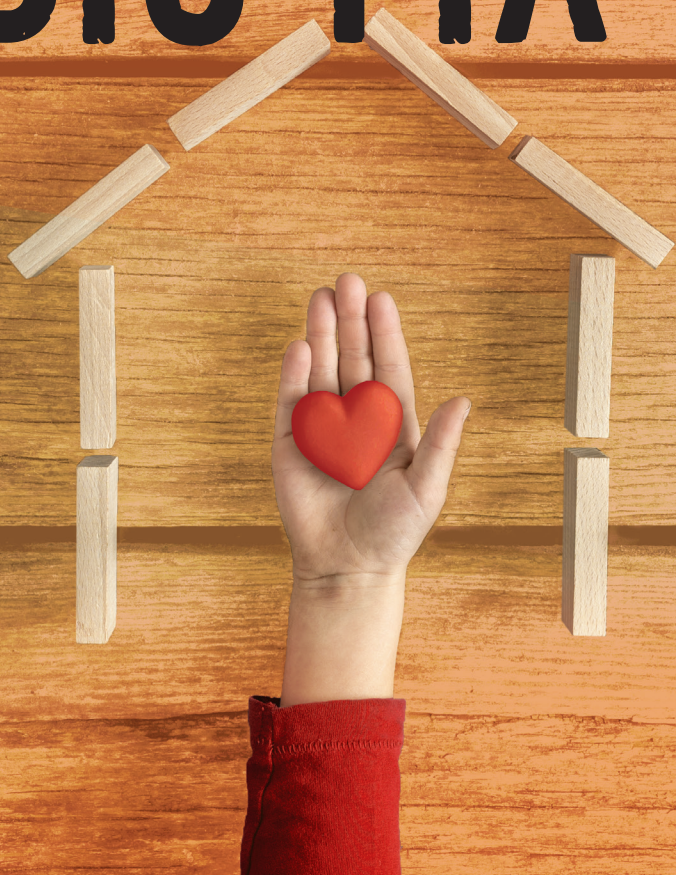


GAIL ANDERSON-DARGATZ

TINY HOUSE BIG FIX



TINY HOUSE, BIG FIX

GAIL ANDERSON-DARGATZ

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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ONE

AS LIAM AND I built the interior wall frame, it lay flat on the first floor of the unfinished house. I hammered in the last nail to hold a stud in place, then put down my nail gun and stretched my back. I'd spent a lot of my day bent over as I banged walls together, and my back was sore. The house had no roof yet, only framed-in exterior walls. We were both sweaty and grubby from working under the sun all day. I'd kept my mess of curls pulled back into a ponytail to keep the hair

off my face. I wasn't sure whether Liam had bothered to comb his hair. Now, toward the end of our shift, his dark mop stood up at all angles.

"Ready, Sadie?" he asked. I nodded. Together, we raised the interior wall frame we had just built and kicked it into place. We both knew what we needed to do, so we didn't talk much. Liam and I had been on the job together for several months. I found him easy to work with.

Most people are surprised when I tell them I'm a carpenter, working as a framer in housing construction. Not many women work in the trade, even now that skilled carpenters and framers are in short supply. But building is in my blood. My dad owned a small construction company until he passed away. He taught me how to use power tools when I was just a kid. I built my own go-cart and tree fort when I was ten.

When I was a teen, I worked summers alongside Dad, framing houses. In fact, I worked part-time for my dad even after I married. I quit when I got pregnant with Zoe. Then I had Maggie not long after. I was a stay-at-home mom for nearly fifteen years. But when I divorced, I needed to make a decent living for the kids and me. A career in construction seemed like the natural choice.

As I worked with Liam to nail the wall into place, I felt my cell buzz in my jean pocket. I finished my task before checking my phone. There was a text from my youngest daughter. **Mom**, it read. **You've got to come get me!**

"Damn," I said.

"Something wrong, Sadie?" Liam asked.

I scrolled through my messages as I spoke. "Maggie is still waiting outside the school. Zoe should have picked her up half an hour ago." I read another panicked text

from Maggie. “And she’s freaking out.”

My youngest daughter, Maggie, goes to the rural elementary school near our village. My oldest, Zoe, attends the junior high school in town. Maggie is nine, but I don’t feel she is ready to walk home alone. She would have to cross a busy highway to get there.

Instead, Maggie hangs out at the playground at her school with other kids until Zoe’s bus arrives. Then Zoe walks her home.

I replied to Maggie. **Just hang on, sweetheart. I’ll find out what’s going on.**

I quickly texted my oldest daughter. **Where are you? Maggie is at school, waiting. She’s scared.**

“Hey!” my crew boss yelled at me from the other side of the house. He was nailing together a short wall frame on what would be the bathroom. “Use that damn phone on your own time. When you’re on the clock,

all I want to see are your elbows and butt.” It was something Bruce always said. He meant he wanted to see us working, bent over and swinging our hammers.

“Yeah, yeah,” I called back as I pocketed my phone.

Then Liam and I started laying out the studs for the next wall. Once that was done, I banged in the first stud on the new section of wall with a framing nailer. Liam worked on the other side of the frame, nailing in studs with his nail gun.

As I moved on to the next stud, I felt my phone buzz again. I glanced over to make sure Bruce wasn’t watching and checked my messages. There was another from Maggie, wondering if her sister was okay. But there was nothing from Zoe yet. I sent another text to my oldest daughter. **Zoe, where are you?**

Liam straightened up with his nail gun in hand. “Maggie still freaking out?” he asked.

Liam had kids too. We often talked about parenting during our lunch breaks. He knew all about the problems I was dealing with.

“I’m starting to worry too,” I said.

“Oh, I wouldn’t fret,” said Liam. “When my boys stay with me, they’re always running off with the local kids. I don’t know where they are half the time. That’s a good thing too. Kids need to explore the world on their own.”

He fixed another stud in place with the nail gun. *Zap. Zap.* “I’m sure Zoe is just hanging out with friends after school,” he said.

“I hope so,” I said.

I messaged Zoe yet again. **Answer me!**

Bruce yelled, “Sadie, get to work!”

I rolled my eyes at Liam. “Bruce is such a slave driver,” I said. I didn’t know whether to love my crew boss or hate him. Liam only grinned.

I set my phone in front of me as I bent to

nail in the studs. As I worked, I kept peeking at my cell to see if Zoe had replied. I was relieved when she finally texted back. **Chill, Mom. I'm fine. I met up with Jason and lost track of time. But I missed my bus. Pick me up?**

I swore under my breath.

"What now?" asked Liam.

"Zoe," I said, throwing up a hand. "I have to drive all the way into town to pick her up."

"She missed her bus again? That's the second time this week."

"And it's only the first week of school," I said. "I have to put an end to this before it becomes a habit."

Stay at school, I texted Zoe. I'll get Maggie and meet you there.

Then I sent another message to my youngest daughter. **I'll pick you up soon, honey. Just wait outside the school. Zoe is fine.**

Bruce called out, "Sadie, what did I just tell you about using that phone on my time?"

"Okay, okay," I said.

But just then my phone rang. With Bruce watching, I answered without checking who was calling. "What is it *now*?" I asked, thinking Zoe was on the line.

"Sadie?" the caller asked. It was a woman's voice.

"Sorry. Yes, this is Sadie." I laughed a little in embarrassment as I glanced over at my boss. "I thought my daughter was calling."

"This is Ruby," the caller said.

Ruby? It took me a moment to realize who it was. My landlady. I hardly ever saw her. I mailed my rent checks to her each month. The only times I talked to her were when the dryer stopped working and there was a leak in the roof. Even then it was only to get her okay to fix the problems myself.

“Sorry, yes, Ruby,” I said. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m hoping to swing by your place this evening.” She paused. “We need to talk.”

“Is something wrong?” I asked. I lowered my voice. “You received this month’s rent payment, didn’t you? I know I mailed it.”

“Yes, yes,” said Ruby. “You’re always on time with your rent. And whenever I drive by, the place looks tidy. I don’t feel I have to check in on you. You’re the best renter I’ve ever had.”

“Then what is it? Should I be worried?”

She cleared her throat. “I think we better talk face-to-face.”

“I’m just leaving work to pick up my daughters,” I said. “I have to run into town. But we should be back home by six.”

“I’ll stop in just after supper then.”

“Sure,” I said. “See you later.”

After we’d hung up I stared at the phone

a moment. Ruby had been pleasant enough. But a sick feeling was creeping into my stomach, like something was about to go terribly wrong.

TWO

LIAM PUT DOWN his nailer and stepped around the wall frame to talk to me. “Everything okay?” he asked. “You look like you just got some bad news.”

“I’m not sure.” I pocketed my phone. “My landlady wants to see me. I guess I’ll find out why this evening. But right now I’ve got to pick up my kids.”

“You’re not leaving work early again, are you?” my crew boss asked.

Bruce was a big meaty guy with a

shaved head. Even his scalp turned red when he was angry. Or maybe he was just sunburned. Even though I was wearing sunscreen, I could feel the sunburn on my own cheeks. As a redhead, I burn easily. Zoe keeps bugging me to wear a hat at work.

“Sorry, Bruce,” I said. “I’ve got one scared kid crying at her school and another stranded in town.”

“Zoe missed her bus again?” he asked. “Are you kidding me?”

“I don’t know what to do with her,” I said. “She’s been acting out for months now. Talking back, slamming doors, and now she’s missing the bus on purpose.”

“She’s what, fourteen?” Bruce asked. “Kids are all drama queens at that age. Sometimes it seems like they’re only able to think about themselves.”

I imagined he spoke from experience. He’d raised a couple of teenage daughters himself.

“It’s just a stage,” Liam added. “Zoe will outgrow it.”

“I hope so.” I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. “It seems like teens take more work than toddlers. At least, my Zoe does. And that’s energy I don’t have right now, working this much. I think she may be missing the bus just to get my attention.”

Bruce shook his head, dismissing my comment. “The girl’s got to learn you can’t keep running off to pick her up. I say make her wait until your shift is over. Teach her a lesson. In any case, I need you here.”

“What do you expect me to do?” I asked him. “Make my nine-year-old wait at the school alone for hours, crying? I don’t have anyone I can call to pick her up.”

Bruce held up a hand to stop me from going further. “I get it,” he said. “I have kids too, remember.” He rubbed his chin,

leaving a streak of dirt there. “All I’m saying is, you’ve got to pull things together on the home front so you can get your work done. Over the summer you skipped out because Zoe left Maggie at home alone. Now that they’re back at school, you’re running off because Zoe missed the bus. The kid is thoughtless.”

I shook my head. “That’s not true. Zoe *is* acting out. But she’s doing that because I’m not around enough. And I know I depend on her too much. She shouldn’t have to take care of Maggie all the time. Zoe makes dinners too. She takes care of the laundry and cleans up the house. It’s too big a load for a kid that age.”

“That’s not so bad,” said Liam. “Chores are good for kids.”

“I guess. But all that doesn’t leave much time for hanging out with her friends. She’s started to resent everything I ask her to do.

I don't blame her. I just wish I could afford to be home more, like I was before the divorce. With all the overtime we've been pulling, this job isn't exactly family friendly."

"Not my problem," said Bruce. "We build houses when we get a contract and the weather's good. You're here to work. You can't leave early day after day and expect to keep your job."

My phone buzzed yet again, and I checked my messages. There was another text from Maggie. **Are you coming? Everybody is gone!**

On my way, honey! I replied, typing with my thumbs.

"Are you listening to me?" Bruce asked.

"There's a shortage of framers," I said, adjusting my tool belt. "You really think you can replace me that easily?"

"I just hired Alice, didn't I?" Bruce waved at our coworker. Wearing a red bandanna, Alice was hard at work off to the side of the

unfinished house. She had her head down, cutting a stud to fit a window opening.

I had talked Bruce into hiring another woman for the framing crew. He'd chosen Alice because she had taken a carpentry course at the local college. Now she continued to learn on the job as an apprentice. And we'd already become friends. Alice, Liam and I ate lunch together every day and sometimes hung out together at my place after work.

"You're a good framer, Sadie," Bruce said. "I don't want to lose you. But I need people I can count on. With you gone for the rest of the day, it's going to take Liam longer to finish the job. I can't afford to keep you on if you cost me money."

Crap. I didn't want to lose this job. Especially over Zoe missing her bus.

"Of course," I said, nodding. "You're right. I won't let it happen again." I put

my phone in my pocket. "I'll come in early Monday morning to make up for it, okay?"

Bruce dismissed me with a wave and went back to work.

I glanced back at Liam, hoping for his support. "Bruce, eh?" I said. "Always getting himself worked up. He's going to give himself a stroke."

But Liam only shrugged. "I'm not too thrilled about you leaving early either," he said. "Without you here, I'll be putting up these walls by myself for the rest of the day. It's a two-person job."

"Bruce is here. And Alice can help."

"Bruce has his own work to do. And I have to tell Alice how to do everything."

"She'll be fine," I said. "She's catching on." I picked my way through the boards on the floor, heading for the ladder. I called over my shoulder, "And I'll find a way to make it up to you." At that moment I was thinking

I'd buy him a six-pack of beer. But he had something else in mind.

"So you *will* bring the kids over to my house Sunday?" he asked.

Oops! I'd walked right into that one. The day before, Liam had asked me over for dinner. I hadn't given him an answer. I wasn't sure if he was asking me on a date or not. It didn't seem like one, not when I had two kids in tow. But what if it was?

I turned back to Liam. He looked at me hopefully, like a dog in a pet-shop window. "I'm not sure," I said, thinking of my landlady's call. "I'll have to see how the weekend goes. It's already off to a rocky start."

"Yeah, sure," he said. Then he perked up. "Your girls would really like my house. Honestly. My own boys love it."

I laughed. "Your house? What's so special about your house?"

"You'll see. So are you coming?"

“Look, Liam—” My phone buzzed again, and I read the text. Maggie was wondering why I was taking so long to get there.

“You can bring dessert,” Liam said. “Maybe you can make a batch of those great brownies you brought to work that one day.”

Then Zoe texted again, saying she was going to the mall with Jason. She wanted to meet me there. *Ugh*. I didn’t want to search the mall for my teenage daughter. And who the hell was Jason?

I quickly texted her. **I said wait for me at the school!**

“Did you hear me, Sadie?” Liam asked. “You okay bringing dessert?”

“Yeah, I heard you,” I said, still checking my phone. “Brownies. But right now, I have to go.”

“It’s a date then?” Liam asked, sounding doubtful. “Will I see you Sunday?”

I hesitated. So this *was* a date? I knew

I had to set Liam straight. I just didn't think of him in a romantic way. We were work buddies, friends. Nothing more. Still, I didn't want to hurt his feelings either, especially not with Bruce listening in. "I'll text you over the weekend," I said. "I'll let you know whether I'm coming or not then. Okay?"

My phone buzzed yet again as Maggie sent another message. I quickly texted her back. **On my way!**

"Sorry, Liam," I said. "I really have to go."

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If you're interested in learning more about building or buying a tiny house, I found the following resources and stories useful as I wrote this short novel.

Tiny Home Alliance Canada has an excellent website that includes a section called "Process Tips" for building your own tiny home. The Tiny House Festival site has a page called "Tiny House Bylaws in Canada"

that outlines common issues and offers a list of communities that welcome tiny houses.

I was delighted to see that a great many women are building their own tiny homes. Google the topic and you'll see what I mean. Kayla Feenstra of Abbotsford, British Columbia, is one example. She built her tiny house for just \$15,000. Like other women, she went on to start her own tiny-house construction business. Hers is called Tiny Homes Canada. You'll find a "Tiny House 101" primer on the Tiny Homes Canada site.

By the age of eighteen, **GAIL ANDERSON-DARGATZ** knew she wanted to write about women in rural settings. Today Gail is a bestselling author. *A Recipe for Bees* and *The Cure for Death by Lightning* were finalists for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. She also teaches other authors how to write fiction. Gail divides her time between the Shuswap region of British Columbia and Manitoulin Island in Ontario. For more information, visit gailanderson-dargatz.ca.