

## Prologue

**D**ON'T TELL ME. YOU'RE WHAT?" I hit the brake, and the car skids a bit but stays on the ice-covered lane before coming to a stop. "But, Piper, you are coming, aren't you? For the Christmas opening, I mean?"

"Well, I ... and ..." Her voice crackles and then trails off midsentence.

"Piper! Piper? Can you hear me?" I wait. *Oh, rats! No signal. I'll call her back on the landline when I get there. Just a few more turns, then I'll be at the top. What a scene!*

I put the Jeep in park and grab my phone. *If someone comes up the lane, sorry. Better hold on to this moment. Moments come and go quickly. This just might be next year's Christmas card from Emerald Crest.*

The melting ice drips from the naked limbs of the beech trees, but the boughs of the white pines still nestle last night's snow. The powder dusts my shoulder when I brush a pine limb, so I step into the ruts away from the trees and walk up the lane about ten yards for the very best shot.

There. The image. "Emerald Crest, enthroned on a

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snow-covered peak like a beryl palace against a cloudless blue topaz sky.” Those are the words of the advertising executive who just finished printing our winter brochures. Perfect description of this morning.

I trudge through the ruts up the hill to the west to get Red Spruce Knob in the background. It wears a fresh white blanket this morning. *Thank you, Father, for providing that early morning sun like a spotlight on that old mansion. Click. Click. Got it. This moment may never come again, but I can hang on to it now.*

I head back to the vehicle, grateful for my front-row seat to this December morning’s scene peeking through these trees. West Virginia has welcomed me back home in fine fashion. College in Fort Worth, Texas, behind me and my dream job ahead of me. Oh, these hills and trees ... Ah, trees. They call anything that grows above twelve feet tall a tree in Texas because they’ve never seen the chestnuts and maples and beech trees in West Virginia. And color? A cactus is green until it turns brown and dies. But the colors of leaves on sycamore trees? I have a new I’ve-been-away-from-home appreciation for them, scaly bark and all.

I slog back down the hill, brush the snow off my shoulder, and climb back into the driver’s seat. Another couple of hairpin turns, and I am in the driveway. In front of me, Mrs. Finch, red stilettos firmly planted on the front sidewalk, points to the stone chimney, and Mr. Hornsby watches the snow he’s kicking with his pointed-toed boot. His chin is practically on his chest, and his head moves from side to side. I gather they are having another one of their discussions.

I park and get out of the Jeep. “Good morning, Mrs. Finch and Mr. Hornsby.”

She looks at her watch. “It’s about time. Now that you’re here, maybe Edgar will get to work and do what he’s told.”

Mr. Hornsby never looks up. “Julia’s on time whenever she gets here. We’re both at work, but I’m not a-goin’ to do that, not that thing.”

I’ve seen Mr. Hornsby with his hands in his pockets before,

and this has nothing to do with subfreezing temperatures. It has everything to do with being resolute. “So, tell me, Mr. Hornsby, what is it that you’re not going to do this morning?”

“Mrs. Finch here wants me to pull down all these ivy vines from the chimney, and I’m not a-doin’ that this mornin’—or any mornin’, for that matter. Mrs. Lafferty planted this ivy decades ago, before either of you were born, and I’m not a-pullin’ it down.”

Mrs. Finch’s hands are on her hips.

Not the first time I’ve seen her like this. “So, Mrs. Finch, why is it you want the vines pulled down?”

“What do you mean why? Don’t you have eyes? Look at it.” She steps closer to the chimney and breaks off a twig. “It’s gnarly and dead, and it really looks deader than it is. Besides, I have ideas about something spectacular to do with this chimney. Something that would dazzle our guests when they drive up to the mansion.”

Mr. Hornsby stops kicking snow and shaking his head, his hands still in his pockets. “If I pull the vines down, the chimney’s bare forever. So, do you have something spectacular in mind for next spring when the ivy would be turnin’ green and coverin’ this stone chimney? These vines are only bare for about four months, and even then they’re sayin’ somethin’. Even in the winter, they’re a livin’ part of Emerald Crest, and I’m not a-removin’ them.”

*My dream job?* For the last two weeks, I’ve done little more than referee the competition between these obstinate two. Our opening is in two days, I remind myself. *All this will be over, and my real job begins.* “I love that you have spectacular decorating ideas, Mrs. Finch, and I know that you have envisioned such beautiful things for our gala.” I cross my gloved fingers behind my back. *Jesus, forgive me for that fib. I’m just trying to keep peace here.* I know that most of her visions and spectacular ideas come from magazines she purchases down at the drugstore.

“And ... Mr. Hornsby, I’m so happy to hear that you revere Emerald Crest’s history. And it would be a bit sad to see the ivy go. Maybe the solution here is to ask Mr. Lafferty what his

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preference would be.” *Mr. Hornsby and I can always play the Mr. Lafferty card. Henrietta Finch can’t.*

Mrs. Finch heads to the front door in one of her snits, mumbling as she goes. “Well, I would have already asked him if I could.”

Diplomatically, I wait until she disappears inside. “Mr. Hornsby, I think we’ve taken care of that issue. So, since I don’t think you’ll be pulling down ivy vines this morning, would you mind helping me unload these packages and get them inside?”

Mr. Hornsby is grinning on the inside, and it sneaks out one side of his mouth. He removes his hands from his pockets and grabs a couple of boxes. “Why, I’d just be happy to, Julia. Thank you for rescuin’ me and the ivy vines this mornin’. And for saving the vireos. They like nestin’ in the ivy in the spring.”

I follow behind him with three bags of tinsel, ribbon, and red Christmas balls. “Just so you know, Mr. Hornsby, I’m not planning to involve Mr. Lafferty in this discussion. We both know what he’d say. I think hanging the sparkling lights in the pines lining the driveway is on this morning’s list. But that was before we got snow. The ice is melting from the tree limbs, and we don’t want you getting electrified this morning. You know that thing about electricity and water. Maybe it’ll warm up and be dry by afternoon. You might want to find something to do out of hearing distance of Mrs. Finch in the meantime, though.” We step through the front door into the foyer.

“Then I think I’ll split some firewood out behind the shed. Henrietta Finch won’t come lookin’ for me out there. She wouldn’t like gettin’ mud on her red, high-heeled shoes. Where would you like these boxes?”

“Just put them on the counter in the butler’s pantry. They’re punch cups, and Mrs. Finch likes things out of sight, you know.”

Mr. Hornsby puts the boxes on the counter and steadies them. “And I’ll be out of her sight for sure. If you’d rather help me split wood than split hairs with Henrietta, you know where I’ll be.”

"I just might take you up on that. I'm not wearing red, high-heeled shoes. Thanks for your help." I stuff the three bags beside the two boxes on the counter, reach inside my purse for my cell phone, and dial Piper's number. She answers right away.

"Julia! What happened to you?"

"No, no, I'm fine, Piper. Sorry I frightened you. Signal is spotty out here. Just tell me, will you be here?" I'm prepared to beg, bribe, or belittle to get her here.

"I'm coming, Julia. Wouldn't miss it. I have a show tonight, so Mom and I will fly into Bridgeport tomorrow and rent a car."

"I'll come and get you."

"No need. You have too much to do, and besides, we'd like to have a car." She pauses. "Shoot. Gotta go—rehearsal. See you late tomorrow."

"Oh yes! You made my day, my Christmas, my year, maybe my whole life. This just wouldn't be the same if you weren't here. Later."

I disconnect and stare at my phone with a huge smile. She's coming. Piper—the sister I never had. I remember growing up together, making footprints around this place, and I could not imagine celebrating without her.

I nearly bump into Mrs. Schumacher on my way into the kitchen. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I should be more careful. We seem to be moving around here like bees to a hive lately. I'm sure you're not used to that."

"Yes, we are. Moving around, I mean. And no, I'm not used to it, but I guess I need to get used to it." She smooths her apron and checks to see if she spilled any of the tea out of the cup she carries. "Hot cinnamon-raisin scones with orange butter are on the counter, and I just made a fresh pot of coffee."

"Sounds perfect for a morning like this one. How is Mr. Lafferty? I do hope he's feeling better."

"Yes, he's much better. Still in his room, though, and I'm not certain he'll be down today. I'm taking him another cup of my warm potion he thinks is tea. That's why he's better, you

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know. I think he'll be in great shape for the gala. Let's allow him to rest and not bother him with any details today, agreed?"

"Yes, ma'am. Please tell him I'm here, and I'm counting on him. Did he finish it yet?"

"Not quite. He said it still needs work. But you know how he is: never satisfied. There is always just a bit of something else he thinks he should do." She heads toward the stairs.

"I know it will be spectacular. I'll find Mrs. Finch and offer her a warm scone. Hopefully it'll sweeten her disposition. Oh, and I just spoke with Piper. She *will* be here for the gala. I was beginning to think her schedule wouldn't allow it. Please let Mr. Lafferty know."

"Lovely. He'll be so pleased to see her again." Mrs. Schumacher turns around and grins at me. "Oh, and I have another special tea for Henrietta's disposition if you'd like me to brew it."

I wink at her and then sit at the breakfast table with my calendar and a warm scone. Normally I would have reached for the apricot preserves, but Mrs. Schumacher's orange butter is better on this cold morning. I look down my list for today and review the plan for the next couple of days. It's all coming together finally—food, decorations, speaker, and entertainment, and the RSVP list is growing each day. Now, if Mr. Lafferty could just finish it, then everything would be perfect.

Rumbles from the garden room sound like Mrs. Finch is rearranging furniture. That's not happening even if it means one of Mrs. Schumacher's special cups of tea. I sip the last drop of my coffee, which also has a sprinkle of cinnamon in it, and put a warm scone on a plate as a peace offering for what might come out of my mouth.

The garden room is my favorite room in the house. It's more like a loggia connecting two wings of the mansion. The exterior green granite wall rises from the green marble floor for about three feet. Then the stone becomes the stage for paned glass that rises to a twenty-foot ceiling. Every lead pane spar-

kles despite the aberrations that hint at its age. And every sill, casing, sash, and muntin are painted a glossy white. It has been like that since the house was built decades ago.

Beyond those panes are magnificent, manicured gardens. In the spring and summer, smooth brick paths snaking through raised beds of herbs and flowers and trimmed hedges and boxwoods make it feel like a maze. Then there are the fruit trees carefully planted for sun and shade. The limbs are bare now, but they'll be fruit-filled boughs for nesting birds come April.

Mr. Hornsby is right. Even in the winter, there is beauty in bare branches, especially these that allow glimpses into the distant mountains.

And then there is the garden art, mostly made of concrete and natural stone. I know every piece. Grancie is right in saying Mrs. Lafferty had an affinity for all things beautiful, and she must have had an affinity for statues of playful children and animals. They only peek through the garden when it's in bloom, but they are in full sight in December.

The real garden is through the window, but framed garden prints and oil paintings of flowers and birds give the appearance of another garden on the back wall of this room. All through the space are multi-patterned, chintz-covered sofas and chairs. Mrs. Lafferty might have been Irish, but this garden room is as English as it gets. Every piece of furniture here hugs me, and there is always a table nearby where I can set my cup of tea or my glass of lemonade.

But the most comfortable seat in the room for me is the piano bench. That Steinway rosewood grand takes center stage in front of the paned windows looking out on all of West Virginia. Mrs. Lafferty's needlepoint cushion is still there—another picture of how much she loved birds and flowers. This room is one of my growing-up places—sitting on the piano bench playing for Mr. Lafferty and learning about patience and perseverance in the garden.

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I enter the garden room from the door to the kitchen wing. Mrs. Finch steps cautiously back from the piano to admire her work. I barely muffle my gasp.

The piano lid is lowered, and there atop the piano is a heavy drape of green velvet trimmed in gold braid. She steps forward and adjusts the folds in the fabric as it cascades almost to the floor. I don't want to believe what I'm seeing: atop the velvet drape is a sterling-silver candelabra with several arms holding twelve-inch red tapered candles. Silk holly leaves with red plastic berries appear to be growing out of the green velvet.

*Ghastly.*

As I move closer to the piano, wrestling for ways of telling her that decorating the piano would never do, she steps to a nearby table and reaches for a matching candelabra. Before she can put it next to its mate on the velvet drape, I interrupt her.

"Mrs. Finch, no. Just plain no. That will not do." I shock even myself with my bluntness, and shocking myself is a rare occasion. I could not have been less diplomatic, and I am fully aware that Mrs. Finch does not take well to criticism.

Mrs. Finch's face looks like she might have just seen the ghost of the original Mrs. Lafferty drift across the room. Her eyes are blaring and stretch almost to the size of her open mouth, all showing unbelievable surprise. "I beg your pardon, Julia?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Finch, but covering the piano and decorating it simply will not do."

She puts the silver piece on the piano, ignoring what I said, and her hands move back to her hips. "I do believe I was the one hired to decorate Emerald Crest for the gala. And I don't believe I was told to take my orders from you, missy. First it was the ivy, and now the piano. Just who do you think you are, Julia Russell?"

"I apologize, Mrs. Finch. What you say is true. And I think the velvet drape and silver candelabras are lovely, and even the fake holly. And I'm certain you'll find a perfect place for it all, but it won't be on the piano."



“Well, it is if I say it is.”

“No, ma’am, it is not. I do not mean to be disrespectful, but this piano is not a piece of furniture, and there are things that apparently you do not understand.” I set the plate holding the scone down on a chairside table and begin carefully removing the candelabra and the silk greenery.

“One thing I do understand is you’re still just as willful as you were when you were ten years old. Your mom and your grandmother would be ashamed if they knew how you were speaking to me.”

*She doesn't really know Mom or Gracie if that's what she thinks.* “No, ma’am, they would not. In fact, I think they’d both be cheering me on and helping me get these decorations moved to where they’ll be more appropriate. I’ll gladly help you get them to someplace else. Where would you like me to put them?”

“Wherever you like, Miss Russell.” Mrs. Finch stomps out of the room, her red heels clicking.

Mrs. Schumacher comes in through the library door just as Mrs. Finch clears the room. Standing still, Mrs. Schumacher allows her eyes to survey the room and settle on me holding two silver candelabras. “Here, let me help you with all that.” She picks up the last pieces of greenery and velvet drape. “I suppose we can add this to the list of things Henrietta’s unhappy about.”

“I suppose we can.”

“Need I make my special tea for her?”

“Yes. Several gallons, please. I’d like to give her a bath in it. Why we decided it was best to hire that woman is beyond me.”

“Perhaps it might have been easier had you explained the real reason you don’t want these things on the piano.”

“Perhaps. But I didn’t, and I’m glad I didn’t give her the scone I brought for her.” I pick it up and start eating it myself. When the butter drips down my hand, I lick it right in front of Mrs. Schumacher.

Her voice is soft and gentle. She can still scold me with a question. “You’re all grown up now, Julia. Educating people,

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that's what you're about, isn't it?" She leaves the room before I can answer. Maybe she wants me to think about it. I think she learned that from Mr. Lafferty.

I am alone in the room. I finish my scone and return the candelabras to their box on the sofa. Then I walk to the piano, lift the ebony lid, and secure it in its highest position with the lid prop. I run my fingers over the strings and gaze at the distant mountains, looking like they were frosted with the glaze Mrs. Schumacher puts on her Christmas cookies, and remember. I remember the first time I played this piano sixteen years ago and why the lid is always lifted. And then I remember the Christmas of 2002.

## Chapter One

*Sixteen years earlier in late September 2002*

**J**ULIA, DON'T WASTE YOUR TIME arguing with me. You won't win, and besides, what have you really won if you win an argument, unless it's in the courtroom? You remember that, you hear me?" Dad adjusted his tie and picked up his briefcase.

I planted my feet on that knotty pine floor in the front hall. "But Dad, I could go to Piper's until Mom gets home. I don't want to go out there to that old green house. It'll be boring." I had heard stories about that mansion, and none of them made me want to go there. Gracie said it was a lovely place, but some of the boys at school say the old man that lived there was scary. "I could stay by myself. Nobody will report you for neglecting me. I can just stay here and study. That's not boring. I'm not Jackson, and I know better than to play with matches. I am almost eleven, you know."

"Yes, you will be in ten more months, but what you really are right this minute is exasperating! Get your jacket on. It's

getting chilly out there.” Dad gave me the look that said I had lost. “Trust me. I promise you, visiting Mr. Lafferty will be anything but boring. Hurry, we have to pick up Mrs. Walker.”

“But didn’t Mr. Lafferty die?” I looked at my skinny self in the hall-tree mirror and tried to tuck my brown corkscrew curls under the hood Gracie had made for me.

“No. Not this Mr. Lafferty the Second. It was Mr. Lafferty the First who died.”

“Wha-at? What happened to just calling him Mr. Whatever Lafferty Junior?” I put on my jacket.

“It’s a long and complicated story, and you’re not ready for that one. Besides, I don’t have time. Let’s get going.” Dad headed toward the door.

I grabbed my book and my backpack. “But you said we have to pick up Mrs. Walker. Why do we have to pick her up? And tell me why this won’t be bo-ring?”

“Julia Russell, with your gift for asking questions, I’m positive you’ll be the fourth generation of attorneys in this family.” Dad opened the front door just in time for a gust of late-afternoon autumn wind.

I knew he was in a hurry, but I thought I might wear him down. “You may recall, Dad, I didn’t arrive here with a brain like some preprogrammed computer you buy for your office—I mean, except for all the autonomic stuff that I never have to think about. We all come wired for that. You know, the stuff like breathing and going to the bathroom and blinking my eyes. But there’s so much else I need to learn. So how do you expect me to learn those things if I don’t ask questions or maybe read and study, like I could be doing right now?”

“Autonomic’? Really, Julia. See what I mean? You just asked two more questions before I got the first two answered.”

“If you didn’t make me go with you, then you wouldn’t have to hear my questions, would you?”

“Tell me, oh please tell me, you have a book with you.”

“I couldn’t be reading a biography of Ludwig van

Beethoven if I didn't have it with me, now could I?" I gave it my best German accent. "I think he was a whole lot of genius and slightly crazy. Did you ever read about him?"

"I tell you, never just a simple 'yes, sir' or 'no, sir' out of your mouth. You even answer questions with another question."

We made it to the car before Dad explained about Mrs. Walker. "Listen to me, Julia. You asked about why I needed Mrs. Walker before I got your Beethoven recital. I need Mrs. Walker because she is a sign-language interpreter."

"You mean like language for someone who's deaf?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

"Beethoven became deaf. But did you know he was deaf when he wrote his last symphony?"

"Julia. Quiet. There's something else you need to know. We don't have much time. So, just listen and no more questions." Then Dad told me about Mr. Lafferty. "Now, don't stare. He uses a wheelchair, and he's deaf. And he doesn't take to strangers. So just sit quietly and read another chapter about Beethoven." Dad paused. "And for God's sake, don't speak loudly to him."

"You mean to Beethoven? He's dead."

"No, I don't mean Beethoven. We were talking about Mr. Lafferty."

"Yes, but pronouns must have antecedents, and the last antecedent you used would have been Beethoven."

Dad raised his voice. "Just don't speak loudly to him."

"You mean loudly like you're speaking to me? And why would I speak loudly to Mr. Lafferty? He can't hear."

Dad put on brakes for the stoplight and turned to the back seat to look me in the face. "You're right. He can't hear, but some folks think if they speak loudly enough he will hear them. He won't. So just don't do that."

"Why are you meeting with Mr. Lafferty?"

"Because I'm his attorney, and I handle all of his business affairs. I've been doing that for years, just like your grandfather was the attorney for the first Mr. Lafferty."

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“Well, if you’re his attorney and you’ve been his attorney for years, why didn’t you just learn sign language so you could communicate with him yourself?” I could see Dad’s face in the rearview mirror. He wrinkled his brow and his eyes got close together. “Then you wouldn’t need Mrs. Walker. Good question, Dad? Better than the others?”

“Just do what I say. Sit quietly and read your book, understand?”

“That’s weird. So if I can only stare at my book, and I can’t speak, why won’t this be boring?”

“First of all, you’ve never seen anything like this house. Mr. Lafferty’s a fascinating man. He’s highly intelligent, extremely well read, a talented sculptor, and he has a special gift that maybe you’ll get to see if you’re really lucky.”

“You mean his art?”

“Oh, no. You’ll see his sculptures. The place is covered with them and his books, but sculpting’s not his most unusual gift.”

Dad turned into Mrs. Walker’s driveway. “Oh, good, she’s ready. Punctual as always.” He waved at Mrs. Walker, who stood on her front porch holding on to her scarf like it might fly away.

“Or could it be that you’re late and she’s been standing there for ten minutes waiting on you?” I really wished I hadn’t asked that. “So how will I know if I see this gift he has, and is he ... is he like a hoarder? One of those people who doesn’t throw anything away?”

“We are only three minutes late, and I repeat myself to make my point: Julia, does anything come out of your mouth that doesn’t end in a question mark? No, Mr. Lafferty is not a hoarder. Trust me. You’ll know his gift if you’re fortunate enough to see it. Now sit quietly until we get there.” Dad got out to open the door for Mrs. Walker.

I was quiet for the next few minutes. Mr. Lafferty lived out in the countryside. Folks just passing through on their way to Elkins might never know there was such a house on the big hill on the edge of town, but all the town folks knew about the

stone manor. In the summertime, it blended into the trees. But now that the leaves were falling, I could see the house from the road. Dad turned off the highway down a lane that wiggled up the hill. The closer we got, the bigger the house got. It was the biggest I'd ever seen, like a giant green castle plopped down and spread out in all directions. Two stories as tall as the pine trees, and three stories in some places.

Dad parked in the circular driveway out front. He opened the back door for me. "You remember what I said, Julia."

"Yes, sir. No talking, and no questions." I mumbled under my breath, "And no fun."

He walked around the car and opened the door for Mrs. Walker. Dad was just that way. No females were allowed to open doors when he was around. My grandfather was just like him.

I followed him and Mrs. Walker up the green granite steps to the porch. The porch was kind of small for such a big house. I'd never seen green stone like the outside walls of this house. In some places, it was as green as the grass in May, with brown streaks running all through it. All the windows had brown shutters.

I thought it rather strange when Dad rang the doorbell. *How's a deaf man who lives alone supposed to know someone's at the door?* But the minute that buzzer was pressed, lights flickered through all the front windows.

Dad must have known I was about to rupture with a question, so he quickly explained how the flashing lights alerted Mr. Lafferty that he had a guest.

The big wooden door with brass hinges creaked when it opened. Too bad there were no flashing lights on the door to let him know the hinges needed oiling.

And then there he was: Mr. Lafferty, the ogre I'd heard stories about. He looked like an ordinary person to me. He had kind blue eyes that moved around a lot under bushy eyebrows. His hair was gray and wavy and looked like he might have been wearing a hat on it all day. He looked old, but his skin was a

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pinkish white with no wrinkles. He wore a plaid flannel shirt, and he had a different-colored plaid blanket across his legs. His plaids did not match. And it was a little chilly, but not chilly enough for that blanket inside the house.

Mr. Lafferty greeted us silently from his wheelchair. When he motioned for us all to come in, we followed him through the doorway. Dad stayed behind to close the door and to pinch my earlobe. That was my you-better-behave-like-a-good-Russell-daughter alert.

Dad was right, like he mostly was. I had never seen anything like this house. The front door opened into a foyer larger than our garage. It looked like an inside forest with dark wood paneling on the walls and green marble floors and sculptures of birds on tables all around. The room was so big and so hollow that our footsteps created echoes as we walked.

Mr. Lafferty wheeled himself into the dining room to the end of the longest dining table I had ever seen. Dad and Mrs. Walker sat to his right. I was still standing in the archway, looking at carved birds hanging by golden cords from the chandelier above the table, wooden birds perched on the windowsills, and a giant eagle looking as if he was about to take flight from the pedestal at the opposite end of the room. I couldn't wait to tell my friends at school tomorrow that I'd been to the green mansion and I'd met the troll.

Dad motioned for me to sit. I had to put my backpack down before I could pull the big wooden chair away from the table. Big houses wouldn't look right with dainty chairs. I sat across from Mrs. Walker, but I never opened my book. I watched Mr. Lafferty's hands begin to move, and I listened to Mrs. Walker speak. Then Dad would say something, and Mrs. Walker moved her hands while Mr. Lafferty watched. Then Mr. Lafferty made odd motions with his hands, and Mrs. Walker spoke again.

Dad was right. I was not bored. I studied Mr. Lafferty's hands. They were scarred, probably from his sculpting and carv-



ing tools, and his fingers were knotty like a pine branch, but they moved nimbly like Grancie's with her knitting needles. I moved my hands under the table, trying to imitate what he was doing. I was so fascinated with his hands that I wasn't paying much attention to what they were talking about until I heard Dad tell him about a family in town that needed help for some medical reasons. I liked medical stuff. A sick coal miner, I thought. I didn't know sign language, but I didn't need to hear what Mrs. Walker said. The sparkle in Mr. Lafferty's eye and the flutter of his hands already told me that some poor family would get the help they needed.

I behaved and didn't interrupt until I needed to go to the bathroom. I really needed to go, but I didn't know where it was. Dad was on the other side of the table, and that was like being across the whole room. I couldn't just blurt it out, so I walked around to where Dad sat and whispered, and he whispered back that the powder room was underneath the curved staircase across the hall where we had come in.

I only weighed sixty-seven pounds, but the *cloppety-clop* of my shoes sounded more like a rhinoceros. I took them off and tiptoed in my sock feet.

In the hall stood two identical doors, side by side, where Dad had told me to go. A house with a boy's and a girl's bathroom? But I didn't know which one was which. The first brass knob I tried was locked, or at least it wouldn't turn. The next one opened. Good. I did not want to disturb Dad again.

Even the bathroom was tiled in green halfway up the wall from the floor and then painted a lighter green above. Pictures of all kinds of birds lined the walls. The mirror above the sink was about the size of a door. The frame looked like golden tree limbs with green leaves made of stone that looked like Grancie's jade Fu dog. These people had a thing about birds. I washed my hands, opened the door, and heard it needed oiling too.

Mr. Lafferty seemed like a nice man to me, not like the stories I'd heard, and I didn't think he would mind if I looked

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around just a little. The staircase was curved, and the railing was dark carved wood. Beyond the stairs, I could see into a room with large windows. The sun was almost setting, but I could see the garden. It was unlike any I'd ever seen except in my mom's magazines. Trimmed shrubs and beds of flowers and bird feeders were everywhere. Birds flitted around and fed from mesh bags hanging from tree limbs and wooden feeders on top of posts. There were brick-paved paths in all directions. I figured that made it easier for Mr. Lafferty in his wheelchair.

Then I saw it. The piano—the biggest one I'd ever seen, even bigger than my piano teacher's. I supposed a big house needed a big piano. I sat down and raised the lid and ran my fingers over the keys—not white plastic ones, but real ivory keys. I had only read about pianos with real ivory keys. I imagined some poor elephant's misery so somebody could have a piano like this.

I was already learning my music for our Christmas recital, and I really wanted to try it out on a piano with real ivory keys. Then I could tell Mrs. Hawkins all about it.

*Now, Jesus, please forgive me for what I'm about to do, but I may never get this chance again. And I really don't think you'd want me to miss it.*

I knew how to use the soft pedal, and since Mr. Lafferty couldn't hear anyway, I didn't think my version of "Silent Night, Holy Night" would get much attention. I was wrong. I knew that my footsteps made noise, but I didn't know that sound traveled through this house like an echo chamber. Before I finished two phrases, Mr. Lafferty had come rolling into that room like a bowling ball on its way to a strike, moving one hand like he was conducting an orchestra and pushing his wheelchair with the other. Mrs. Walker was right beside him, trying to keep up and talking real fast. "Don't stop. Don't stop," she was saying in a shrill voice. "Play it again, please. Play it once again."

By then my dad was right behind me, and my right earlobe was between his thumb and index finger.

I didn't know what to do. Mr. Lafferty's face was a picture of pure excitement. I looked up at Dad. His wasn't. But he nodded his head and let go of my ear. I guessed that meant it was okay for me to play. So I did, only this time I didn't use the soft pedal. When I started to play, Mr. Lafferty wheeled himself right into the curve of the piano and touched the ebony wood with his right hand. He closed his eyes, and a smile settled on his face. It was like he went somewhere far away to another time. Every time I stopped playing, he wanted me to play again. I only knew three songs, but he heard them all three times.

I thought it sad that Mr. Lafferty couldn't hear the music, but I was glad he liked whatever he was experiencing that I didn't understand. And I was hoping that his liking it might keep me out of a ton of trouble.

Before we left, Mr. Lafferty invited me back to play the piano for him. For once, I didn't know what to say. All I could do was nod my head. I didn't have language for Mr. Lafferty. Except ... my grancie said that smiles, hugs, and music were the universal language. I had already smiled at him, and I'd made music for him, so there was nothing left to do but hug him. So that's what I did. I hugged him. He was like hugging Dad's set of golf clubs, and he didn't hug back. I think I scared him. But he smiled just a little when we were leaving, and he waved goodbye.

I had about a million questions when we got into the car. I thought maybe, since Mrs. Walker knew sign language, she might know a bunch of other stuff about being deaf. When Dad breathed between sentences, I said, "Dad, you said Mr. Lafferty's deaf, but I think he can hear. He heard me playing the piano."

"I heard you playing the piano and alerted Mr. Lafferty that I needed to go and retrieve you, Julia. That's when he took off."

Before Dad could say anything else, Mrs. Walker answered. "Oh, he's deaf all right, but that doesn't mean he can't experience music."

*Silent Days, Holy Night*

“So, what is music like when you can’t hear it?”

“He feels it. He’s able to sense vibrations in the same part of the brain that you use for hearing. His experience with the piano today was every bit as real as the sounds your dad and I heard.”

“That’s something I need to know about—brains and hearing. I’d like to know how all that works. I know about the eardrum and vibrations. Must have something to do with that.” Mrs. Walker turned around to look at me in the back seat. “Yes. It does. And how the deaf experience music is something that has been thought about and studied for a long time. It’s difficult because of our inability to describe what we experience when what we experience is so basic to us. How do you experience music?”

“Hmm, I hear it.”

Mrs. Walker turned back around in her seat. “And if you asked Mr. Lafferty that same question, he’d probably tell you he feels it.”

“But I feel music too. I mean, it can make me happy or sad just by the way it sounds. Like today, I think Mr. Lafferty really liked ‘Jingle Bells.’ I think it made him happy.”

“Yes, and just like what you hear stirs your feelings, what he experiences, however he experiences it, stirs his emotions too. I’m thinking this isn’t the first time Mr. Lafferty has experienced music.”

Dad spoke up. “You’re right. His mom and grandmother played the piano beautifully, so I’m told. He must have remembered experiencing them play.”

The rest of the way home I was quiet. I mostly thought about what had happened at the green mansion, and I wondered if I might get to go back. And I thought about Beethoven, and how he couldn’t hear. But he was different; he had heard the orchestra. He knew how every instrument sounded. But Mr. Lafferty ... I wondered if he had ever experienced anything but the piano.

When we got home, Dad settled in his study while Mom

worked in the kitchen. I went upstairs to do my homework. I could tell Jackson was playing video games when I walked by his room. I studied for a while and then pulled out my book about Beethoven, skimming the pages quickly to see what I could find out about his deafness. Mom called us to the dinner table before I got to that part.

I expected to see my grandparents when I got downstairs. My grancie knew lots of stories about the Laffertys, and she liked to tell stories. All I had to do was ask one question, and there she went, and she didn't have an Off button until she was finished. I knew just the question to get her started. And I knew if I asked Dad that question, I'd get no answers, just a "I don't think you need to know all that right now" kind of response.

I helped Mom with the tea. "Where are G-Pa and Grancie? It's Tuesday night. They always eat with us on Tuesdays."

Mom answered as she put the meatloaf on the table. "Couldn't make it tonight. G-Pa's friend from Richmond is here for a few days."

I sat down at my place. Mashed potatoes and gravy, apple salad, Brussels sprouts, and biscuits. I hated Brussels sprouts. Nobody should eat baby cabbages. "But I like it when they eat with us, and I miss them tonight. Maybe I could go there tomorrow after school and spend some time with Grancie."

Mom looked at me over her reading glasses. "And how will you do that when you have your piano lesson tomorrow?"

"Oh, Brussels sprouts!"

Mom turned around from the sink. "Tell me you didn't say Brussels sprouts like a swear word because you're disappointed."

"Oh, no, ma'am. I just noticed them on the table." *Jesus, forgive me.*

"Um-huh. And I'll be seeing them on your plate shortly, won't I?"

I stammered, "Yes, ma'am, but I'm really not very hungry. I had a big lunch and a snack this afternoon."

Jackson came bumbling down the stairs with his headphones hanging around his neck, trying to act cool just because he was

*Silent Days, Holy Night*

thirteen now. He was into everything that included throwing, kicking, hitting, or bouncing a ball. He slumped at the table, but he might eat my Brussels sprouts if I promised to make his bed in the morning.

Dad told Mom all about our trip to Mr. Lafferty's and how I'd played the piano for him. "I thought I might get fired for bringing my daughter to the meeting when it's not bring-your-daughter-to-work day, especially if she showed signs of being a willful child—and she did."

"But Dad, the keys—the piano keys were real ivory, and I couldn't bear not playing real ivory keys. Besides, I didn't think Mr. Lafferty could hear." I dipped the ladle into the gravy bowl four times. Then I stirred that gravy into my potatoes before Mom could see.

"About your piano playing: Did you think I had lost my hearing?"

"No, sir. But I used the soft pedal."

Jackson piped in. "So, what were you doing plundering through the house in the first place?"

I hoped he choked on his biscuit. "Shut up, Jackson. I had to go to the bathroom. I'd like to see what you would have done in that house. Breakable things and birds everywhere, hand-carved wooden birds. With you around, lots of them would have broken wings. You can't move without tearing something up. Your spasticity level is off the convulsive meter."

Jackson shook his head. "Where do you learn words like that? You should get a life."

Mom interrupted. "She learns from reading, Jackson." She turned to me. "I'm very proud of you for playing for Mr. Lafferty today."

I held my nose and ate two Brussels sprouts. I counted out the English peas too, until I finished dinner and excused myself to finish my homework. At 9:01 I was already in bed with my book on Beethoven when Dad knocked on my door.

"Your Mom's talking to Aunt Jane, so I'm the one tucking

you in tonight.” Dad sat down on the edge of my bed. “Time for lights out, my number one daughter.”

“I’m sorry if I disappointed you today. I didn’t mean to. I just couldn’t help myself.”

“So your curiosity got the best of you? You might remember what it did to the cat. But everything turned out all right for you. Not so much for the cat. And Mr. Lafferty did seem to enjoy your playing.”

“Will you take me back with you when you go to see him? Mr. Lafferty asked me to come and play again.”

“We’ll see.”

“Is Mr. Lafferty’s special gift talking with his hands? It surely looked like a gift to me.”

“No, that’s just his language, one of the ways he communicates. You’ll know his special gift when you see it, because you have never, and I mean never, seen anything like it. Maybe next time.”

“So that means I get to go back to Emerald Crest?”

“Sounds like it, but you need to remember that you’re not to talk about meeting Mr. Lafferty. He’s a very private man and doesn’t want people knowing anything about his business. We need to respect that. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Dad prayed with me, kissed me goodnight, and turned off my bedside lamp. As soon as he closed my door, that’s when the light came on—the light in my brain. I was going to learn sign language. I wanted to talk with Mr. Lafferty, and I didn’t want Mrs. Walker telling him what I was saying. She could teach me how to talk with my hands.