

*Lottie's
Hope*

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ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI USA

LOTTIE'S HOPE

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One

*D*on't call us, Mr. Arnold. We'll call you."

"But I can bring this house into the 1980s—"

Lottie closed the heavy front door on the dapper little salesman and slumped against it. "That man couldn't build a sandcastle at the beach, much less my room addition. Please tell me we have another choice."

Miranda didn't blame her employer for sounding discouraged. So far they'd seen three contractors, none of them suitable. One wanted to talk to the man of the house. Another was more interested in financing the project than discussing design. The third—well, Peter Arnold's enthusiasm for paisley drapes and country blue walls marked him as a decorator, not a builder. She couldn't suppress a chuckle. "Can you imagine this gorgeous old house with pink wall-to-wall carpeting?"

Lottie shuddered. "Old-fashioned or not, I love these hardwood floors." Her gaze fell to the polished walnut staircase. "Helen kept this house in beautiful shape. If only it had a room big enough for a grand piano."

"But it doesn't." Miranda consulted her clipboard. "Which brings us to our last construction company. This is the one Ed Williams recommended. Apparently, the owner is a friend of his."

"That's a good sign," Lottie said. "Ed and Martha have to live next door to this room addition. They'd want to point me in the right direction. What do you think of this company?"

Miranda looked up with a frown. "They didn't impress me much. When I called, the guy acted like he was too busy to answer my questions."

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Lottie's blue eyes lit with humor. "You probably caught him by surprise. Not everyone knows as much as you do about construction."

"Surprised or not, he should have had answers." Miranda frowned. "He wasn't even sure he could make time to see us because they already had a Saturday appointment. No business is secure enough to turn away a customer." She glanced out the window. "Speaking of which, they're here."

"Oh, good." Lottie pulled the lace curtain aside and peeked at their last option. A big white pickup truck stood at the curb, Harms & Sons Construction printed in block letters on the door. She threw Miranda a startled glance. "Harms? Their name is Harms?"

Miranda nodded. "Why? What's wrong?"

Lottie shrugged. "I once knew a family named Harms. But it couldn't be them. They weren't from Iowa."

The wistful note in her voice caught Miranda's attention. In her year as Lottie's assistant, she had never seen the great pianist drop her guard. Which made it all the more surprising when Lottie opened the door and stared at the contractor with slack-jawed recognition.

Tall and dark-haired, with broad shoulders and blue-gray eyes, the man returned her stare with a look of polite boredom. "Jason Harms, ma'am. We spoke on the phone?"

Lottie flushed to the roots of her wavy white hair. "Come in. We're expecting you. This is my assistant, Miranda Charles." She reached out to draw Miranda into the conversation. "Actually, she's the one who called..." Her voice trailed off as she stared toward the street.

Miranda had to crane her neck around the man in the doorway to see what had caught Lottie's attention. As she watched, the passenger door of the truck swung closed, revealing a man who could only be Jason's father. Tall and lean, with a silver crew cut and weather-beaten skin, he strode across the lawn carrying a notebook in one hand and a tool box in the other. When he reached the porch, he set his burden down and looked straight at Lottie, who smiled radiantly back.

"Well, hello there," she said brightly.

"Hello, ma'am." His tone was distant, almost wooden. "I'm Sam Harms. I'll be helping my son today."

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Lottie's welcoming smile froze. "Of course. Come in." Her voice, usually so smooth, sounded hoarse. She cleared her throat. "I'll let my assistant take over from here. She's in charge of the project."

Miranda stared at her employer, trying to puzzle out what had just happened. Lottie looked devastated. What did she know about these men? Could they be trusted?

Jason Harms cleared his throat. "Can we get started? We've got a schedule to keep."

Miranda matched his brisk tone. "Right this way." She led the men down the hall, away from Lottie, talking business all the way.



Lottie sank onto the bench in the entry hall, her thoughts in a whirl. That man was Sammy Harms. She was sure of it. So what if she hadn't seen him in forty years. He hadn't changed that much. And his son—well, the likeness between them was uncanny.

What was Sammy doing in Collison? Had he lived here long? Did he still play the drums? Her brain teemed with questions.

Most of all, why was he treating her like a stranger?

Long minutes later, she heard the sound of work boots stomping back down the hall. "All finished?"

The men looked preoccupied. "We're moving outside, ma'am," Jason said. "We'll need more measurements to give you an accurate quote." He turned to Miranda, who followed close at their heels. "No need to come. We'll bring you a bid in a couple of days."

Miranda looked like a storm cloud as the door swung shut behind them. Lottie was amused in spite of herself. The Harms boys always did know how to irritate women. "They're a charming pair."

Her assistant smiled ruefully. "Unfortunately, they know their stuff. You'd be a fool not to hire them."

"Did they..." Lottie hesitated. "Did they say anything about me?"

A pucker appeared between Miranda's black eyebrows. "What kind of thing?"

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Lottie turned away, embarrassed. “Forget it. I can’t imagine why I said that.” She glanced at her watch. “Would you look at the time? I’ve got to get moving. I planned on putting in a few hours at the office.”

Miranda took her cue. “I’d better get out of your hair. I’ll just put this clipboard in my office before I go.”

Lottie watched her petite assistant climb the stairs to the tiny room that served as an office. The arrangement wasn’t ideal, but it was necessary. Collison College had outgrown its campus, and office space was scarce. At least, that’s how the matter had been explained to Miranda. Lottie had her doubts. Surely there was always room for one more secretary’s cubicle.

“What else can I do for you?” Miranda asked when she came back downstairs.

“Tell me what you liked about Harms and Sons.”

Miranda thought a moment. “I could tell from their walk-through that they’re competent builders,” she said slowly, “but it’s more than that. They seem to understand old houses. The son pointed out architectural details that he’d want in the new room, while the dad knew what kinds of problems you’ll have with wiring and plumbing. I think the two of them work well together.”

Lottie thought this over. “So you really think I should hire them?”

“Yes, I do.”

Lottie walked her assistant to the back door and watched her hurry down the brick path. Miranda looked oddly formal for a Saturday in a blue business suit and low-heeled red pumps, with her abundant black hair confined to a bun at the nape of her neck. The girl’s choice of wardrobe screamed, “Take me seriously,” but no amount of shoulder pads or ruffled blouses could disguise how young she was.

As Miranda’s Toyota hatchback pattered down the alley and disappeared, Lottie sighed. Most of the time she didn’t think about getting older. Fifty-three was only a number, and she had the energy of a much younger woman. But after this morning she felt downright ancient. Ancient, faded, and forgettable.

For some reason Sam Harms’ sudden appearance had knocked her sideways. She puzzled over this fact as she stood at the stove, heating a

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can of tomato soup for lunch. Over the years she'd run into other men from the Neverland Band, and those encounters had not troubled her. She'd ignored most of them, of course. Those men would have been pretty hard to explain to anyone who knew her now. Her official biography said nothing about playing piano for a down-at-the-heels traveling swing band. As far as her fans knew, Lottie Braun grew up on a little farm in Iowa until she enrolled in the Dayton Conservatory of Music at age fourteen. It would never do to let the public learn the truth.

This morning Sam had given her a dose of her own medicine, looking straight through her like she was no more important than a hat rack. They'd been friends, darn it! She'd been the one to introduce the lonely fourteen-year-old boy to her Aunt Eva, the woman who adopted him, and gave him a way out of the life he hated.

She carried the steaming pan of soup to the table and picked up a spoon. Come to think of it, she and Sam were related now: First cousins, because of good old Aunt Eva. Not that it mattered. Lottie hadn't seen any of her family in forty years. Apparently, Sam didn't plan to be the first to break the ice. No loss, she told herself. She must have dozens of relatives in this county. Surely not all of them wanted to pretend she didn't exist.

Maybe they do, her conscience whispered. Maybe they sit around at family reunions and gossip about what you did to Helen.

She shooed away the treacherous thoughts. Helen's letter had been clear. Nobody knew their secret. Nobody. She raised her eyes to the ceiling. "Helen?" she murmured. "Does that include Sammy Harms?"



Miranda didn't expect a crowd when she decided to jog around Col-lison's historic downtown in the early afternoon. On weekdays, when she drove through on her way to work, the place looked deserted. To-day, though, the shops were full of customers, and a line of cars circled the courthouse square in search of parking.

A busy farmers' market occupied the sidewalk, forcing her to run along the curb, behind booths that overflowed with bright vegetables

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and fragrant baked goods. One or two dogs on leashes wagged friendly tails as she passed, but a fat gray goose with a gleam in its eye chased her down the street, hissing angrily.

“Look out!”

Miranda hit the open car door and went down like a sack of flour. First her tail bone, then her head bounced on the pavement before she came to rest next to sleek red sports car.

“Are you hurt?”

She opened her eyes to find a man crouching over her, a look of concern in his warm brown eyes. She tried to ignore the way the scenery whirled as she sat up. “I’m fine.”

“Thank God.” The man looked relieved. “I didn’t see you when I opened my door.”

She nodded. “I was trying to outrun a goose.”

His mouth turned up in a lopsided grin. “Good idea. Geese are mean.”

“Of all the fool—” The driver came around the hood of the car and stopped next to Miranda. “Oh. We meet again.”

She winced. “Hi.”

Jason Harms did not look pleased to see her. “You should watch where you’re going.”

She narrowed her eyes. “No kidding.”

The other man looked curious. “Wait. You two know each other?”

The contractor gave a long-suffering sigh. “This is Lottie Braun’s secretary.”

“Ohhhhh.” The other man’s face lit with recognition. “The one with all the questions.” He turned his interested gaze on Miranda. “I’m Mitchell Harms. Everyone says I’m the nice brother.”

She couldn’t help smiling at his friendly tone. “Miranda Charles.” She scrambled to her feet. “Well, I’ll be going now.”

Her knees shook too badly to start running again, so she settled for a fairly steady walk. Once she turned a corner she let herself limp, then sank onto a park bench and rested her aching head in her hands.

She was almost relieved when the red sports car followed her around the corner and stopped at the curb. The tinted window glided down to

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reveal Jason Harms at the wheel. "Get in," he said. "I'll take you home."

She waved him away. "Don't you have a schedule to keep?"

There was a short pause. "It can wait."

"Uh-huh."

He flung his door open and came around to stand in front of her. "Look, you're obviously in pain. My car did the damage, so I'll make sure you get home." He opened the passenger door and held out his hand. "Come on. I'll help you up."

Her aching head overrode her usual sense of caution. She complied with the gentle pressure of his hand and settled with relief against the soft leather seat.

"Good." He shut the door behind her and got in the driver's side. "Now, where do you live?"

"Division Street, in that big complex of townhouses."

He put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb. "I know the place. The units are tiny."

"It was all I could find."

He nodded. "The best places in Collison never go on the market. Take your boss's house, for example."

She rolled her head to one side to look at him. "How do you know it didn't go on the market?"

"I practically grew up there. My family was good friends with the Parkers." He glanced at her. "It's a great old place. I always wanted to live there myself."

"Wouldn't it be strange, adding to a house you know so well?"

He shrugged. "I'm not thrilled about working for that woman, but at least I know we'll do right by the house."

She stared at him. "What do you mean, that woman? She has a name."

"Yeah, I know. The great Lottie Braun." He shot her an ironic glance. "I just don't get it. She was too good for little old Collison while her sister was alive, but now she wants to settle down here?" He shook his head. "How long do you think that will last?"

Miranda had wondered the same thing, though she wasn't about to admit it. "You make it sound like she's doing something illegal. If you're

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as close with the Parkers as you say, then you probably know Lottie's sister gave her the house."

"Yeah. That's another thing I don't understand."

Her head was beginning to pound. "You can let me out here."

He pulled up to the curb and came around to help her out of the deep bucket seat. "Easy does it. You're going to be sore tomorrow."

"I'm fine." She yanked her arm away. "Thanks for the ride."

He stepped back and nodded politely. "Chalk it up to good customer service."

He was gone before she could react, tearing away in that ridiculous sports car. "You don't have the job yet," she yelled as he roared out of sight.



Lottie stared out her office window at the deserted campus three floors below. The green quadrangle, hemmed in by six limestone buildings, looked cool and inviting in the afternoon heat. White sidewalks divided the lawn into neat triangles that met in the center at a sprawling marble fountain. Next Saturday the grass would no doubt be trampled underfoot by hordes of returning students, but for now it looked like the cover of a college recruitment brochure.

The quad hadn't changed since Lottie was a little girl. She and Helen had splashed in that marble fountain on hot summer Saturdays while they waited for Pop to finish his business in the county seat.

The peace on the quad carried into the Performing Arts Building. Lottie had passed one or two people on her way to the third floor, but for the most part the place was deserted. Not that she minded. With a week to go before classes started, she had a lot of work to do in a small amount of time. In the past, as a visiting professor, she had worked with piano performance majors and delivered a few guest lectures. She hadn't taught general music courses, and while she was extremely well-versed in music theory, she was finding it difficult to develop a semester's worth of lesson plans.

She did not feel comfortable asking the other professors for help.

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They weren't a warm bunch. In the week since her arrival, none of them had said much to her beyond, "Hello." Worse yet, they didn't seem to talk among themselves. Aside from the Monday morning staff meeting, she hadn't seen any two of her colleagues in the same room together. Lottie was accustomed to professional rivalry, but this general sense of alienation was something different. Katherine Snelling, the department dean, set the tone for everyone else. Formal and serious, she approached her duties with the gravity of a prime minister, weighing every word she spoke as if lives hung in the balance. The result was a pompousness she probably didn't intend. Still, it was off-putting.

Maybe things would change when the other piano professor came back from her summer in Europe. Surely two pianists would have enough in common to forge a good working relationship.

She leaned back in her chair and pinched the bridge of her nose. This wasn't working. The warm August air, the whirl of her desk fan, and the scent of mowed grass outside the open window all were conspiring to put her to sleep. She stood and stretched, leaning to one side and the other, then paced to the other end of the room and took her seat at the baby grand piano. A little Beethoven would wake her up.

Six measures into the second movement of the *Pathetique*, a prickle went up her spine. A glance over her shoulder confirmed she was no longer alone. A plump, red-faced woman stood in the doorway, holding a red milk crate full of books. Beads of sweat stood out above her upper lip, and her chest heaved in an effort to catch her breath. "Who are you?" Lottie said, without breaking tempo.

"Rhonda Kennedy." The stranger blew a lock of frizzy yellow hair out of her eyes. "What are you doing in my office?"

Lottie stopped playing and turned around on the piano bench. So this was her fellow piano professor. "Your office?" she said with raised eyebrows. "This office was assigned to me."

Rhonda Kennedy took a firmer grip on her box of books. "I'm afraid there's been a mistake. Katherine promised I could have this office after Alicia retired."

Lottie stared at her opponent. The busy dean had not bothered

herself with something as small as assigning Lottie's office. Instead Elaine Woodward, the department secretary, had handed her a key and a room number, and sent her on her way. The office, with its long windows, high ceiling, and scarred wood floor, had come as a lovely surprise. She wasn't about to give it up without a fight. Rising to her full five-foot-ten, she approached the angry professor with unhurried steps. When she stood too close for comfort, she looked down at the shorter woman. "What's the old saying? 'Possession is nine-tenths of the law.' I'm not moving until Dean Snelling says so."

A whiny note entered Rhonda's voice. "Katherine will take my side. You'll see."

Lottie nodded. "Maybe. For now, though, you'd better take those books back where they came from before you drop them."

Rhonda threw her one last outraged glance and retreated. "This isn't over," she called over her shoulder. "We'll settle it tonight."

The door swung shut, cutting off Rhonda's shrill voice.

Lottie closed her eyes. So much for forging a partnership. After an introduction like that, she'd be lucky to avoid an all-out war.

With a sigh, she gathered her lesson plans off the desk and filed them in her book bag. Rhonda was right about one thing. The whole department would be together tonight at Alicia Maynard's retirement reception. Hopefully the angry professor had enough sense not to ruin the occasion with an argument over office space.

Fat chance.