

I was so impressed by the fresh, new voice in *Big Love*!
I'm waiting anxiously for his next book.

— Ane Mulligan, author of the award-winning
Georgia Magnolias series

Big Love is a breath of literary fresh air with characters whose voices were so unique and likable and dialogue that made me want to spend the day with these people. I was never sure where the plot would ultimately take me, but I happily followed it through each scene and sighed with satisfaction at the conclusion, wishing the story wasn't over so soon.

— Deborah Raney, author of the Camfield
Legacy series and *A Nest of Sparrows*

The characters are believable. The settings are well-developed. The blend of tension/pain alongside hope/joy is well-executed. I really enjoyed the story.

— Jeff Crosby, author of *The Language of the Soul*

BIG LOVE

A NOVELLA

MICHAEL EHRET



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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

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Chapter One



I'm just going to put it out there. My name's Timberly. Yeah, Timberly. Get over it. I did long ago, okay? What can a girl say? My father, the dealmaker, cut what he called a "win-win" with my mother. Trouble is, there were three people in the deal and only two of them "won-won."

Mom knew I was a girl and wanted to call me Kimberly after her best friend in high school. Dad—Timothy Robert Charles—wanted a boy to "carry on the family name and name after me." No one really asked me, which was probably good because I dislike both the K and the T versions.

And, no, in case you're wondering, I was never confused about who I am. I decided early on who I was and who I wanted to be. Let me start over.

I'm Berly Charles. I live in Broad Ripple, with my four-legged main crush, Baxter, my mini Schnauzer. The Ripple used to be the coolest neighborhood in Indianapolis but isn't anymore, now that the people looking to gain cool by osmosis have overtaken it. But I still like it. I'm single, twenty-nine, naturally redheaded, and sassy. And I like it that way—most of the time.

Other times? Well. Why don't I tell you what I do for a living?

During the day I run a tiny construction company that's part of my dad's conglomerate, King Charles Enterprises. Yeah, I know, ego much? But I love my dad, and he did give me one thing—other than the strangest name of all my friends. He gave me tenacity. And a mind for business. So, that's two, I guess. Plus the name. Okay, three. And he did love me. We'll go with four and an option to upgrade.

When I said I run the tiny construction company you probably thought it was a little, boutique-like construction business my dad set up for me to build a house or two a year and feel like I'm doing something meaningful. It's okay. Lots of people think that. If you did, you're wrong too.

La Petite Maison, LLC—so, shoot me, I majored in French for a brief shining moment—is my construction company that builds tiny houses. Homes just like yours, at a fraction of the size (and cost). And it is mine, not King's. It's housed under the family corporation because it's better for business, but I run it.

I hold meetings at homeless shelters and under highway overpasses in the parts of town most people just drive over. Well, mostly. I do have an office and a desk at King, but I don't go into Edward's territory willingly. My real office is in my home and out at the sites.

Who is Edward? He's my baby brother by seven years. Let's just say Edward and I were raised in two different families. He doesn't get me and I stopped a couple years ago trying to understand how he can be so completely soulless.

I try to be generous. I've seen ungenerosity. Been the recipient of it. And it cuts to one's core. To me, refusing to be generous is denying the other person's humanity. How can a Christian—and I am one—look at someone in need and turn his back, roll up his window, pretend not to see? This is Edward. I love my brother, but he is a bit of a tool.

I should be honest. La Petite Maison isn't exactly rolling in dough. Don't get me wrong; I'm not about to be turned out on the street—not this time. But if things don't turn around soon, Edward, Daddy's chosen successor, will be justified in recommending to the board, as he swears he's going to, that they shutter me.

In starting the business, I asked Daddy for the freedom to build a tiny home now and then at cost—or less—for people who need a home. Edward hated the idea, but with Daddy's assistance I was able to build the vision into the margins.

Edward and I differ on the definition of “now and then.” Now that Daddy's gone, I've lost my protector. I can't say Daddy liked me giving homes away, but I can say he understood why. We lived it together. Edward did not. And maybe that's the difference.

One good thing is that Edward's not an idiot. Definitely a tool, but not a fool. He'd stop the saber waving if I could show a healthier bottom line.

So, I need to hike up my big girl panties and find a way. And I may know just the woman to help.



Nathan Rafferty, or Rafe as the few he allowed close called him, strode into his office and paced in front of the window that afforded him one of the most enviable lake views in all of Chicago. How had he been roped into this? Him? Of all people?

The feature articles he wrote for *architecture journal*—oh how he hated the pretentious use of all lower-case that came about two years ago with the new hipster managing editor, Holden Fields—were about the biggest and the best architectural accomplishments of the modern world.

Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur.

The Bird's Nest in Beijing.

Hotel Remota, Puerto Natales, Chile.

These were the types of projects Nathan Rafferty, magna cum laude graduate of the Lyles School of Civil Engineering at Purdue University, wrote about. Real Architecture. Important, trend-setting, place-creating Architecture. Projects worthy of his attention.

Tiny houses were not. Not places even smaller than the rat holes he grew up in. Definitely in the “not worthy” category.

He stood behind his expansive two-toned wooden desk, his hands splayed over the smooth surface, claiming it, owning it. Taking dominion over things, even other people, when necessary, always brought back his sense of control. And he needed that sense reinstated. He needed it reinstated right now, baby.

As the senior writer—and should-have-been editor—he ought to get to choose his own assignments. That was the unassailable argument. Yet it had failed.

It was the twit. That twit admin. Bitsy, Betsy, Twitsy, whatever. This was her fault.

In that morning’s editorial meeting, where everyone pretends that all stories are available to anybody, regardless of who they might be—but they really aren’t, Twitsy’s annoying little bird chirp of a voice had rung out as Hipster Holden was preparing to make assignments for an upcoming issue.

“Wouldn’t it be, you know, sort of cool and all if Mr. Rafferty would, I don’t know, take on the tiny home story?”

“Absolutely not,” Rafe had said immediately, nipping that idea in the bud.

The admin squirmed a little, and he was glad to see his remark had the desired effect.

“But,” she stammered, getting her gumption on now, “it’s a hot trend right now and he’s—you’re—our Trends writer. Your name on it would get much more attention. I mean, as important as you are.”

She was right, but why was she trying to massage his ego?

Holden coughed and bit back a laugh. “That’s actually a great point, Betsy. I’m inclined to agree. I think our readers would enjoy a story on this new phenomenon. Look at the ratings HGTV is getting for those shows. What, uh, what do you think, Nathan?”

Rafe thought he’d like to smack that smug look right off Fields’s face.

“I couldn’t possibly. I have zero interest and even less desire to explore such a plebeian trend—no, fad. Architecture is not about fads. Architecture is about grand statements on the human condition.”

With all the calculated nonchalance he could muster, Rafe laid his notepad on the table in front of him and opened his phone to “check his messages.” Discussion over. Winner declared. The crowd roars in approval.

As he peered over his phone, pretending to pay no attention, Rafe saw Holden stroke the stubble he’d been nursing into a beard for six months. This he had to see. His editor’s patented far-away-deep-in-thought look he thought made him seem contemplative, was now playing out on the man’s increasingly mashable face.

“Truly,” Fields said, a soft Calgon-take-me-away look illuminating his face, “what could be more grand of a statement on the human condition than finding home?”

Rafe simmered, seconds away from boiling over.

Twitsy raised her hand, like the new kid in the classroom she was and would forever be, and sealed the deal for Rafe.

“The, uh, contact we have is for a company in Indianapolis called La Petite Maison, run by Berly Charles,” Twitsy chirped. “In addition to regular contracts, they also do some *pro bono* work with the city’s homeless population. So there’s that appealing side angle. The company is a subsidiary of King Charles Enterprises.”

“Not. On. Your. Life.” Rafe pocketed his phone and picked up his notebook as he turned toward Holden. “Not even on your less spectacular life. I will never take that assignment.”

He would not, could not, promote Tim Charles.

As he headed for the door, a low chuckle rolled from Fields’ throat.

“This is exactly why it’s so good to be the editor,” Holden said. “You see, Nathan, that’s the beauty of the word ‘assignment.’ Because, assignments—if you understand the definition properly—aren’t so much taken as they are given.”

Rafe turned. “Don’t threaten me, Fields.”

“Oh, I’m not. I’m not threatening you, Nathan. I’m simply stating a fact. The assignment is yours.”

There was none of the traditional murmuring that marks a typical editorial meeting, but the eyes of all twelve people in the conference room were on him. Except Twitsy, who looked away with what seemed like embarrassment *for him* on her face.

Oh, we’ll see about that.

“One cannot give an assignment—*noun*, a specified task or amount of work—to someone over whom one holds no authority,” Rafe said. “I will not do that assignment.”

“You will.”

“Then I quit.”

Rafe stormed out of the meeting room and headed for his office to collect his stuff, and stew.

Tim. Charles.

Granted, the man was dead, and good riddance. He’d read the news six months ago in *Indianapolis Monthly* and rejoiced. But the pit of his stomach still clenched when he remembered the look on his mother’s face after she learned the company she’d invested her life—and her savings—in had evaporated due to Charles’s mismanagement.

Even worse was the defeat in her eyes that night as she’d sought temporary shelter for them at Haven of Hope, a shelter

for the homeless in Indianapolis, only to be turned away because she had a child. Technically because there was no room in the family portion of the shelter, but Rafe knew why they'd slept on the street that night, and many other nights, under an overpass. It was because of him.

How that buffoon had ever built anything into the admitted success King Charles Enterprises was, still mystified Rafe. He'd always wanted revenge for his mother and, if he was honest, for himself.

But it wasn't to be. And neither was this job.

He shoved some books into a box and the memory back into wherever it had come from. While packing, he felt the unmistakable pretentiousness of Holden Fields behind him—hovering just outside his office door.

“Holden.”

Fields entered the room. “Your kingdom just get a little smaller, Nathan? A little *tinier*, perhaps?”

He raised his eyes to bore a hole into Holden Fields's forehead and, once again, was disappointed not to have Superman's infrared, fry-them-from-the-inside-out, eyeballs.

“Don't try to goad me, Fields. It won't work. This is a momentary setback. One that you know I'll soon right.” He smiled as he indicated the box on his desk. “I'm already packing.”

They both knew the start-up competition, *By Design*—no lowercase frou-frou name, thank you—would snap up *architecture journal's* star attraction in a heartbeat. Rafe would be out of work no longer than it took to make the phone call.

Fields raised his hands to fend off Rafe's ire.

“It doesn't have to be this way.” He sat his Armani-clad *derrière* on the corner of the desk. “We can work this out.”

Rafe saw something other than the customary arrogance playing in the man's eyes. Was he afraid?

“You'll give the assignment to someone else?”

“I can’t. You know that.” Fields sighed. “Not after you made an issue of it and forced my hand.”

They’d had this discussion before, or one like it. Rafe sat behind his desk and crossed his arms. “Money, again.” Not afraid then. Desperate. Yes, desperate to keep him on staff. He could almost smell the man’s sweat—except for the abundance of Sauvage assailing his nostrils.

Holden nodded. “As you know, I’m under pressure to make the magazine appeal to a wider audience. I don’t like it. I don’t. You likely find that hard to believe, but it’s true.”

Case in point: the recent addition of “My Movie Star Home”—the latest tactic to reach the younger demo. Rafe leaned back in his chair. His lip quirked up on the right. “Don’t look at me like that,” Holden said. “It’s easy for you. You don’t have to worry about the finances. You just put words together like, I don’t know, like the Frank Lloyd Wright of publishing or something, creating your version of Samara with each precise article.”

Fields knew about Samara?

“Oh, spare me the squint,” Holden said. “I do actually know a little about architecture. You aren’t the only one.”

Rafe reached across his desk for the brass sextant his mother had given him five years ago when he moved to Chicago. She’d hoped then it would be a symbol to help him find his way home. “This is your chance, Nathan,” she’d said. “Take it. Forget about Indianapolis.”

“What are we talking about, Fields?” Rafe asked. “I’m not doing the teeny home story. I thought we settled that.”

“Tiny *house*, not teeny home.”

“Po-tay-to, po-tah-to.” He placed the sextant in the velvet-lined box he’d pulled from his bottom drawer. Maybe Mom had been right all along. Maybe this was his chance. Not to leave the past, but to avenge it. Still, how desperate was Fields?

“Nathan, please. Reconsider. For the magazine,” Holden

said, taking the sextant out of Rafe's moving box. "We—I—need you here."

Fields replaced the sextant on the desk. "Do the tiny house story, and we'll talk about an editing position. Say, Grand Poobah in Charge of Architectural Statements on the Human Condition?" Rafe chuckled and straightened the navigational tool, wiping a smudge from one dial. "Enough," he said. "I'll stay."

The surprise on Fields's face pleased him. He set the moving box on the floor in front of his skyline view, turning his back on Fields. "But, I'm staying for me, not you."

He heard the editor's sigh of relief, but ignored it, his mind racing with possibilities as he turned back to his desk.

"Which doesn't mean I'm turning down the promotion."

Fields's smile faded a bit, but he nodded.

"Besides, I'm actually starting to see the merit of Twitsy's idea. It's an opportunity. One too good to pass up."