward her noisy car. And he frowned—undoubtedly at the expensive sound the Pathfinder had just made.

She frowned as well, but her attention moved from the noise of a sick car to the shoulders on that man. The Realtor had introduced them a couple of weeks ago when Clay was due to close escrow on his house, which was almost identical to her own little abode. Actually, all the houses on the wide bend in the river were alike, having been vacation homes at one point.

Apparently Clay had lived in the area his entire life. He was a firefighter—thus the wide strong shoulders, flat belly and narrow hips. Seemed like a nice enough guy, but a flirtatious bachelor was exactly what Dory didn’t need.

The minute she put the car in Park, the engine quit. She bit back a curse.

“Hey,” he said. “Dory, right?”

“Right,” she said. “And you’re…?”

“Clay Kennedy,” he said, smiling.

Surely he couldn’t have guessed that she’d known his name all along, that she’d remembered it. Nah.

“Um, got a car problem?”

“Not as bad as it sounds, I’m sure. I’ll take care of it,” she said.

“Is there a… Well, is there a husband or boyfriend who can give you a hand with that?” he asked.

“I’ve got it handled,” she said.

He put his hands in his pockets and smiled lazily. “Single?”

“As it happens,” she said.

“Well, what a coincidence,” he said, shoving his hands deeper in his pockets, rocking back on his heels. “So am I.”

“Yes,” she said, “that’s what you told me when we met. Remember?”

“Ah. So you remember that part, huh? Good.” He peered into the car. “They’re awful quiet in there.” He winked at her kids before he straightened. “They always that well behaved?”

“Yes, they’re very good,” she said, but what she thought was—sometimes she wished they weren’t. Kids who came from abusive or dysfunctional homes were often a little too good, walking on eggshells, without realizing they were being overly cautious so as not to set anything off. Although she’d been the sole parent since Austin was two and Sophie four, she worried sometimes that they were still reacting to the craziness of their very early childhood. She opened the back door. “Let’s go, you two. Come on.”

But then they got out of the car like normal kids, grabbing backpacks, racing each other to the house, Austin tripping to go splat and Sophie laughing and making fun, beating him to the front door. That comforted Dory.
She started to follow when Clay said, “Dory?”
She turned. “Hmm?”
“I don’t suppose you’d like to go out sometime?”
“I don’t suppose,” she said, but at least she smiled when she said it. Then she turned again and moved on.
“Why not?” She turned back and saw him pull the neck of his T-shirt away from his body and sniff. “I’ll shower and everything.”
She almost laughed, but in the end she decided it would be better to be firm. “Nothing personal. Just too much on my plate, Clay. Thanks for asking.” She turned back again. “But that shower thing—good idea, before a date.”
She heard his laughter at her back as she went into the house.
It was true—she was too busy to date. With her full-time job at a large grocery store in Fortuna, plus as much overtime as she could wrangle, two kids and involvement in an organization working to support single mothers, there wasn’t much time left over. Certainly none for dating. Why would she date anyway? Not only didn’t she trust her instincts with men, but she had no intention of being the female half of a couple. Her only experience with that had gone very, very badly.
Tonight, after a quick dinner, she had to go to a support group for single moms held in the basement of a local church. All the women took their kids along—they were single moms, often without any backup support. Everyone pitched in to pay one of the mothers’ teenage daughters to keep an eye on the kids in a Sunday school room right down the hall.
Three years ago Dory had gone to one of those support group meetings because she needed support. It didn’t take long before she’d been recruited by a couple of women to help them grow the organization into a bona fide nonprofit agency dedicated to helping single moms and their kids. They’d come a long way—churches, businesses and individuals supported their efforts and they were writing grants all the time. Though the women were always striving to do more, they’d already managed a couple of two-day educational conferences for single mothers, something they planned to do at least every summer. They also now had a house that served as a shelter for victims of abuse, and there was a waiting list to get in! A bank account had recently been set up from which they withdrew money for things like gas chits, utilities deposits, emergencies. Some of the women who hooked up with their group were in desperate need of absolutely everything. Volunteers also carried donated supplies in the backs of their cars—powdered milk and formula, diapers, some canned goods, soap and shampoo, cereal and baby food. One day they planned to have an actual center with an emergency food bank.
When she and the kids got back into the Pathfinder after dinner, Clay was on his front porch, feet up on the rail, drinking a soda. She gave a wave; he gave a wave. And Austin gave an enthusiastic wave. She sometimes felt bad for Austin—he could use a positive male role model in his life. But Dory doubted she’d ever be willing to take that kind of chance.
She started the car, and voilà! No terrible sound! Started right up! Jeez, these old cars with a million miles on ‘em could be quite temperamental. She was so happy that she found herself grinning victoriously at Clay from behind the wheel. And he, smiling slightly, raised his can of cola in a toast.
A couple of hours later, returning from the support group, she was almost home when she heard the sound again. But just a little and not for long. She pumped the brakes—at least they worked well. Whatever it was, she’d ask around at her next single moms’ support group to see if anyone had a friend or brother who’d be willing to just diagnose it for her. That would make her feel better.
When Dory got home from work the next day, her grass was cut. Her grass had been cut? Well, she might’ve let it get a little tall, but it was only April! She always caught up eventually and it wasn’t as if there was a neighborhood association monitoring upkeep out here by the river.
Her new neighbor was at the side of his house, hosing off a shiny new riding lawn mower. Something in her gut clenched and an unwelcome memory surfaced. Her ex-husband, Todd, nicknamed Trip, used to do those kinds of neighborly things. In fact, he was so dang helpful in their little Oklahoma neighborhood, everyone thought he was just the nicest guy….
The kids got out of the car, dragging backpacks. “I’ll be right in,” Dory said to them. And then she walked over to her neighbor’s yard.
He turned off the hose, smiled at her and said, “Hey, Dory. How’s it going?”
“You don’t have to cut my grass,” she said. “I have a lawn mower. I can get it done.”
“It’s no trouble,” he said. “Glad to help.”
“I wish you wouldn’t.”
He frowned at her. “I said I didn’t mind. Why don’t you want my help, anyway?”
She thought for a second. She didn’t want to get reeled in, that’s why. But she said, “Listen, I’m just too busy to be repaying grass-cutting favors.”
“Yeah, I got that—busy. Look, that’s perfectly fine. I didn’t have any kind of repayment in mind.”

“But it’s a pretty big yard!”

“Dory, it’s a riding lawn mower,” he said, throwing an arm wide toward it. “It’s kinda fun, to tell the truth.” Then, for no reason she could immediately figure out, he crouched. “Hey, what’s your name?”

Austin had followed Dory and now stood right behind her. He just stared at Clay for a second until Dory said, “It’s okay.”

“Austin,” he said shyly.

“Well, Austin—want a ride on my new lawn mower?”

“We need to get dinner…” Dory said.

“A very short ride?” Clay asked. Then he stood and looked into her eyes.


She sighed. “Please be careful,” she said to Clay.

“I’m very careful,” he said. “Come here, Austin. I’ll drive you over to your front door.”

Austin scrambled excitedly onto Clay’s lap and Clay revved up the lawn mower, lifted the blades off the ground and let Austin put his hands on the steering wheel. Then they started off toward Dory’s house, taking very wide S-turns getting there, making the ride longer. By the time he delivered Austin to the front porch, sweet Sophie was standing there, a very envious light in her eyes. “Well, I bet you’d like a short ride, too. Ask your mom,” Clay said.

Swell, she thought. She’d pretty much shut down the come-on, so was he planning on winning her over by charming her kids first? Sophie was just watching her with large, imploring eyes. “Mr. Kennedy, this is Sophie. Very quick ride, please. We have to get going,” Dory said reluctantly.

“Very quick,” he said. Austin scrambled off, Sophie scrambled on and Dory stood right in front of her little house, watching and waiting. He made some more of his wide S-turns, stretching out the ride a bit, and she could hear Sophie’s laughter and squees right till they pulled back up in front of the house, and he lifted her down.

“Thanks, Mr. Kennedy,” she said.

“If it’s all right with your mother, I’d like to be called Clay. We’re neighbors,” he said. Then he made a wide turn on his lawn mower, raised a hand and yelled, “Adios!”

And Dory thought, _Oh, man, I have issues. Perfectly nice, helpful man treats me and my kids well and I have problems with it._

_Corsica Rios_ was a social worker who had been a single mother to a young son, whom she had raised into a fine man. It went without saying that she was sensitive to the many needs of single moms. Corsica moderated their support group and was the person who had originally recruited Dory to help her and a couple of her friends grow one small community effort into a nonprofit agency with many volunteers.

Dory had learned so much from Corsica in just a few years, including fundraising, writing grants and networking, all so that single moms who found them got what they needed. Being part of such an effort filled a need in Dory, because it hadn’t been very long ago that Dory had found herself suddenly alone in Oklahoma with two little kids, behind in rent, no job, no money. Back then it was an angel named Rhonda, a single mother and founder of the Zoë Institute in Oklahoma, who had helped Dory get back on her feet. A year later Dory’s uncle Joe had died and left her the little house on the river in Fortuna, California, mortgage free. Now it was her turn, with other volunteers, to give back.

When Dory got to her next support group meeting there were a total of nine women in attendance, five of whom needed shoring up by what the volunteers had named The Single Mother’s Resource Agency. In addition to Dory and Corsica there were a couple of Corsica’s friends from a little town upriver called Virgin River. Paige Middleton had met the group in much the same way Dory had when she sought their help for herself—she had once been a single mother and refugee from a violent first marriage. Mel Sheridan was Virgin River’s nurse practitioner and midwife. Both ladies lent their considerable experience to the cause. The four of them now made up what constituted their organization’s board of directors.

The other five women were new. One was very young, only twenty-three, and already the mother of two, just getting out of her second abusive relationship. There was also a thirty-six-year-old mother of two teenage girls, getting divorced after a long struggle. Though new to the area, she was living with a sister who had a stable home. Another was forty and recently widowed, her teenage children struggling with the loss of their father. Then there was a forty-two-year-old mother of four who had been abandoned by her spouse of twenty-two years and was not only unemployed, but had never worked a day outside her home during her marriage. Finally, there was a thirty-four-year-old mother of two sons—aged ten and twelve—who had been divorced a few years. Her name was Elizabeth.
After an hour of group support dialogue, moods all around were more hopeful. And after group, there was a little hands-on help. Corsica helped one woman go over the catalog of college courses and fill out an application for student aid, while Paige helped another complete the paperwork to qualify for food stamps. Dory went through want ads with a third, while Mel went out to her truck and pulled out powdered milk, dry soup mix, diapers and canned meat for the fourth. Dory asked who could use gas coupons for free gas and handed out four ten-dollar chits.

They had given each one of the women a little help. They hadn’t saved anyone, but they’d provided assistance. And next week they’d provide a little more. And the week after that, and after that, and after that… It was a process that was ongoing and not finished quickly—Dory could attest to that. Four years after escaping a nightmare of a marriage, she was still recovering. But she was so much stronger, so much healthier and self-sufficient. Now she knew that, not only would she make it, giving herself and her children a good life, but she would thrive.

Before leaving that night, she approached the only woman who didn’t seem in dire need. Elizabeth. Dory asked, “Is there anything special I can help you with?”

“I have all the essentials covered, thanks,” she said.

There was a real hint of sadness in her eyes, in her voice, which Dory picked up on. “Listen,” she said, “I’m going to grab my kids and get them some ice cream at the McDonald’s down the street. I could stand a cup of coffee. You?”

And then Elizabeth smiled, grateful. “That would be great. My kids are with my sister, so I have some time.”

Just based on the comments Elizabeth had made during group, Dory wasn’t all that surprised by what she learned over coffee. The woman had a pretty good job and a lot of family help to make up for her ex-husband’s lapses in child support and visitation. “I’ve been divorced three years now. Half of me wishes my ex would be better about spending time with the boys just so they’d be clear that he really cares about them, but the other half doesn’t push because he’s not always the greatest role model. But my dad, brothers-in-law and brother are…they pick up the slack and the boys seem to be well-adjusted.”

“That’s lucky. How old are they?”

“Ten and twelve. Typical boys. Good kids.” She glanced down into her cup for a moment. “I don’t have the kind of problems the women I met tonight have. I should be so grateful. I almost felt guilty taking up chair space tonight.”

“Oh, heavens, don’t! I’m sure you had a reason for coming out to support group.” Dory paused, then said, “If you don’t mind me asking, what kind of problems do you have?”

She gave a half smile. “Nothing that compares to some of the situations I heard tonight. I have three sisters—all with good marriages. And they’re very supportive. But to tell the truth, sometimes I just get so lonely. I thought maybe some women in the same boat, with situations like mine…”

“I can relate,” Dory said. “I guess that means you’re not dating…”

“I’ve had some dates,” she said with a shrug. “Actually, a few nice guys have asked me out, and I’ve been seeing one regularly lately—it’s not serious, though. Nothing seems to shiver me timbers, as my dad would say.” Then she smiled.

Dory laughed. “I have an idea, something for you to think about… You might not be in need of gas coupons or food or shelter from an abuser, but please don’t let that stop you from attending our support group—we can all use people to talk to. We don’t weigh the problems to see who has the heaviest load. We just deal. You know? I understand how hard it is to keep up with everything when it’s all on you, but more than half of our volunteers are single moms. They volunteer because they know how tough it can be and they want to help. We’re getting some amazing things done and we’re growing into a real significant resource, one that’s even more important now that the economy is down and government benefits are being cut like mad. We need the help, Elizabeth—would you consider becoming a volunteer? I can guarantee you’d meet some fantastic people.”

“How’d you get into it?” she asked.

“Exactly like this. I needed some emotional support and found the group. It felt as good to give support as it did to get it, and then Corsica recruited me to help her develop this organization so it could assist more women and kids. We’ve come such a long way in three years. It’s become so important to me. I work full-time as a checker at a grocery store—that pays my bills. But this work feeds my heart.”

“I don’t know that I have a lot of time, but I sure have some,” she said. “I think I’d like that. I think my heart needs a little something.”

As often happened after support group meetings, Dory’s thoughts turned to her own story as she drove home. She had lost her parents when she was young—she didn’t even remember them. Her mother and father were killed in a freak traffic accident. Though Dory had been in the car with them, she was not only spared, but uninjured. She was sent to
live with her father's much older brother and his wife. Her aunt and uncle took her in when they were already in their fifties, a couple who had not had children until she was sent to them.

She grew up in Fresno, California, as an only child. The little Humboldt County house that she and her children now called home had been inherited from her uncle Joe. It was a very small three-bedroom, fifty-year-old vacation home and a place he had stayed while on hunting trips. Dory remembered fun summers and long weekends there—running in the woods, fishing in the river, catching fireflies.

There was no real reason for her to have ultimately found herself in an abusive marriage—she had been raised in a loving home. It wasn’t easy, though, when she was a young teen to have “parents” so much older than all the other moms and dads. Her aunt and uncle were understandably nervous and resistant to Dory’s idea of cool clothes, fun pastimes, acceptable behavior, music and friends. She’d roll up her skirt on the way to school, and while riding the bus put on makeup she wasn’t supposed to wear. She had been a bit rebellious—defying them now and then—but she had been a good kid.

And she always knew her aunt and uncle loved her, wanted the best for her.

Trip Jones was a couple of years older than Dory and a high school dropout. Uncle Joe had strictly forbidden her to date him, so she pretended to go to girlfriends’ houses to get around it. But because her aunt and uncle were so much older than her friends’ parents, and old-fashioned besides, she didn’t get much of a frank education about the ways of men and women. Before she knew it, she was in too deep with Trip and he thought he owned her. He could talk her into anything, and he ultimately talked her into running off with him when she was barely eighteen.

The first time he hit her he told her it was because she cried every night that she wanted to go home. Things only escalated from there, and before she knew it they’d been together five years, she was the mother of two small children and her life had become one giant nightmare.

But God had been looking out for her. They eventually ended up in a small Oklahoma town, and it was there she found help in the form of the Zoë Institute. Her life was forever changed. And now she was forging ahead, trying to help others in a similar way.

Over the next couple of weeks Dory got to know Elizabeth a little better. They had coffee with Corsica and talked about where her volunteer time could best be spent. Elizabeth worked for a local big-box store in the accounting department. She wasn’t a CPA, but she was an experienced bookkeeper and had lived locally for a long time, so she could be a big help with fundraising and public relations. When it was time for their annual conference for single moms, she could maybe teach a workshop on money management, applying for loans and benefits, budgeting, etc.

She also got to know Clay, because at home there were also developments. When Clay was around, he was always doing little things for her without being asked. One morning, as she was pushing her large garbage canister down her drive to the main road, he intercepted her and took it off her hands. And a couple of days later, when Austin was outside pitching his ball up in the air, Clay appeared to toss it with him. Dory went out onto the porch and yelled at Austin not to bother Mr. Kennedy.

“We’re just playing!” Clay hollered back. “It’s not a problem at all!”

Then Sophie actually came outside to join them. It seemed both her kids were interested in playing ball now that summer had arrived, and while Dory might like to think of an excuse to criticize Clay, the truth was it was good for them to have an adult to play ball with them.

And then she came home to find her grass cut. Again.

But the last straw came that afternoon when she looked outside in the yard for Austin and he wasn’t there. Dory yelled into the house, “Sophie, do you know where your brother is?”

“Nope,” she yelled back from her bedroom.

Dory walked around her little house calling, but no Austin. She saw that Clay’s big SUV was parked in front of his house—would Austin have gone into the house with Clay? Up to now Clay had limited himself to catching the kids outside and maybe tossing the ball around for a little while. In spite of herself, she was catching on to his schedule—it seemed as though he worked about every other day, occasionally off for a couple of days in a row.

She ran up his porch steps and knocked on the screen door; the inside door had been left open. “Hello? Austin?” she yelled when no one answered her knock.

Austin was not there. She yelled for him and he didn’t answer.

Dory suddenly felt a heaviness in her gut and her heart began to race. Even though Clay’s car was right there and he was clearly nearby, even though Sophie was safe in the house, she was remembering a long time ago. Four years past. Trip had beaten her senseless. Up till then he’d been known to lose his temper and whack her around, but that time he’d hurt her badly. Frightened of the consequences, he had grabbed the kids—aged two and four at the time—
Dory, driven by fear and flashback, ran down the path toward the river. Austin was never to go to the river without a grown-up! Of the two kids, Austin was the more likely to defy her rules, but even he rarely did so. She screamed, “Austin! Austin! Austin!” as she ran. And when she burst through the trees, she saw them at river’s edge, sitting on the bank. Austin held a long fishing pole, and Clay sat next to him, knees drawn up, encircling the boy with his arms. “Austin!” she yelled.

They both turned to look at her, and both stood up. She converged on them, but she got down in front of Austin, grabbing his upper arms. “I couldn’t find you!” she almost screamed. “What are you doing here? You aren’t supposed to be here!”

Austin had a wild, terrified look on his face. His mother never screamed at him! “But Clay’s grewed up!” he said. “You can’t leave the yard without asking! Without telling me where you’re going! I was scared to death!” She gave him a little shake. “I couldn’t find you!”

“He won’t again,” Clay said calmly. He reached down and lifted Dory’s elbow, urging her to her feet. “He followed me. The next time he says it’s okay, I’ll be sure to check with you myself. I should’ve thought of that.”

She turned on him. “What were you thinking? That you can just do whatever you want where my kids are concerned, like you’re…you’re… Like you’re their uncle or something?”

“I probably was thinking like that,” he said with a shrug. “My sisters all have kids—they all trust me with their kids.” He wiped a thumb under her eyes, along her cheek. “Hey, I’m really sorry. It’ll never—”

“That’s completely irresponsible! You’re not my brother. I hardly know you! I don’t know your sisters, either, and you—”

“I scared you,” he said very softly. “But now I think you might be scaring Austin. I am sorry—it won’t happen again. Can we ratchet it down a notch? Smooth out that screech? Everyone is fine.”

She drew in a jagged breath. “I was… I was so scared….”

He lifted an eyebrow. “First time he’s gotten away from you?” He wiped his thumb under the other cheek. “One of my nephews crossed a busy street to put a nickel in a gumball machine when he was only two—took about ten years off my sister’s life. Thank God that didn’t happen on my watch or I’d never have heard the end of it. Come on, let’s go back. Nothing’s biting. Try to relax.”

She took a deep breath. “Run on home, Austin,” she said calmly.

He took off as if the seat of his pants was on fire and Clay chuckled as he began to walk back.

“Something’s funny?” she asked, an angry edge to her voice.

“Look at him go. He’s afraid he’s going to get whipped. You don’t do that, I hope. Because if you do, you should really go after me—it’s my fault. I should’ve just thought about it for a second and I’d have realized, I’m not up on your house rules. I would’ve marched him right back home and we’d have asked you together.”

“Just why are you chumming up to my kids, anyway?” she asked, not even close to calmed down.

He stopped walking. He looked down at her. His brows were drawn together, eyes narrowed. “I like kids,” he said. “I have five nephews and three nieces. I come from a big family. Don’t make this into something not nice.”

“Then why don’t you have kids?” she asked.

“Call me old-fashioned, but since I’m not married…”

“Why aren’t you married?” she demanded.

“I don’t know! I brush and floss!” he shot back. “I’ve had about enough.” And he stalked off ahead of her. Then he stopped and turned back to her. “You know, if we went out on a date, got to know each other a little bit, you might feel better about me playing catch with your kids!”

“I don’t want to date!”

“So you’ve told me!”

Dory watched him walk away and she thought, Oh, man. Oh, no. I totally lost it because I’m still so fragile in some areas—so scared and self-protective. It’s good to be cautious and safe—it’s destructive to go into over-drive.

The biggest part of the problem was, when you had issues like hers—a history of abuse and almost losing her kids—it was sometimes so hard to know when you were being safe and cautious and when you were going over the top.

One thing Dory did know was that her overreaction had scared Austin and insulted Clay.

She knew she had some soul-searching to do. When she allowed herself to fantasize, which was rare, she longed for a trustworthy, caring man in her life. So why when one moved in next door did she push him away? Because she was afraid to trust.

She followed Clay at a comfortable distance. He went into his house, and she went into hers. Dory apologized to Austin, gave him a hug and reminded him to always check with her before going anywhere with anyone. And he promised he would.
CHAPTER TWO

Dory didn’t see Clay for a few days, which was probably for the best—allowing them both time to think about what had happened between them down by the river. He might be avoiding her, which she couldn’t blame him for. But if he was also avoiding the kids, who seemed to really like him, that made her feel kind of bad.

Since she had never had such innocent differences of opinion with her ex-husband, this was new territory for her. She talked to Corsica about the situation. “Perfectly understandable,” Corsica said. “What would resolve the situation is if you could tell him the reason behind your reaction. When you’re comfortable that you trust him, of course."

“He seems trustworthy, but I tend to be overly cautious.”

“Do you like him?” Corsica asked.

“What’s not to like? He’s cute, funny, nice, helpful. But I always worry that I’ll pick up all the wrong signals and a man who is not good for me will seem all right. I’ve been through years of these support group meetings and the number of women who have multiple abusive partners is not small.”

“Give yourself a little credit,” Corsica said. “Your senses are very heightened, your consciousness is sharpened, you pay attention to details. You would definitely pick up clear signals.”

“Are you so sure about that?” Dory asked her.

“Fairly confident,” she said with a shrug. “Listen, you can have a very productive and fulfilling life as a single mother without ever finding a new partner—I certainly have. But there is no crime in actually falling in love and marrying the right man the second time. Take your time. Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.” Then she smiled.

As for her transportation troubles, Dory replaced the Pathfinder’s old battery and for a couple of days it seemed to be running well. That was until she was driving home from work one day and the car started making a lot of bad noises again. Grinding, engine-skipping noises. And she knew that the next thing she absolutely had to do was find out what was wrong.

Then first thing the next morning when she and the kids were leaving the house for work and school, what did she see but her neighbor under the hood of her car, poking around. Her neighbor, whom she hadn’t yet attempted any amends with.

“What are you doing?” she asked him.

“I heard you come home last night,” he said as if talking to the engine. He came out from under the hood. “I don’t like the sounds of the truck. It might be a transmission problem. Listen, here’s an idea. I have a friend who’s a mechanic and will look at it for you, fix it if he can, tow it to his shop if necessary. And he’ll do it on the cheap as a favor to me. I don’t think you should drive the car until this is figured out.”

All that stuff she’d just put to rest over the past couple of days came rising back up again. He was doing too much. That she couldn’t possibly repay him went without saying—she didn’t want to owe him more than she could afford to give, because she feared those feelings of obligation. She didn’t want him making decisions for her, taking over her life! She was afraid he’d begin to control her, isolate her.

Dory’s old tapes were running in her head and she knew it, but it was impossible to stop. She kept hearing Trip’s voice, not Clay’s, even though Trip was never truly helpful—he was purely manipulative and domineering.

An ordinary woman without all her emotional baggage would be able to appreciate a nice man lending a hand now and then, and she so wanted to be an ordinary woman.

Not only was Dory wearing out that old lament, but she was also trying to figure out whether it was safe to take her own car to town, drop the kids off at school and go to a mechanic.

“You can’t be doing that,” she said. “You can’t be making decisions for me!”

He seemed not to even hear her. He closed the hood. “I start a twenty-four-hour shift this morning at the firehouse. If you drop me off at work, you can use my car while yours is being worked on.”

She shook her head. “You can’t do that,” she said sharply. “You can’t tell me what to do, make my decisions for me like that.”

“I’m just trying to help, Dory!”

“You’re telling me what to do—and it’s invasive, controlling and abusive!”

He stared at her in wide-eyed shock.
And Dory stood frozen. Watching his eyes. Thinking. Blushing at her outburst. Finally he smiled slightly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I overreacted.”

“No kidding. I just bring out the best in you, don’t I? I didn’t mean to take away your freedom of choice and, for God’s sake, I would never be abusive. You seem to be a little on edge or something.”

“I have become wary of strange men bearing gifts....”

“Strange men? Come on!”

“Why would your mechanic friend fix my car on the cheap? I mean, that’s suspicious!”

“Because I helped him move three times, landscape his last house and install a fancy hot tub—now, that was a huge pain! We moved these big friggin’ boulders his wife had to have decorating her backyard. And I also babysat three kids overnight so he and the wife could get away for their anniversary. One of the kids had the flu. The stomach flu. He has to fix about nine cars cheaply to get even with me!”

Suddenly she had to cover her mouth so he wouldn’t see her laugh. Mr. Good-Looking Bachelor, wiping up kid puke. She bet that was worth the price of admission. She sobered. “Still. You’re poking around in my car without being asked. Without asking.”

“Because for some reason you won’t let me be a good neighbor!” He took a breath and leaned on the hood of her car.

Sophie and Austin stood on the porch, watching. Clay saw them and softened his voice. “Dory, I’m in the safety business. I have a bunch of nieces and nephews. I’d get in my sisters’ business if I thought there was a chance the vehicle they were taking the kids to school in might not be a hundred percent safe. Let’s not fight about it.”

“Well,” she said, considering, “As long as you think of me as a sister and there’s no more of that date business. Because I don’t date.”

“I thought we might have a good time, but I’m changing my mind about that. You’re too angry about something, and I’m not interested infighting my way through the anger. And since your kids are fun and well-adjusted, I doubt you’re angry all the time—maybe it has something to do with me specifically. So how about if I just lend a hand when it’s no trouble for me and you forget I ever asked you out? How about that? Can we start over then? I swear, I’ll never ask you out again. Believe me, I’ve received your message loud and clear.”

She was flooded with disappointment and relief.

“Besides,” he said. “You’re too busy to date.”

“I am,” she said. “I have my job, plus overtime when I can get it, and I volunteer for this nonprofit organization that helps single moms.” She shrugged. “I have a vested interest there, obviously. Listen, I can’t repay you for all your help.”

“No one cares,” he said.

She sighed heavily. She cleared her throat. “So you don’t think I should drive my car?”

“It could be fine for a while longer, or maybe not. It doesn’t make much sense to drive it if you suspect the transmission is failing. Would you drive it if the brakes weren’t working so well?”

“How do you know it’s the transmission?” she asked.

“It sounds like the transmission—it’s running rough. It’s having trouble with a gear.” He shrugged. “I could be wrong—but it’s a mechanic’s call. Till then, my car will sit at the firehouse for twenty-four hours. You might as well use it. You’ll have to pick me up tomorrow morning when I get off, but if you can’t, let me know and I’ll hitch a ride. You can return my car when you get home.”

“What if you have to run an errand?”

“Not a problem—I have a whole crew with cars and trucks to borrow. I wouldn’t have offered if it was inconvenient. Really, I haven’t been trying to trick you. I was just trying to be a nice guy. The way I was raised, being nice is considered a positive thing.”

She felt like crawling under the car. She was seeing a negative side to her determination to blaze her own trail, be in charge of her own life. “Clay, I’m sorry. Not just about the car, but about everything. I just want to be independent. I’m afraid of giving my will to anyone.”

“Apology accepted. I don’t want to take your will away. I wouldn’t want to spend time with a woman who didn’t want to willingly spend time with me anyway.” He picked up his small duffel. “What’s it gonna be?”

“Clay, may I borrow your car?” she asked, purposely not saying please. She’d have said please to any woman offering a favor, but she feared giving her power to any man, even the nicest man in the world.

“Yes, you may.”

“What will happen to my car?”

“I’ll have my buddy drive out to look at it, and, if need be, he’ll take it in to his shop. Whatever happens next, it’s going to happen with a mechanic, not me.” He swung an arm wide toward his big SUV. “After you.”

“Come on, kids,” she said. “We’re going to school in Clay’s truck.”
Sophie and Austin smiled, shouted hooray and dashed for the SUV. Dory removed the booster seats from the Pathfinder and followed them.

At her back she heard Clay say, “But you can’t make me think of you as a sister.”

Clay was working out in the weight room at the firehouse, straining against the weights. Staying fit and strong was part of his job, but today he’d been at it a little longer than necessary. He was doing biceps curls, concentrating on his breathing, grunting with the effort, pleased by the burn, because he was in a mood.

Then Charlie, one of his work buddies, sauntered over, sat on a bench and propped his feet up on the weight shelf. He sucked his big cola down past the ice, making that loud, annoying slurping noise, so as not to be ignored.

Clay let the barbell fall with a crash. “Do you mind? I can’t concentrate with that going on!”

Charlie lifted his brows and said, “Girl trouble?”

“What? No!” He bent to lift the weights again.

“The little honey next door turn you down again?” Charlie asked casually.

Clay dropped the weights again and got in Charlie’s face. “Do not call her that! It would be a bad idea to call her that!”

“Whoa, Kennedy, get a grip, buddy. I don’t think she heard me.”

Clay backed off immediately, feeling stupid for almost losing his temper. He didn’t have a temper! He was the most sweet-natured guy on the crew. He grabbed his towel and wiped off his neck. “Sorry,” he muttered under his breath.

Charlie slurped through the straw again, making that irritating rattle against the ice at the bottom of his big plastic cup. Then he grinned at Clay’s scowl. “Come on, tell Uncle Charlie what’s wrong. Before you rip all your muscles apart.”

In defeat, Clay sat on the opposite bench. “I did a stupid thing, but that doesn’t mean I know what’s wrong.”

“I think you started the story in the middle there, bud,” Charlie pointed out.

Clay shook his head and took a breath. “Her car’s got mechanical issues. It’s twelve years old and has a billion miles on it anyway, but I know she’s gotta be on a tight budget—she’s a grocery-store clerk with two kids. So I heard her pull in last night, because the thing was grinding and slipping. This morning I decided to take a look, see if I could see anything. She came out of her house and I was under the hood of her car. She didn’t like that so much—that I was digging around in her car without talking to her, without asking her. But I thought I could fix her up with a good mechanic who works cheap—”

“Your buddy Stan?”

“Stan, yeah. He’d do it cheap for a friend of mine if—”

Charlie sat up straighter. “He never did it that cheap for me, and I’m a friend of yours!”

“You’re not a broke woman with a couple of kids! Stan’s got a family to feed, too, you know? You wanna hear this or not?”

“Yeah,” Charlie said in a semi-pout. “Lay it on me.”

“I said she shouldn’t drive the car, especially if it’s the transmission. And told her she could borrow mine. But you know how me doing her a favor always seems to be a big issue with her…”

“If I recall, you’ve done everything but paint her house and she won’t go out with you, if that’s what you mean by an issue,” Charlie said.

Clay narrowed his eyes at his friend, but he continued. “So I suggested she use my car and I’d have Stan look at hers.” He swallowed. “She went ballistic. Accused me of being controlling and abusive.”


Clay hung his towel around his neck. “Thinking about it later, I realized I should’ve knocked on the door, told her I had heard the engine and offered to help instead of just doing what I wanted.”

“Ya think?”

“I just didn’t want her taking any chances. And it seems like if the choice is between accepting a hand from me or taking a chance, she’ll go with the chance.”

Charlie shook his head. “You should brush up on your approach, my brother. The lady is not into you.”

“I’m not going to ask her out again. I promised her that—it upsets her too much. I just wish she’d relax a little and let me be a friend.”

Charlie pitched his empty cup halfway across the room and hit the trash. Then he sat forward, elbows on his knees. “Listen, I know you’re used to good luck with the ladies, although I can’t figure out why. But once in a while you pick out a smart one and get turned down. It doesn’t usually put you all upside down.”

“It’s not me, Charlie. It’s her. She’s got no reason to keep me at such a distance—I haven’t done or suggested
anything that should put her guard up.” He just shook his head. “But I’ve learned my lesson—I haven’t seen a
meltdown like that since my little sister Beth had a conniption fit because someone closed her romance novel and
lost the page.” He smiled. “And with four sisters, I come from experience with conniptions.”

“What’s your plan now?” Charlie asked. “Because for some reason you probably don’t even know, you really like
this girl. I don’t think you’ve been out with anyone else since you moved next door to her.”

Clay stood, tossing the towel and reaching for the weights. “I thought maybe I’d lie low, go slow and lift some
weights.”

DORY FOLLOWED THE directions Clay had given her and went to a hole-in-the-wall garage on the outskirts of Fortuna.
She parked Clay’s big SUV very carefully, away from the front of the garage, conscious that if she put one scratch
on it, it would take forever to save enough to get it fixed.

Before she even got to the opened doors of the garage a man was coming toward her. He was dressed in a gray,
grease-stained jumpsuit, wiping his hands on a red rag. He also had grease on his face—a streak here and there—and
he wore a grin. “You must be Dory.”

She stopped dead in her tracks. “How’d you know?”

He nodded toward the SUV. “You’re driving Clay’s car.”

“Oh. Of course. Well, then…” She cleared her throat.

The man held out his hand and said, “I’m Stan, by the way.”

“Oh, nice to meet you,” Dory said as she shook his hand. “Did you figure out what was wrong with my truck?”

“Yup. Transmission, like Clay thought. I put in a rebuilt one. I usually recommend a new one, but that
Pathfinder’s getting on in years and has almost two hundred thousand miles on it. She’s still in good shape—you
take good care of her—but sooner or later those miles are gonna catch up with you. Might want to think forward a
little.”

“Oh, yeah. I’ll think forward. What am I gonna owe you?”

“I’ll have to write it up—we’re not quite done in there yet. It should be ready by morning. I’ll stay a little late if I
have to. When you pick Clay up from work in the morning, you can swing by here and pick her up. Anyway, I’m
just charging you for the part, so it’s probably gonna be around fourteen hundred dollars….”

She gasped and her hand went to her heart.

“That’s discounted, kiddo,” Stan said. “And no labor.” It took her a minute to catch her breath. And while she was
trying to get a grip, he said, “Three-year warranty. Which, by the way, is a hell of a deal.”

She let out a breath. “I… ah… I…”

“There’s no need to stress. You can pay me a little something every month if you need to,” he said.

She tilted her head. “Why would you do that?”

He shrugged. “Clay asked me to. Said you were a next-door neighbor, a good friend, a single mom who didn’t
have a lot of money to throw around.”

“And that’s all he has to say to get a deal?”

“Well, Clay would do it for me. Plus he said something about you being a volunteer who helped out single moms
who were down on their luck.”

“Oh. That makes a difference?”

“Lots of people, like me and Clay, have family members who fall in that category.”

“Is that so? Like…”

“Me and Clay both have sisters who are single moms.” Stan chuckled. “Clay has sisters coming out his ears, but
one is divorced. I hear support payments are spotty at best and she worries about calling in sick to her job if the kids
need her. He looks out for her, and does his share of babysitting on his days off.” The mechanic shrugged. “The
whole family looks out for her, matter of fact. I have just the one sister, but she’d have a hard time getting by
without me, my wife and our folks.”

For just a second Dory was reminded she had no family and there were too many like her, with either no family or
a family that couldn’t or wouldn’t help. “You both have sisters who are single moms?”

He made a face. “Who doesn’t have a sister—or at least know someone—who’s a single mom? The point being,
it’s relatively easy for our sisters, since they have us. And it’s still hard for them, raising the kids alone, with little, if
any, support from the fathers. They’re weekend dads at best. When you get down to it, even the single moms in the
greatest shape have it rough. I can’t even imagine how hard it is for women without parents, brothers and sisters
willing to help out.”

She just nodded, but she was thinking that maybe she’d tell Clay her story someday, and perhaps enlist his
support for their resource center. One day she’d explain to him about single moms without jobs, places to live,
extended family, transportation, food and, most important, without self-esteem. “Do you mind if I ask—how long have you known him? Clay?”

The mechanic rolled his eyes back in his head as he thought. “Maybe six years or so. I’m a volunteer firefighter. I first met him that way. He’s a friend of the family now.”

“Yeah,” Dory said. “And mover, landscaper, babysitter?”

Stan grinned.

“Funny story?” she asked. “He said he kept your kids overnight and one of them was sick.”

He actually laughed. “That wasn’t the worst of it—the little fella infected Clay. The guy was sick as a dog for three days. He’s still whining about it, to this day. That’s the way it goes. If you have kids, you know about that. One gets it, it goes through the whole family.” And then being brought back to the business at hand, he said, “I checked the brakes. Brakes look fine.”

Dory smiled at him. “This is very nice of you, Stan.” She was reminded that too often, because of her experience, she forgot there were wonderful men in the world. In fact, she’d met so many at the Zoë Institute and in her own mission here in California. Good men who were kind and strong and trustworthy. “I want you to know how much I appreciate it. I don’t know what I would’ve done without this generosity.”

“You’d have paid through the nose,” he said easily, not really taking himself too seriously. “But it’s not that big a deal to help out now and then. I’ll just catch up on Saturday.”

She heard the rare sound of her own laughter. “How many kids do you have, Stan?”

“Three. All boys. The oldest is eight.”

“And you’re going to stay late tonight? And catch up on Saturday? I bet your wife complains!”

He shook his head almost shyly, looking down. “Yeah, sometimes she gives me the business. But when you get down to it, she wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Dory dug around in her purse and pulled out a business card for The Single Mother’s Resource Agency. It had four names and home phone numbers on it—it would be that way until they could open a center. “Tell your wife and sister we need volunteers to help single moms really down on their luck. And tell them we have a great time together.”

He took the card and smiled. “Sure. Will do.”

“Hey!” she said. “I just thought of something! How about if we set you up to teach a course to single mothers on car maintenance and repair? I mean, I know you can’t show them how to replace a transmission or service brakes, but if they just learned enough to know when something’s really wrong. Or to keep their cars running without being taken advantage of by less than honest mechanics.”

He cocked his head and lifted a brow. “Worth thinking about,” he said.

“I’ll get to work on that idea,” she said with a grin. “And I’ll give you a call later to see if the truck’s ready.”

The next morning Dory dropped her kids off at their school and went to pick up Clay at the firehouse. She vacated the driver’s side so he could take over. When he opened the door, she said, “Stan said my car would be ready this morning, if you want to swing by there.”

Clay grunted and got behind the wheel.

“Are you upset about something?” she asked.

“Sorry,” he grumbled. “I was up all night. That’s pretty rare around here, unless it’s wildfire season. I’m just tired.”

“Want me to drive?” she asked. “I’ve just about figured out how to pull into a parking space without wiping out the other cars.” She grinned at him.

He didn’t seem to appreciate her humor at the moment. Nor did he seem to notice that for once she wasn’t biting his head off. “I got it,” he said, taking the captain’s seat.

“Whew, you’re a little grumpy.”

“Sorry,” he said again. “I held off on coffee so I can sleep when I get home. The next time you see me, I’ll be a peach.”

“Your friend Stan is fantastic. He fixed my Pathfinder for the cost of the part. I spent a little time online last night and found out that anyone else would’ve charged me three times as much. Thank you for arranging that.”

“My pleasure. No problem.”

“I’m a little embarrassed at how I acted around you,” she said. “You’ll never know how much I appreciate the grass cutting, trash hauling, playing with the kids. I’m not a man hater. When men volunteered at the Zoë Institute back in Oklahoma, where I used to live, I had no trouble accepting their offerings gratefully. The Zoë Institute is a place dedicated to helping single moms—and very close to my heart. But anyway, this favor you got me from Stan
—wow, you have no idea how much that means. I’m usually much more grateful. And gracious. Really.”

“And I’m usually much more considerate about asking permission,” he said, making a face. “I guess when I do that stuff for my sisters, they’re family, and we already know each other’s limits.”

“Well, you’re right about one thing—if we’d known each other better, I might not have gotten all freaked out about Austin going fishing with you. He loves to go fishing, actually. And I can’t take him nearly often enough. Plus, both kids want to play on ball teams this summer, so playing catch is good for them.”

His mouth tilted in a half grin. “This is the friendliest you’ve ever been to me,” he said. “Is it because I promised never to ask you out again?”

“It’s because I was out of line. I didn’t really know I was out of line, Clay. I’m a woman on my own with children to protect—I have to be careful. I’m sorry I—”

He suddenly reached across the front seat of the SUV and grabbed her hand. “Don’t apologize, Dory. I should apologize. I was only thinking of myself. I want you to be cautious. You shouldn’t take chances on men you don’t know. And I should’ve realized cutting the grass a couple of times isn’t all it takes to build trust. And yes—I’d be happy to toss around the ball sometimes. But I’ll let the kids ask.”

She laughed. “You have no idea! Brace yourself! They’ll ask and ask and ask!”

From then on they laughed like a couple of giggly little kids, laughed till they had tears in their eyes—he from being overtired and she from the eased tension surrounding their relationship.
Sundays were typically catch-up days for Dory if she didn’t have to work at the grocery store. She tried to take weekends off whenever possible, because the kids weren’t in school and if she couldn’t trade off babysitting with a friend from her single moms group, it got very expensive. She could usually keep her time at the store down to weekdays, and the occasional Saturday.

That gave her Sundays to clean house, get the laundry done and basically get the family set up for another week of work and school. It was also a good day to phone volunteers, if she had some on her list to call. And she had a little more time to look at work in progress, such as writing grants. Right now, because it was spring, she was working on the summer conference, lining up the workshops and speakers, planning the promotion and squaring away the facility they would rent. Corsica had gotten them a good deal with a local church and the adjacent buildings for the conference, but it wasn’t free.

Sometimes, when dealing with people whose needs were the most basic kind—food, shelter—and survival was an issue, it was easy to forget the fundamental importance of workshops on building self-esteem, maintaining personal boundaries, parenting, budgeting, developing interview and job skills, and learning what is and is not healthy in relationships. But in order for these women to not only survive but thrive, the very core of their beings had to be rebuilt and reinforced. This Dory had learned from attending her own workshops within the Zoë Institute.

And now she was leading workshops. It filled her up inside to have come so far.

Another sign of her growth was her improving relationship with her neighbor. The past couple of weeks since her car had been repaired had been very nice between her and Clay. On those late afternoons Dory and the kids came home to find him enjoying a day off, he’d either play a little catch with Sophie and Austin, walk down to the river with them so they could fish for a half hour or so while Dory fixed their dinner, or maybe even give each of them rides around the yards on the riding lawn mower. She got used to finding her grass cut and her trash hauled down to the road while she was at work. It was a cordial relationship—no pressure, no more dating talk. She was even starting to consider inviting him over for Sunday dinner with the kids.

But just as that thought surfaced yet again, she looked out the window toward his house, and what did she see? Clay was perched against his porch rail, holding a beer, talking to a leggy blonde who reclined on the chaise on his porch. Dory couldn’t really see them clearly, but she had a good enough view to make out the brown bottle Clay held and the long, tanned legs in a pair of very short shorts.

Well, she chided herself, you won’t go out with him. Did you expect he’d never find himself a girlfriend?

She fought down the disappointment with the rationalization that they were really better off just as hospitable neighbors. Healthier for her, less complicated for him. After all, she came with a lot of baggage. She could still invite him for dinner—just a friendly little no-fuss dinner to thank him for being such a good sport with the kids.

Concentrating on her conference details was a little harder at the moment, however. Dory found herself looking out the window toward his house a number of times. He and the blonde were gone, but both cars were still there—his and hers. They would be inside, she thought. Having grown-up time.

So she finished her laundry and cleaning. She could at least manage that without focus.

Then there was a knock at her door. She opened it to a smiling Elizabeth—blonde Elizabeth, her newest volunteer, wearing short shorts and a tank top. Elizabeth, dating Clay?

"I had no idea you lived here!” she said, grinning. “When I told Clay that I was starting to do a little community service with a single moms group, he said his neighbor was into that and wondered if it could be the same group. I mean, how many people named Dory are there, anyway?"

"Hi,” she said, but couldn’t help frowning a little. “How do you know Clay?” Dory asked, because she couldn’t bring herself to ask if they were dating.

"He’s my brother,” Elizabeth said. “We came over so the boys could fish. They love walking down to Clay’s river. We’re going to put some hot dogs on the grill in a half hour—why don’t you and your kids come over and join us?"

"Oh—I don’t want to impose on family time,” she said, almost backing away from the front door. In fact, she was a little embarrassed, not only by the conclusions she’d jumped to, but her reaction to those conclusions.

"Come on,” Elizabeth said. “Believe me, it’s not much. I brought over deviled eggs and a bag of chips. Clay’s opening a can of baked beans and has plenty of hot dogs and buns. It’s casual.”
“I’m so surprised I haven’t seen you in the neighborhood before.”
“I’m not out here that often. I usually see Clay at my folks’ place or with one of my sisters, and he sometimes takes the boys off my hands for a few hours after school—either brings them out here to fish or meets them at my house.”
“He seems to like kids,” Dory said.
“Firemen,” she said, shaking her head with a laugh. “They have a real reputation for having soft spots for kids. Most of ’em, anyway. Come on, gather up your crew and come on over. You can use a night off from cooking, can’t you?”
She couldn’t help but smile. “I sure can. Give me twenty minutes and I’ll be over.”
Dory just wanted to make sure the kids had washed faces and clean clothes, and she was going to comb her hair and put on some lip gloss. The kids were ecstatic and raced ahead of her. They were a little shy when first meeting Elizabeth’s boys, Jed and Mack, but they all warmed up to each other quickly. As for Dory, she had a fantastic time. Visiting with Elizabeth and Clay while putting out dinner, eating and cleaning up was just the grown-up time she’d needed. She was reminded about how important it was to have balance in her life—not just important for herself, but for the kids to see in her, too. She worked too hard—she knew that. It wasn’t always just because money was tight, but often to keep her mind off how alone she could sometimes feel.
It turned out Clay was full of questions about their organization and their goals. He seemed genuinely interested and pleased that Elizabeth was getting involved.
The sun was sinking when Elizabeth and her boys took off—they, too, had to get organized to start a new week. Right after saying goodbye, she thanked Clay.
“Not very fancy, but if I went to too much trouble, the boys wouldn’t be interested.”
“It was great, and I specialize in unfancy. I’ve been meaning to ask—how would you like to join the kids and me for dinner? Maybe next Sunday?”
“I work next Sunday,” he said.
“Oh, that’s too bad…”
“But I’m off the Sunday after that,” he said, smiling.
“You don’t have family commitments, do you?”
“I’ll manage not to. I’m entitled to a little of my own time. I’d love to have dinner.”
“Good, then,” she said. “It’s a date.”
He lifted a brow. “Date?”
“You know…”
He laughed at her. “I look forward to it.”

Dory found herself looking forward to her dinner with Clay so much that she bought the ingredients for her famous red beans and rice well in advance. She didn’t say anything until the next weekend had passed, then mentioned to the kids that on Sunday evening Clay was coming over for dinner. They were nothing short of thrilled—they adored him.
She thought about that a minute and realized that he hadn’t really done anything spectacular with her kids to completely win them over. He was just himself—cheerful, present, and he communicated with them on their level. They’d helped him wash that big SUV of his and then, just for fun, they all washed her Pathfinder together, spraying each other and laughing the whole time. He’d given them ice cream sandwiches in the warm afternoon sun; they’d built a little fire in the yard one early evening and roasted marshmallows; they’d dug up a little garden patch in his backyard together so he could plant some pumpkin seeds for Halloween. He just included them in what he was doing, and not only did the kids have a good time, so did Clay.
And Dory realized that she was also participating a little more all the time. She was no longer so afraid of getting close. She’d be the fourth for a game of catch, or sit on the ground with them while they roasted marshmallows. Of course, they never had a second alone, but that was good. Moving slowly was best. But she was admitting to herself that having a guy like Clay in her life, at least for a good friend, appealed to her. And maybe, just maybe, he’d become more.
While she was at work, she found herself thinking about the kids and figuring out a way to afford the money to sign Austin and Sophie up for T-ball and Little League. She also needed to buy uniforms and bring drinks and snacks like the other parents. And Dory wondered how she would manage the schedule—driving to practices, being at games, pitching in with the other team parents. Money and time were always short. And she couldn’t give up her job or her commitment to single moms—one fed their bellies, the other Dory’s heart. Unfortunately, the manager of
the grocery store where she worked was not really supportive of her cause; he didn’t like letting her have time off to serve any cause other than his bottom line.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the big fire rig pulling into the grocery-store parking lot—she couldn’t help but smile. This wasn’t an unusual event, but it had become one of her favorites. The firemen shopped en masse. They didn’t always come to Dory’s grocery store, and if they did it wasn’t always on Dory’s work days, but they always shopped in a full crew, just in case there was a call while they were away from the station. And if it was both Dory’s day and Clay’s day to work, she knew he would at least check through her line with a candy bar or something. He would flirt with her a little, tell the guys she was Dory, his next-door neighbor, and they’d all be really friendly. Dory never flirted, but she thoroughly enjoyed the way Clay did.

When she saw the rig she thought that today, if he flirted a little as he bought a pack of gum or something, she might just return the favor. She was feeling so much more agreeable lately about Clay’s low-key advances.

But it didn’t get that far.

Dory was busily and happily running the bar codes of grocery items across the scanner, laughing with her customer, when she heard a comment from another checkout lane. “Holy crap, look at that!”

She glanced through the front windows and saw that a couple in the parking lot stood arguing heatedly, nose to nose, yelling at each other. They appeared to be in their twenties, possibly early twenties. Her stomach took a flip. Not only had she seen this before, she’d been this before.

The man shoved the woman hard, and she landed up against the hood of an old car. The man stumbled slightly as if he might be inebriated. And then the woman straightened, lifted her chin and simply went to the car’s back door, as if just carrying on with her business, and brought a baby out of the car! The child was maybe nine months, or a year at the most. She balanced the child on her hip and said something to the man. Even at a distance, Dory could tell the woman was brave. Not cowering but confronting. Then the man grabbed her free arm and gave her a violent shake, almost shaking the baby from her arms.

Dory muttered, “Oh, God.”

Some of the customers moved to the windows and someone else said, “Oh, God!”

Dory committed the cashier’s cardinal sin—she left her register and went to the window. She quietly said, almost to herself, “Oh, God, help.” She watched as the woman hung on to her baby. The man, who was not at all steady on his feet, drew back his arm, hand in a hard fist, and slammed her in the face, knocking her to the ground. Dory screamed, “He-l-l-l-l-p! Please, help!” She bolted from the store, leaving her full cash register, drawer closed, and ran into the parking lot.

The woman had managed to hang on to her infant during the horrible commotion, but she now sat on the ground in the parking lot. The baby was screaming, the woman had a large cut under her eye that was bleeding profusely, getting blood down the front of her and on her baby. Without hesitation, Dory flung herself on the drunk, unstable and dangerous man. He had been teetering to begin with so it took nothing for little Dory to tackle him. He hit the ground hard. She heard his head crack onto the ground and then she was on top of him. He was completely stunned and smelled like a brewery. In the background she heard the screaming of a small child.

Dory never lost touch with reality, but she had a flashback. It was suddenly Austin’s crying and little Sophie was screaming, Mommy Mommy Mommy! The man beneath her hardly struggled—he seemed stunned. Then he closed his eyes and his mouth opened as if he was drunk and had passed out. She wanted to pummel him. Then his eyes popped open and he growled, baring his teeth. For just one terrible moment she shook in paralyzed terror, and braced herself to be hit.

But just then a strong arm went around her waist and lifted her effortlessly off the man. “Easy does it, Dory. We got it.” Clay held her like a sack of potatoes against his hip and she watched as a couple of big, good-looking firefighters lifted the snarling man to his feet and held him. “The police have been called and one of the boys is going to tend to this lady’s cut face and make sure the baby’s okay.” And then, almost as if it was an afterthought, he put her on her feet.

She looked at Clay, at the two men holding the aggressor, and then at a firefighter crouched in front of the injured woman, his first aid kit already opened. She could hear the sound of sirens in the distance and feel the press of people from the grocery store forming a circle of spectators around them. But oddly, her first thought was, Is it required that firefighters be handsome?

Clay looked down at her, hands on his hips. “What were you thinking, jumping on the guy like that?”

“I was thinking if he swung at that woman one more time, he could hurt the baby.”

“He could’ve shaken you off and hit you!”

“I took that into consideration,” she said more bravely than she felt. “But I wasn’t holding a baby.”

He shook his head. “Dory, Dory,” he said. “Well, you’re okay, aren’t you?”

She grinned widely. “I’m fine.” Better than fine, she thought. I got between him and the woman he was going to
hurt even more. She felt suddenly so strong, so capable. “Nice of you to do your grocery shopping today.” The sound of the baby crying right behind her caused Dory to turn.

While the firefighter was tending to the young woman’s face, Dory got on her knees beside the mother and child and said, “Here, let me comfort the baby while he takes care of that cut. Come on, big fella,” she said.

“She’s a girl,” the woman said, crying and gasping.

Again the memories flooded back for Dory. The baby girl Dory held was dressed in baby jeans and a blue hoodie—safely warm, but not looking girlish. For poor Austin Dory sometimes had to make do with a girl’s jacket or shoes because that’s what she had and she couldn’t afford newer clothes. This woman might have an older child who was a boy, or maybe these were handed-down clothes. Perhaps she couldn’t afford to be fussy about the gender look of them. Dory looked at the mother. “Do you have somewhere to go that’s safe? Like friends? Neighbors?”

She shook her head and cried. “I won’t press charges,” she said. “He’d kill me.”

“Unfortunately for him, you’re not required to press charges. So many people saw him hit you, they’re going to charge him regardless. They’ll take him into custody. I volunteer for an organization that helps single moms. Of course, it doesn’t matter right now if you are single—we’ll do whatever we can….”

She shook her head. “Not married.”

The firefighter pressed a medicated gauze pad against a cut beneath her eye. “He hit you before? Even once?” he asked her.

She nodded pathetically.

“Do you understand that he’s going to hit you again if you stay with him? Again and again? And that it’s going to get worse and worse? Do you get that?” the man asked. “Do you understand that before long, your baby is going to be physically hurt?”

She just cried. Her face crumpled and she sobbed loudly and Dory knew why—because she did get that, and yet it all seemed so hopeless.

The baby in Dory’s arms cried, but less hysterically now. The baby laid her head on Dory’s shoulder, and Dory gently stroked her back. “What’s your name?” she asked the woman.

“Simone,” she said in a low voice. “I don’t have anyone,” she whispered. “Just Max.”

“I can try and find you some help. Our organization has a safe house. It’s full and we have a waiting list, but I’m sure there’s something we can do. I’ll make some calls. We’ll talk to the police—if they keep him overnight, you’ll be safe at home until tomorrow.”

“My mom is in Colorado, but I don’t have any money.”

“And this car? Is this your car?”

“Sort of. It belongs to Max. It’s the only car we have.”

The firefighter turned and looked up at Dory. “Tell her—she can’t take the car unless it’s registered in her name. The charge for grand theft auto is a felony, while battery domestic is a misdemeanor the first time.”

Dory laughed sardonically. “Now, doesn’t that just illuminate what we’re up against here?” She turned to Simone. “Would you be safe at your mother’s if you went there?”

“I can’t get there….”

“But if you could get there, would you and the baby be safe there?”

“I guess so.” She shrugged.

“Do you want to get away from this mess? It’s up to you, you know. But he’s right—it’ll get worse. If you don’t make a change, it’ll get worse and eventually the baby will get hurt.”

The young woman nodded, but her chin quivered.

The firefighter looked at Simone. “I put a butterfly on the cut, but you need stitches. If you don’t get stitches, it might heal, but it’ll scar. You should also go to the hospital and get looked at, because there might be something wrong I can’t see. It would be good to have the baby checked, to be sure. The ambulance is on the way and—”

Simone laughed through her tears. “I don’t have any money. I have some food coupons. And I’m on probation—I got arrested for possession. I was holding Max’s dope. I’m going to end up worse off if I get involved with the police or the hospital.”

“Simone, if you did a urine test right now, would it be hot?” Dory asked. Simone would know what that meant if she’d been around druggies. Would a urine test show she’d been using? But the firefighter looked up at Dory just then with surprise, and maybe respect, in his eyes.

Simone shook her head. “Not a thing. Not since I found out I was pregnant.”

“Good for you—you protected the baby. Not easy for you, I’m sure. You want me to make some calls, see if I can get you back to your mother in Colorado?”

“Can you?” she asked desperately. “Please?”

“I can’t make any promises, but I’ll try.” The baby had quieted, her head resting on Dory’s shoulder. Dory
snuggled her close and stood up. Ahhh, the feel of that small body against hers was heaven. “I’ll do what I can. I need to know where to find you, though.”

The firefighter stood. “She and the baby will be at Valley Hospital. I can find someone from Social Services to get her home.”

There was a hand on Dory’s shoulder and she turned to look into Clay’s eyes. Had he been there the whole time?

“We’ll get her address and phone number so you can touch base later,” Clay said. “Meanwhile, we’ll make sure the police hold this guy tonight.”

“That would help,” Dory said. She looked at her watch by glancing over the baby’s butt. “I have a couple more hours to work before I can get on it. But there are a lot of potential helpers in our organization—I think something will materialize.” She smiled at Simone. “I hate to give her up. My name is Dory Finn and if I don’t contact you personally, the person who does will say she’s referred by me.” She turned the baby toward Simone. “Please, get away from this mess if you have the chance. Please. Your life and your baby’s depend on it.”

THE AMBULANCE TRANSPORTED Simone and her baby to the hospital, the police carted away Max, who was drunk, high and combative, the firefighters left the grocery store, and the store manager, Ben Sills, said, “Miss Finn. My office. Now.”

She rolled her eyes and followed Mr. Sills. She suspected by his pink cheeks and agitated stride that he was a little worked up. They went to the back of the store, the loading dock area where there was a small office he used. He held the door for her, but after she entered, he slammed it shut. And she jumped. Okay, he was more than a little worked up.

“What in the world were you thinking?” he shouted. “You left an untended cash drawer, in a store full of customers, while you ran into the parking lot to get involved in some brawl! Are you out of your mind?”

She backed up a step. “A woman was being battered right in front of my eyes! She was holding a baby! What did you expect me to do?”

“Leave it to someone else!”

“Since I got there first, that would indicate no one else was moving! I wasn’t going to let him hit her twice!”

“Did it ever occur to you he might’ve beaten you both up?”

“Yes! But not until afterward. At the time it seemed better to try to take a chance, get involved, than worry about the consequences.” Dory took a deep breath to calm herself. “Mr. Sills, I’m sorry I left the cash drawer, but was any money taken?”

He smirked at her. “We’ll find out when you cash out. Which you will do right now.”

“My shift isn’t over yet…”

“Yes, it is. You’re fired. I’ll give you a week’s severance, and don’t push it.”

She was stunned and momentarily speechless. When she did find her voice, disbelief coated each word. “You’d fire me for trying to help someone in danger? Trying to help an infant in danger?”

“It was the last straw, Miss Finn. We’ve talked about some of these issues before. You miss too much work, for one thing—one little problem at home and you’re calling in. You put your volunteer project ahead of the needs of this business. And today you abandoned your post, leaving the cash at risk, because something you care more about than your job caught your attention.” He shook his head. “I need more dependable employees.”

“I don’t miss much work,” she said. “And single mothers who need the work are a great resource. Plus you’re missing an opportunity to help, to do so much good. Do you realize half the poor in this country are single mothers? What will become of the next generation if we fail them now?”

“It’s too late,” he responded.

“I’ll worry about that in my old age, Miss Finn. Right now the single mothers who work for me are not a resource but a drain on my schedule and pocketbook. Cash out and I’ll cut your severance check.”

He turned his back on her to go sit behind his desk. Head down, he took out his checkbook. There was no point in arguing with him. He didn’t have much to give, anyway.

She’d have to find a new job, and there wouldn’t be a recommendation from Mr. Sills.

But first she’d have to make some phone calls. There had to be a way her group could help Simone.
CHAPTER FOUR

Dory called her closest friends, the other three women who made up the board of directors. She asked if they could meet for coffee—she’d had a very eventful day and needed their input and help. They agreed to get together at the McDonald’s near the location of their support group meetings.

Dory settled the kids in a booth with hamburgers for dinner and explained she had a meeting with Corsica, Mel and Paige. She quietly went over the events of the day as her friends listened. When she was finished she said, “The most important thing is to find Simone some help to get herself and her child out of town. And second, I’m going to have to find a job. I have a severance check and some unemployment benefits coming, but looking for work might cut into my volunteer time. Plus, I really can’t afford after-school day care without a job. Elizabeth, our newest volunteer, is very smart and dedicated—maybe she can help cover for me for a while.”

They were all silent for a moment. Paige finally said, “Dory, this isn’t right. Your boss should have been the first one in that parking lot. Instead he’s firing you for going.”

“The least of my concerns right now,” she said. “We have to discuss if anything can be done for that woman and her child. And then I’ll get busy looking for a job.”

“I might have a suggestion,” Corsica said.

Dory gave a deep sigh. “Oh, I had hoped one of you might have heard of something. With all the effort we put into looking for available jobs for our single moms, I hoped something might turn up for me. What is it? I think you know I’ll do anything.”

“It’s a risk,” Corsica said. “It’s a new position, probably won’t pay as well as your cashier’s job, and it will take some finesse and time to work out health benefits. But I think it’s something you can throw your energy into with pride.” She shrugged. “Also, you’re perfect for it.”

They all glanced at each other, just waiting, wondering. “Well, what is it?” Dory finally asked.

Corsica slipped a hand inside her briefcase and pulled out a contract. “Up until this minute it didn’t look like the best deal in the world, but under the circumstances, it might be just right. I found a house—a small three-bedroom in Fortuna. The owner is willing to rent it for a pittance plus taxes if the renter is willing to improve the property by cleaning it up, getting it back on its feet so it can be sold eventually. Maybe the time is right,” she said.

“For?” Mel Sheridan asked.

“For opening a center,” she said. Then she looked pointedly at Dory. “With a full-time director. After all, this is what we’ve been working toward for three years. We can discuss salary and get busy on a grant that will provide health benefits for Dory and the kids.”

Mel grinned. “And Dr. Michaels and I can provide some medical coverage in the interim. We should actually look into whether you can keep your coverage from the grocery store until you can replace it with coverage from the foundation.”

It took Dory a minute to respond. “Are you serious? Do you think I’m qualified?”

“You’re completely qualified,” Corsica said. “You’ll grow with the position, certainly. But you’re the reason we’re all headed in this direction. No matter what happened to your job, you have always been the perfect choice. After all, this whole operation is built primarily on the model of the foundation that helped you. Yes, Dory. You’re the one. The question is, can you afford to take a chance? This is nonprofit work—it’s hard and it’s a gamble.”

She smiled at them. “It’s going to work,” she said. “We’ve always known that because there’s a desperate need, it has to work.”

They talked a little about what they could afford from their treasury for salary and rent and improvements for an old house that needed a lot of work.

Dory found herself laughing. “Why do I feel like a burden has been lifted from my shoulders when, truthfully, it’s hardly enough money to live on? I mean, I don’t want more salary. I want our funds to go where they’re needed most—to the women and children. But I should be crying when instead, I feel like singing!” Then she laughed some more. “I’m insane, that’s what!”

“Or maybe it’s because you no longer have the pressure of working for an ungrateful, selfish boss,” Mel said. “Instead you’ll be working for something you can believe in. Take it from someone who is often paid in produce—it’s a privilege to be able to do work you love, work you believe in.”

“Really, it could be so much worse,” Dory said. “My uncle Joe left me that little house free and clear. I just have
to pay the taxes, insurance and utilities. If I didn’t have an old car to keep running, I’d have hardly any expenses besides food, clothing and… Oh! Day care. School will be out soon and I have to do something about summer!”

“Let’s look around for a good community summer program for Sophie and Austin,” Corsica suggested. “It won’t be full-time, but they’re well-behaved kids. Maybe they can help around the office sometimes. And if we have a center, we have a place for our volunteers to meet, a place for women in need to go, a place for our support groups and classes.”

“Oh, and as you know, I’ve been at work on the agenda for our third annual conference,” Dory said. “It’s going to be better than the last two. Those workshops are vital—they changed my world. Actually, I need to meet with the conference committee soon, get a report on their progress, find out who they have in mind for the workshop leaders and instructors. But first I have to find a way to get a young woman to Colorado, back to her mother, where she and her baby can be safe.”

“We have a little money in the emergency fund,” Mel said. “This sounds like an emergency to me. Why don’t I get Simone a ticket on my charge card and the organization can reimburse me later?”

“Do you mind? Because if you can do that, I can call Simone and tell her.” Then she shrugged. “And I’m free to drive her to the airport in Redding—the car is fixed and I…” She laughed. “I don’t have to go to work tomorrow.”

“Dory, my love, I don’t think you’re going to have a real day off for a very long time!” Corsica said with a laugh.

**Dory spent the rest** of the week at the old small three-bedroom house in Fortuna that was to become her group’s new resource center. Along with some volunteers who were as giddy with excitement as she was, they cleaned, painted, made minor repairs and scrounged around secondhand shops for essential furniture. Mel donated the computer from her Virgin River clinic—it was time for them to upgrade their equipment anyway. The biggest expense they had was finding and buying filing cabinets that actually locked.

They found an old desk for her office, which would occupy one of the bedrooms, a sofa and a couple of chairs for the living room, a big old distressed-oak table for the dining room and a bunch of mismatched chairs to sit around it. The stove still functioned and Mel’s husband found them a used refrigerator that worked. Dory had asked him what it cost and he’d said, “Don’t worry about it—it was practically a donation.” She knew that meant he’d purchased it.

At the end of the school day she would fetch Sophie and Austin and take them back to the house/center, where they would help. At six and eight, they weren’t the most efficient helpers, but they tried, and at least they weren’t in expensive after-school day care.

Having a phone installed was very important to their operation and Corsica managed to get it done quickly, pulling in all her favors. The first call Dory made was to Colorado, where she spoke to Simone at her mother’s house. The young woman was safe for the time being, but of course she had many needs, the most essential of which was some counseling, a support group of some kind—any available help to get her stronger, more sure of herself and independent, so she didn’t run the risk of repeating this disaster with yet another toxic relationship. Dory spent most of their conversation trying to point Simone in the right direction, encouraging her to search out support groups. All she could think was that nonprofit assistance to single mothers was needed everywhere. With the economy in such a mess, social services were tighter than ever and what government agencies considered flab—usually assistance for women and children—was always the first to go.

At the end of the week the crowning glory came when Jack Sheridan and John Middleton presented Dory with a sign that would fit over the porch. “The Single Mother’s Resource Center.”

Dory stood in the street in front of the house—all cleaned up, some of it painted, the ratty grass and flower beds trimmed and weeded—and she cried. “Oh, my God, I can’t believe it. It’s so beautiful!”

“The sign’s not exactly beautiful,” Jack said. “It’s homemade—but the price was right. Free. We didn’t want to spend money on signage when there are women and children who need basic stuff.”

Mel handed her a small box, and she opened it to find business cards bearing her name, the address and phone number for the center, and a small list of available services. They were simply beautiful to Dory. “Where did you get these?”

“I signed up for one of those online Web sites that offer five hundred free business cards. Bet you go through them in no time. And John just about has the center’s Web site ready—take a look at it in the morning and if you have any tweaks, let him know.”

“This is really happening,” Dory said. “After three years of doing the best we could, we actually have a real, live, nonprofit resource center.”

“Dory, we’ve gotten a lot done in three years, and now with more space, more volunteers and more time, we’ll help more people. Thank you for bringing us this vision.”

“Thank the Zoë Institute,” she said. “Without them, I don’t know where I’d be today. I sure wouldn’t be holding
Dory felt she’d had one of the most productive weeks of her life, and for some reason she couldn’t explain, she’d had no sense of doom over the loss of her steady job. With overtime she had earned a little more than she was making as the director of the center, but not enough more to make it worth putting up with Mr. Sills’s constant criticism and haranguing. And Corsica was so right—even though she had hardly begun as the director, she was already so much more fulfilled, so much happier. 

Dory had left one of the three bedrooms in that little house empty of furniture. She and the rest of the board of directors had been hauling around donated nonperishable food items and supplies in their cars for women in need, but now she could create a bona fide, well-stocked food closet. The first thing she planned to do next week was visit some of the big-box stores like Costco and ask for donations on a large scale to stock that closet. She’d promise them good press and a mention on the Web site. She would hit all the stores, including Target and Albertsons, and she’d even swallow her pride and check with Mr. Sills’s grocery in Fortuna. She’d be lucky if he didn’t spit in her eye, but this wasn’t about her. She’d ask anyway.

But the next thing on her agenda was to make red beans and rice for Sunday dinner with Clay. She’d been too busy to think about it much and was surprised to realize she wasn’t stressed out about it at all, but rather very excited. She’d been on the run so much all week, she hadn’t even seen him to wave across the yard. With her time divided between work and The Single Mother’s Resource Center, she didn’t hang around the house with time on her hands much.

The kids were so jazzed about having Clay to dinner, they helped her by cleaning their rooms and doing a few chores around the house. And to her surprise, Clay must have been looking forward to it, too. He stopped by her house at around noon on Sunday and said, “You never told me what time.”

“Well, five be too early for you? I know you bachelor types start your evenings at ten at night. You probably haven’t eaten earlier than nine in years. But the kids—”

“Five is great. Is there a wine that goes with red beans?”

She just laughed at him. “Clay, do I look like someone who knows anything about wines? I couldn’t tell you. I usually drink milk with the kids. We’re keeping our bones strong.”

“I drink a lot of milk, too, but for the first time you have me to dinner, I’m going to find something special.”

“Knock yourself out,” she said. “Now, get out of here. I’m not ready for company. I’m cleaning and I look a wreck.”

Without smiling, he said, “No, you don’t, Dory. You look as good as ever.”

She just shoved him out the door. “I’ll be cleaned up by five—now, go!”

When he came back, he brought with him a six-pack of imported beer, nice and cold. “There is no special wine for red beans,” he announced. “I checked with a couple of people and both recommended this.”

“I can’t remember when I last had a beer,” she said. “Do we have one now? Or does this go with dinner?”

The kids came screaming out of their bedrooms before he could answer. They practically tackled him, they were so excited. He’d never been inside her house before, had never seen their bedrooms, and they wanted to show him all their stuff. They wanted to play with him as if their mother had invited one of their friends from school for dinner rather than an adult she was looking forward to sharing an evening with, also. But he grinned while one pulled at each hand and said, “It probably goes with the beans, but tell you what—let’s save it for later. After things…you know…quiet down…”

And she thought, Excellent idea.

The food was delayed while the kids dominated Clay’s attention. Then over dinner Austin and Sophie talked about everything going on at school, and their excitement over signing up for T-ball and Little League. They even brought up the resource center and how they’d helped their mom with cleaning, painting and moving furniture. “She’s the boss, you know,” Sophie announced proudly.

“That doesn’t surprise me at all,” he said, just as proudly. Then to Dory he said, “That means I’m going to see you guys around here even less than before. Being the boss carries responsibility. How many jobs is that now?”

Dory was frozen for a second. “Oh, Clay, I haven’t seen you since that day at the grocery store! Oh, my gosh, so much has happened, and you don’t know any of it! First of all, we had some emergency money in our fund. Mel Sheridan is our CFO—she’s in charge of the money. Her husband, Jack, says we couldn’t have found anyone better. He says prying a nickel out of her is harder than getting a— Oh, I’ll save that. But trust me, it’s colorful. Anyway, she got a plane ticket for that woman we rescued, and she and her baby are safe with her mother in Colorado. And Corsica Rios, the social worker who really started the group, found us a house for an office and center, so we’re kind of moved in and have been fixing up. We spent all week hunting for used furniture and donated paint. We cleaned,
weeded and did whatever fixing up was needed—the kids helped, didn’t you, guys?”

“We did!” Sophie said.

“I painted a wall,” Austin reported.

“Oh, and I got fired,” Dory said.

“What?” Clay asked.

“Mr. Sills, the manager at the grocery store—he fired me. For leaving my cash drawer unattended to run into the parking lot and get into that situation with Simone and her…her… What do I call him? He isn’t really a boyfriend. Well, the guy they arrested.”

Clay’s eyes grew dark and angry. “He fired you for that?”

“He said there were other things, too. He said that was the last straw. But I don’t agree about the other things…."

“What other things?” Clay ground out the words.

“He said I missed work too much, which I would dispute. We had a little flu last winter, but the kids are healthy and haven’t been sick much. I had to take a couple of days for our single moms’ conference, but I don’t do that regularly. It’s an annual thing, and I tried to explain how important it is, but—”

“He fired you?”

She nodded. “He said I wasn’t reliable, yet I worked all the overtime he’d give me—I always needed the money. I think he’s missing something, to tell you the truth. I was pretty dedicated to that stupid job because I needed it, but I’m not mad, Clay. I think the best thing happened. I took the position at the resource center, and we needed someone full-time to pull all the strings together, to keep better and more consistent records, to manage the volunteer program. It’s a little less money, but it’s not going to kill us to tighten up—we’ll just eat more red beans!”

The kids sent up a cheer, making her laugh. “The only thing missing at the moment is a medical benefit program, but the board’s working on that. We needed this change—up till this week, we were all so busy with our full-time jobs, there was no one available to hold the reins of the foundation. But we’re growing. There will be more employees, and every year that we grow, we’ll do more.” She leaned toward him, and with passion and drama she said, “I’ve kept a room empty for a food closet! Do you have any idea how many women we encounter who don’t have diapers or formula for their babies? Or enough food for themselves? I’m going to fill up that room with nonperishable food and supplies, like diapers, soap, shampoo and essentials.”

Clay’s lips were pursed in a thin line and she thought maybe his eyes clouded a bit. “That’s wonderful, Dory,” he said, and his voice was gravelly. “I’m proud of you.”

She was confused by his emotional reaction. “It’s going to be great,” she said.

“Let me help with the dishes,” he offered. “Then it’s about time for that beer.”

She laughed. “Sounds like a plan. Kids? Wanna clear for us?”

It was eight o’clock before all the dishes were done and the kids were finished with their baths and settling for the night. Dory excused herself to make sure everything was under control, then she said to Clay, “I think your first dinner at our house was a success. You have very adequate table manners.”

“Thank you. And you have excellent red beans. Let’s have a beer on the porch while we talk about grown-up things.”

“I’m all for that.” Dory took her beer and headed outside. She sat on the porch swing while Clay settled on the porch rail nearby. “This is so nice, so peaceful,” she said. “I have myself running around so much, I never take time to relax like this. Thank you.”

“Dory, you know all about Elizabeth and the boys. I spend a lot of time with them. It happens their dad is pretty good about seeing them, but it doesn’t hurt for them to have more than one male influence.”

“Positive influence,” she said with a smile. “Stan told me he has a sister who’s a single mom, too. In fact, he said something that will always stick with me. He said, ‘Who doesn’t have a sister—or at least know someone—who’s a single mom?’”

“I mention all this as a way of explaining—I asked Sophie where her father is and she drew herself up real tall and said, ‘Our mother says we don’t have to answer that question unless we feel like it.’ And apparently she didn’t feel like it.”

“Oh, good for her,” Dory said. “She’s strong! I wasn’t sure how she’d deal with that and I don’t want the kids at school to tease her or give her a hard time. I didn’t want her to feel she had to explain, either. And I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this—I probably put it off too long, but it was a matter of being sure of our friendship. But it might help explain the way I behaved when you first moved in and started getting in my business.” She laughed a bit uncomfortably. “At least I hope it will explain my reaction to your attempts to be a good, helpful neighbor.”
He leaned toward her. “Tell me,” he urged. “You can trust me.”

She took a deep breath. “Sophie’s father is in prison. We’re divorced. He was a violent man. I got involved with him and eventually married him. I was too young and dumb. Like a typical abuser, he separated me from my family, moved us to Oklahoma, out of my uncle’s reach. He shoved and slapped and talked real mean, but then one night he really lost it and beat me badly enough for a 9-1-1 call. He was scared of what would happen to him, so he took the kids and ran—but he didn’t get far.”

He wore a pained expression and shook his head, looking down. “What in God’s name makes a man like that?”

“Many things. Many different combinations of things. In his case, a father who beat his mother and him. He used drugs from time to time, and probably had a personality disorder, as well…. I was lucky to get a good lawyer and an angry judge. My ex doesn’t even have visitation and will have to go back to court if he wants to even see the kids.”

In the darkness of her front porch, she could tell he tried to control his breathing to keep it calm. Clay was a protector of women and children. Her story would be hard for him to hear. “And you do this volunteer work because of what happened to you?”

“No,” she said. “I do it because I was helped. I went to a support group when I moved here because I needed ongoing support after leaving Oklahoma, where I was helped so much by the Zoe Institute. I met Corsica Rios, the social worker who had been a working single mom. We had coffee together, talked about things, and got to know each other. She told me about setting up this local support group and she said, ‘They need everything! It’s not enough to feed them and cover their heads and find them work—they have to be reeducated in their own worth. It’s the only way they can go forward and create a positive environment for our next generation.’ And I said, let me tell you how I was helped. That was our beginning. We had a good model for a nonprofit organization dedicated to assisting these single mothers. And it’s working. We helped a lot of women that very first year, and more every year since. We have a shelter, and it’s always full. There’s a waiting list for women who need a place to go where they’ll be safe from an abuser. We can do better than that!” She smiled at him. “But we have a full-time director now,” she said proudly. “And sixty-two volunteers!”

“Sixty-three,” Clay said.

She was so surprised, she couldn’t speak for a moment. “Oh, Clay.”

“I don’t suppose I could get a job as a bodyguard at that shelter...?”

“I don’t suppose,” she said with a laugh. “Feel like busting some chops, do you? Believe it or not, as much as that probably comes from the heart, that’s not your best recommendation. We advocate nonviolence. Of course.”

“I just get hot under the collar at the thought of that whole scenario. But there are lots of other things you can use help with. Nobody loves a cause like a bunch of firefighters,” he said. “Yours wouldn’t be the first or only nonprofit group we support, either. There are a million things we can do, from food drives to fundraisers. We’re really good at baseball tournaments that pit the firehouses against each other.”

“What fun!”

“We give kids tours of the firehouses all the time—kids without dads would be even more important. I bet I can get our female crew members to go along with that idea. And how about pancake breakfasts and barbecues?”

“You’re after my job,” she said with a laugh.

“I’m just saying I wouldn’t mind helping with a good cause. It’s like Stan said—all of us are impacted by the need. It’s in our families, our neighborhoods, churches, schools. Sometimes it’s right next door. Dory,” he said softly, seriously, “I’m real sorry that happened to you. And I’m real glad you’re a survivor.”

“Clay, I just want you to know that the reason I’ve never accepted a date with you doesn’t have anything to do with you. You seem to be a great guy, and you’re terrific with the kids. Because of what I’ve gone through the last several years, I don’t entirely trust my instincts about me. I should never have ended up in that terrible relationship—I wasn’t raised that way. My aunt and uncle were good, solid, loving people.”


“And I’ve learned that many women just like me end up in trouble. But that’s not my point—I really just wanted to apologize because I know you didn’t understand. And I wasn’t ready to explain at the time.”

He stood and drained his beer. “It’s perfectly understandable, Dory. Thanks for telling me.”

She stood, as well. “And thanks for your offer of help.”

“Yeah, I mean it, too. Listen...” He paused and looked down briefly. “I want to say something. I’m not good at this sort of thing, but I’ll try. I know you’ve been in a really bad place. I understand you have healing to do and strength to build—and I admire you for it. I’m not going to pester you for dates—I can see that’s not the way to go with you. But I want you to know—when your heart heals, when you feel strong and more sure of yourself, when you feel sure about me, and you’re ready, I want to take you some place really nice. Just me and you. And I want you to know that I’ll see it as a beginning for us. I’ve waited a long time to find someone like you. You’re the kind of woman I’m looking for. When you’re ready.”
“You underestimate yourself. I think you said that very well,” she said softly.
“Thanks. And thanks for the beans. They really were good. I’ll have to get the recipe—the guys at work would love it.”
“I’ll write it down for you.”
“Well, I’ll get going then. And I’ll definitely talk to the guys about volunteering.”
“That would be so awesome.”
He nodded and turned away, stepping down the porch steps to walk back across the yard to his own house.
“Clay?” she said to his back. He turned to look at her, standing on the porch steps. “I think I’m ready. Now.”
**CHAPTER FIVE**

*Ready?* Had she really said that aloud?

Clay took a couple of slow steps toward her. He took the bottle of beer out of her hand and set both his and hers on the porch floor. He put a finger under her chin and lifted her face up to his. “You’re so pretty,” he whispered. “Do you even know how pretty you are?”

She shook her head. Truly, she didn’t. Confidence came hard in many areas of her life. But in one thing she was feeling much more certain—this was a fine man.

He touched her lips softly with his. Then a little more firmly. He put his arm around her waist and pulled her against him, covering her mouth in a searing, hot, fantastic kiss. Her arms slowly encircled his shoulders to hold him close and she let him part her lips. He moved over her mouth with warm, passionate, delicious pleasure, a moan coming from somewhere deep inside him. When the kiss came to an end, he didn’t retreat far. Dory sighed against his lips—an “mmmm” escaped her.

“You taste wonderful,” Clay said.

“I taste like beer and beans,” she said with a half laugh.

“I didn’t notice,” he said, holding her. “Dory, it’s going to be hard to go slow with you.”

“But very necessary,” she said.

His lips found her neck and he seemed to breathe in her scent. Then he was kissing her again, and not only did he hold her tight against him, but Dory pulled him nearer and moved under his lips. She tilted her head to get a better fit, to bring him passionately closer. When he broke the kiss, he was breathing hard. “If I kiss you every day for the rest of your life, will that be slow enough?”

“I think so,” she said in a breath.

Then the kissing began again and Dory was completely lost. If she wasn’t careful, she could fall in love with him quickly. Desperately in love. But maybe she had started loving him when he played with the kids that first time…. And started loving him more when he said he’d be her newest volunteer. And perhaps she was totally sunk when he’d said *when you’re ready*.

His lips went back to her neck. “Please don’t move, Dory.”

“Okay,” she said, feeling so much more connected now, against him, warm and safe in his arms.

“I have to go home now,” he whispered. “Home to my own house.”

“I know.”

“In just a second, I have to leave…. .”

“I know. But it’s still early. What will you do?”

“Hmm. Grab a shower, I think. A really, really cold one.”

She laughed a little and said, “Oh-oh.”

He pulled back a little and looked into her eyes. “There’s one thing you need to know, honey. You can trust me. You’re in no position to take chances and I swear, you can trust me.”

“I believe you.”

“I better go,” he said huskily. “While I can still walk.”

She wondered if she would crumble to the ground when he let go. “And while I can still stand,” she said.

“G’night,” he muttered. And then with a groan he let go of her and turned away, walking across the wide yards to his house. When he got to his own porch he turned and lifted his hand toward her.

And Dory lifted hers.

When she walked inside, she found Sophie sitting on the sofa in her nightie, apparently waiting for her to come inside.

“You were kissing Clay,” Sophie said.

*Nothing but the truth in our house,* Dory reminded herself. “Yes,” she said. “I was.”

“Good. I like Clay.”

Dory chuckled and tilted her head. “Are you sure you’re only eight?”

“Are you going to marry him?”

“Right now I’m going to be his good friend. I’m going to have a date with him one of these days and you and Austin will have a sitter so I can have a grown-up date. When men and women who are all grown up become very
good friends, they sometimes kiss. Only if it’s okay with both of them, but it has to be okay with both of them. Do you understand that?"

She nodded. “Is he like a boy friend?”

“Well, I haven’t thought about this a lot yet, but I guess he is. Like a boyfriend.”

“Good,” Sophie said. “I wondered if we’d ever get us a boyfriend! Night, Mommy.”

“Night, sweetheart,” she said, almost laughing out loud.

CLAY KENNEDY HAD TO report for his twenty-four-hour shift the very next morning, and one of the first things he did was tell his buddy Charlie what had happened to Dory as a result of the incident in the parking lot.

“You’re kidding me?” Charlie said with bark. “That old creep.”

“That’s what I thought. He had a few pretty negative things to say about Dory’s commitment to her foundation. In fact, he said some real negative things about single mothers on the job—like he couldn’t be bothered because they have to miss work for the kids sometimes.”

“I’ve missed work because of situations with kids!” Charlie said.

“I have a sister who runs into this kind of attitude at her job—and if she couldn’t hold that job, my folks and I would be supporting her.”

“Well, I have an ex-wife, and I do the best I can by her and the kids, but she’s still gotta work. And she doesn’t need that kind of resistance.”

“I told Dory we’d lend a little support to her foundation. They’re on a shoestring and need everything from donated food items to money. Probably mostly money.”

“I’m on board,” Charlie said. “The rest of these guys will do anything to look like heroes. But that’s not the first thing we’re going to do.”

AT ABOUT TEN IN the morning, the rig pulled into the grocery-store parking lot and a bunch of firefighters sauntered into the store. Right up front, smiling one of his big smiles, was Mr. Sills, the manager. “Welcome, gentlemen, welcome! If there’s anything we can help you find, please let us know.”

The firefighters shopped regularly, and for a big crew, too. Not only did they feed their own house, they had frequent drop-ins from cops and highway patrol who didn’t have a gang meal going on at their stations. Firefighters were famous for making huge, wonderful meals. Clay supposed it was worth some good money to the grocer.

“We’re not shopping today, Mr. Sills. In fact, we stopped by to let you know why we won’t be shopping here anymore. I heard through the grapevine that you let that cashier go—the one who helped out when that young woman was under attack in your parking lot.”

“Oh?” he said, eyebrows up, as if totally surprised.

“Dory Finn,” Clay said. “You fired her for that.”

“Oh, that,” he said. He laughed uncomfortably. “I’m sure that can be worked out. It was one of those, you know, spur-of-the-moment reactions.”

Charlie stepped forward. “Were your comments about not hiring single mothers because they were undependable spur-of-the-moment, too? Because I’m divorced, Mr. Sills, and I try to take good care of my family, but my ex-wife needs her job, and fortunately she doesn’t have a boss as unsympathetic as you. Nah, I’m getting my groceries somewhere else.”

“My mother raised me alone,” another firefighter said. “Come to think about it, we’ve had at least a couple of United States presidents raised by single mothers, including the current one. Guess that means it must pay off to give them all the support we can—pay it forward, if you get my drift.”

“Gentlemen, I’m sure this was exaggerated.”

“I doubt it,” Clay said. “A lie would cause Dory’s tongue to fall out.”

“Tell her to come and see me—we’ll work it out.”

“I’ll run that by her, but she’s already got another job, and this one actually caters to single moms, knowing what a great work force that can be,” Clay said.

“I’ll pass the word, too,” Charlie put in. “I’m telling all my friends, neighbors and family. I have quite a large family around here. I doubt they’ll want to get their groceries here any longer.”

“Me, too.”

“Me, too.”

“I guess that sums it up, Mr. Sills. We completely disagree with your take on single moms. So…gee…have a good life.”

And they departed in force.
Summer was almost upon the land. School would be out in less than a week and Dory Finn’s life had taken an entirely new direction. She woke up earlier and earlier each day, too excited about the prospects that lay ahead to sleep. She started each day with a cup of coffee at the computer she kept at home, working for a while before the kids woke up.

After taking them to school, Dory went to her new office at The Single Mother’s Resource Center. Before they had a center, it was difficult to get a large number of their volunteers in one place at the same time, but that was no longer an issue. For meetings they gathered at the center. There was also space now to leave their essential items—like posters and fliers advertising the upcoming single moms’ conference; the gift baskets that would be given away; the food and supplies that were being collected for their food closet. Their July conference would be held at the local Presbyterian church. The pastor and his wife had turned out to be major supporters, willing to do anything and everything to help them.

The shelter they maintained for families of domestic abuse stayed full, always with a waiting list. But they were successful in moving women and children through there pretty quickly, making room for the next ones. It was a small house, but a safe one. And their goal was to eventually have more than one, or at least a larger one.

Things were so much more organized, with one person in a static location to ride herd on all the projects and people involved. And because they now had an address and business cards were scattered everywhere, people who needed them were calling and stopping by. It was not at all unusual to have a woman with kids in tow drop in to the center. Sometimes she needed absolutely everything; sometimes she was merely curious or even wanted to help as a volunteer.

And of course Dory had a new volunteer—Clay Kennedy. He was organizing a competitive baseball tournament between area firehouses. An entry fee would be collected, admission would be charged, a big barbecue would follow the playoff games—for a price—and he had managed to arrange for the food to be donated. It was destined to make a bunch of money for the center—money they could put to very good use. And it would probably become a popular tournament, with competitive players going after the title year after year. Clay was also regularly picking up food items for her closet.

And he was kissing Dory whenever possible. Sometimes they’d duck behind a tree, only to be caught. Sophie would say, “You’re kissing again!” and Austin would say, “Bllllkkk!” She suspected Clay enjoyed getting caught. It was like marking his territory with the kids. If she didn’t have evening meetings and he wasn’t doing his twenty-four hours at the firehouse, they often had dinner together followed by a private meeting on the front porch after the dishes were done.

Just the evening before, he had some things on his mind—a new dimension to this still new relationship.

“We need a better game plan for summer,” Clay said. “On my days off, I want you to let me take charge of the kids so you can be at the center. I’ll get them to T-ball and Little League practice and all that stuff. It takes the strain off you a little bit so you don’t have a hard time adding ball games to your schedule, because I know you really want to go to as many games as possible—and you have kids in two different leagues. Know what I mean?”

Boy, did she know! Between her work with the center and the kids’ activities, it was sometimes a push keeping the schedules straight. “I appreciate the offer,” she said to Clay. “But that’s too much. We’re not your responsibility.”

“I want to do it, Dory,” he said. “It’s not something I have to do, and I don’t have any ulterior motives. It’s not about getting closer to you—though I’ll take any invitation I can get.” And then he grinned. “They’re good kids and I’m good with kids. I can get a letter of recommendation from my sisters. They take complete advantage of me.”

“So they, now?” she asked with a smile.

“Absolutely. And speaking of my family, the rest of them want to meet you. We have to pick a day you can come to a family picnic, meet the whole gang.”

“Have you been talking about me?”

“Not really. I brag. No one can believe I have a girl as beautiful as you, so you have to give me credibility and meet the family.”

“Are you getting a little ahead of yourself?” she asked him. “We’re pretty new, you and me.”

“Nah, we’re not new. Kissing is new. Watching the kids is new. But we’ve lived next door to each other for months and know plenty about each other. Besides, those kids of yours? They tell everything. If I forget to put on a turn signal, they’ll rat me out.”

True enough, she thought. They saw everything, heard everything, told everything. Besides, she was totally hooked on Clay, only because he was wonderful. Generous and kind and loving and tender. So they did just as he’d suggested. Dory and Clay worked out a schedule that eased her load a little bit by letting him help out with her kids sometimes. Her children were ecstatic—they’d far rather have Clay at their practices and games than her!
She thought about this as she sat at her desk in her office, and of course it made her smile. She was alone in the house that served as the center. It seemed it was either crawling with people and thus distractions, or quiet like this. But not quiet for long. She felt a presence standing in her office doorway and looked up to see Mr. Sills standing there. He was a short, bald man who got red all the way to the top of his head when he was upset. Right now he was exceedingly pink.

“I hope you’re satisfied, Miss Finn.”

“Mr. Sills?” she asked, standing from her cluttered desk. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He walked into her office. “Oh, don’t play coy, Miss Finn. You launched a campaign to ruin my business, and don’t deny it!”

“What?” she asked, appalled. She came around her desk. “Mr. Sills, I wouldn’t do something like that, no matter how upset I was with you! What in the world are you talking about?”

“Those firemen, they said they were going to stop shopping at my store and spread the word to their family and friends. All because I had to let you go! And I’m not going to kid you, Miss Finn—I resent it! But in order to undo the damage, I’m willing to give you your job back.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” she said. “I already have another job, Mr. Sills. It’s not only one I’m more suited for, but it needs me as much as I need it. But I’ll speak to them—the firefighters. I’ll insist they go back to your store, and try to un-spread their word to family and friends. They shouldn’t have done that—it was wrong.”

“You will?” he asked.

“Of course, Mr. Sills. I told you, I’d never do anything like that. But please, let’s not kid ourselves that it’s about me. I think it has a lot to do with your attitude toward single moms, and that they’re too much trouble to employ. My next-door neighbor Clay is one of the firefighters who was at the store the day we had all the drama in the parking lot. It turns out he has a sister who’s a single mom and he looks out for her and his nephews the best he can. Apparently he took your attitude more personally than I realized—and obviously doesn’t appreciate it.”

Mr. Sills muttered something, shaking his head.

“What was that?” she asked.

“And one of them has an ex-wife who’s a single mom, and another was raised by a single mother….”

Dory crossed her arms over her chest. “Oh, so you already knew this wasn’t about me, but about your bigotry. Maybe I should just stay out of this—it sounds like you made your bed.”

Mr. Sills seemed to shrink a bit. “Listen, Miss Finn, my receipts really dropped off the last several weeks. If you know a way to end this moratorium, I’d be most appreciative….”

“You need an education,” she said. “First of all, the only category you can lump single moms into is that category where they don’t have partners to share the responsibility of the kids, and that makes life that much harder for them—their jobs that much more essential. Many of them are widows or victims, and they need our help. All our help! Maybe you should come to our conference for single moms, sit in on some of the workshops, see if you learn something.”

His expression was all pain—he’d clearly be mortified. “Ohhh, Miss Finn…”

“Or you could donate to our food closet. You have a lot of product that’s perfectly good but can’t be sold—like disposable diapers in a crushed box, dented cans of vegetables and soup, that kind of thing. As long as it’s safe, we can use it.”

He brightened at once. “And you’ll speak to your neighbor?”

“And we have single moms looking for jobs all the time. You’re hiring from time to time. You could free up a position or two for us.”

“Ohhh…” he moaned.

“If qualified, of course,” Dory clarified. “But even without the food and the job, I’ll still speak to Clay. Of course, I’ll tell him the whole story, about how I tried to get you to—”

“Done!” he said. “I’ll have the unusable items stacked in the stockroom weekly and you can go through them, and I’ll give you a call when we have a position free. But only for an interview—the job candidate has to be qualified.”

She smirked at him. “Mr. Sills, don’t kid a kidder. I was a hard worker. You’re going to miss me.”

“You were more than adequate….”

She laughed at him. “I think we can work together, Mr. Sills. I’ll call off the firefighters and you give me all your damaged but completely safe stock and let me send you job applicants when you have openings. And for good measure, we’ll put a nice big poster advertising our single moms’ conference and our resource center in your front window.”

His eyes brightened at that. “I suppose that could lure my customers back.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “It might give the illusion you’ve joined those of open minds and loving hearts,” she said. “Only you and I will know the truth.”
He scowled at her and she laughed.

Dory put out her hand. “Do we have a deal?” she asked. He nodded and took the hand. “Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Sills. Please, take some of my cards and leave a stack at your customer service desk.”

“Don’t push it, Miss Finn....”

“Your competitors do that for me,” she said. “Happily.”

He took the cards from her, though he made a face. And she thought, what a piece of work! But she laughed and thanked him.

Once Mr. Sills had gone, Dory grabbed a couple of files off the top of her desk and turned to the filing cabinet. Still chuckling, she had begun to file them when she felt a couple of very sweet, very familiar arms slip around her from behind, followed quickly by some of the hottest, sweetest lips she’d ever known right against her neck. She giggled.

He turned her around and kissed her. When their lips parted he asked, “Was that Sills from the grocery I saw leaving?”

“It was,” she said. “I hear you’ve been a lot of trouble for him. Boycotting his grocery and all.”

“You weren’t supposed to hear about that. He had it coming, the old jerk.”

“I won’t argue that, but your move was vindictive and I’d rather not resort to that. I believe what goes around comes around and I just don’t need any bad karma. Know what I mean?”

“Yeah, but he did have it coming and he is an old jerk.”

“We made a deal—donations of food and et cetera, plus a shot at job openings in his store for our moms. I’m good with that. I think I actually intimidate him,” she said, and laughed. “He didn’t realize I have such influential friends. Now, what are you doing here?”

“I wanted to stop by before getting the kids from school and off to their practices. Meanwhile, you go home and freshen up. Put on something nice. I hired a babysitter—one of the guys at the firehouse has a seventeen-year-old daughter who drives. She’s going to be at your house at six-thirty.”

“Oh, Clay. Babysitters are kind of expensive....”

“It’s my treat and I can afford it,” he said, tightening his arms around her. “I’m going to take you to a nice restaurant, then bring you home to a couple of sleeping kids worn out from baseball, excuse the sitter and make out with you on the porch for a while. That’s what I want. Can you deal with that? Because it sounds like a great idea to me.”

She rose on her toes and gave him a kiss. “You turned out to be a pretty good neighbor, Mr. Kennedy. Yes, I can deal with that.”

He covered her lips in a deep and meaningful kiss. Against her lips he said, “I want to be a lot more than your neighbor, Dory.”

She ran her fingers through the thick dark hair at his temple. “You already are.”
Dear Reader,

Harlequin Books is well-known as a publisher with a lot of heart, and that attribute is not limited to their ability to publish universally loved romances, but also speaks to their generosity of spirit. Harlequin is about not just entertaining women, but empowering them. That’s why it’s such an honor and privilege to be asked to contribute a novella to the More Than Words program. The novellas are always inspired by charities that serve those in need.

The charity that inspired the project in my story is the Zoë Institute, a multilevel nonprofit resource center for single mothers located in Tahlequah, OK. Zoë refers to the Greek word that stands for not only the duration of life, but the quality of life; therefore the services the Institute offers range from crisis intervention, including the distribution of emergency food and other supplies, to education, mentoring, encouragement and support.

The Institute was founded by Rhonda Clemons, who found her calling when she was a widow with four young children. Single mothers, she quickly realized, need everything! Rhonda Clemons had a vision—a resource center that could meet every possible need, because she believes that every child deserves to grow up in a home where their mother is well supported, has the education necessary to live a full and abundant life and can lead their children to do the same. It is a world-changing, epic resolve that the center strives to reach—one single mom at a time. Between 300 and 400 families contact the Zoë Institute offices each month!

Rhonda Clemons’s vision has become the helping hand that has walked hundreds of single moms through the storm. For more information about this amazing organization, please go to www.zoeinstitute.com or call 918-453-9778.

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