

Preview of *Road to Briarwood*

By Holly Bebernitz

Chapter 1 ~ Strangers on a Train

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Road to Briarwood – Coming 2014

Tales of the Peregrine Inn: Olivia's Escape

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If only I had left Dennisonville on Saturday, I would've had time to talk to Margaret *before* the first day of faculty orientation. She would've given me a complete rundown on the new people on staff and I would've recognized Elspeth Sherwood at once. If I'd known she was the new provost, I could've advised the janitor, Tallmadge Hampton, to wait till later to change the fluorescent light. But I didn't leave Dennisonville till Sunday and as a result, there was no possibility my second year at Brighton Park Community College would begin any better than the first one had.

As Dr. Sherwood tapped on her gold-plated name badge and demanded through clenched teeth if I knew "who she was," I stared, bewildered, at her and wondered how, only a few minutes into the fall semester, everything had gone so wrong. Only twenty-seven hours had passed since I'd awakened in my third floor room at the Magnolia Arms and had lain in the dark, knowing once I rose, summer would end. I would leave the beautiful house to return to my musty classroom, needy students, tiny apartment, chatty roommate, and begin to cross autumn's thousands of days off the calendar.

Nestor Carlyle, the caretaker at the Magnolia Arms, had driven me to the train station. While he parked the

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truck, I lugged my big black suitcase to the platform and sank down on top of it to search my purse for my ticket. When I stood, my dinosaur of a bag toppled onto the leather briefcase of the man standing next to me. Before I could splutter out an apology, the man kicked my suitcase and snatched up his briefcase, cradling it as if he were quieting a child plucked from the path of a speeding car.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he said.

“It was an accident,” I said. “No harm done.”

I heaved my bag upright and sized up the stranger.

If he hadn’t been wearing jeans with his starched blue shirt and brown suit jacket, I would’ve guessed he was a stockbroker or corporation president. Any man who parted and tamed his hair so meticulously must be accustomed to dismantling financial empires and dismissing staff. He set down his briefcase a safe distance from me and cleaned his gold wire-rimmed glasses with a monogrammed handkerchief. Then he bent down to straighten the tassels on his expensive loafers, worth more, no doubt, than my entire wardrobe. At least my suitcase hadn’t fallen on his foot and snagged his argyle socks.

“No harm done,” he mumbled. “Easy for you to say.”

“Excuse me?” I said.

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He pointed at my offensive bag. “The zipper on the side compartment might’ve scratched this leather. Do you have any idea how much an attaché case like this costs?”

Attaché case? I thought. Who does this guy think he is—James Bond?

“I’m pretty sure I do,” I said. “I offered to buy one for my father for his birthday, but he said he’d rather have a new leaf blower.”

My attempt to lighten the moment failed.

The stranger sneered. “Was the general store all out of corncob pipes?”

I turned to face him. “Look, Mr. — I was sitting here minding my own business—”

Nestor joined us on the platform. I decided not to spoil my last few moments with him by reliving what had happened, so I kept quiet. The stranger turned away.

Nestor pulled out his wallet and handed me a check.

“I almost forgot,” he said. “Ivy Leigh wanted you to give this to Flossie—payment for the last order.”

I tucked the check inside my purse.

“Give Flossie our love,” Nestor said. “Maybe she can come with you next time.”

“Maybe,” I said. Then, sniffing like a four-year-old on the first day of school, I stared at the ground, my

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shoulders rising and falling as I wept. “Thanksgiving is ages away.”

Nestor pulled a paper towel from his pocket. “I knew you’d need this, so I grabbed one as we left the kitchen. These goodbyes don’t get any easier, do they?”

“No. I didn’t want to leave after my first two trips and I don’t want to leave now.”

“Don’t cry, Agnes. You’re going back to Jonas and Margaret. Don’t forget that.”

“You’re right,” I said. “That does help.”

Nestor lingered on the platform till time for me to leave and then hugged me so tight he lifted me up off the concrete. I buried my face in his shoulder. When I looked up, I noticed the stranger staring at me, still scowling. Unnerved by the thought of sitting near him during the long journey, I hung on Nestor’s arm till the stranger entered the train and all the other passengers followed behind him. Only Nestor’s urging to “get going” dislodged me from the platform.

I boarded the train at the last possible moment and slid into an aisle seat, next to a woman in a long-sleeved black pullover sweater tucked neatly into the waistband of her camel-colored slacks. Her hair, so light a shade of artificial blonde it was almost white, was teased, combed

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straight back, smoothed under, and held in place by a tortoise shell headband. A generous coat of powder on her face made her dark red lips look like black cherries on vanilla ice cream. Behind her narrow black-framed glasses dotted with tiny rhinestones at the corners, her pale hazel eyes glistened.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Do you mind if I lean over you to wave goodbye to my friend?”

She nestled back in her seat. “Not at all. Just be careful you don’t jostle Mary Smith.”

“Who?” I asked.

She pointed at a potted peace lily between us on the floor.

“For my new home,” she said.

“The plant is named Mary Smith?”

“All my plants have names,” she said. “Don’t yours?”

“No, I’m not a plant person,” I said. “But my friend is—the one I want to wave to?”

“Sorry,” she said. “I’d never stand in the way of a fond farewell or sit in the way either.”

I waved till Nestor spotted me and kept waving till the station faded out of sight. Then I leaned back my head

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and squeezed my eyes shut in a futile attempt to stop the gush of tears.

The woman patted my arm. “There’s no worse feeling in the world than saying goodbye to the one you love, is there? Are you engaged?”

Eyes open, I turned to her. “Engaged?”

“Has he popped the question yet?”

“No, he hasn’t popped the question,” I said. “He’s the gardener.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh-o-oh. He feels unworthy to ask your hand in marriage.”

If I’d met this lady a year earlier, I would’ve responded to her inquiries with chilly indifference, quieted her with an insincere smile, and kept to myself all the way to Plainview.

But since I’d met Flossie Bingham, I’d learned to regard the eccentricities of “little old ladies” as unspoken requests for companionship.

“No, he doesn’t feel unworthy,” I said. “He studied at Princeton.”

She spread a red-checked dish towel on her lap and settled a large gray Thermos on top. “So, you’re *not* a wealthy heiress hiding a forbidden love for the hired help?”

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“No, I’m not an heiress,” I said. “I’m a schoolteacher.”

She unfolded a pink paper napkin and tucked it under her chin. “How noble of you to forsake your aristocratic roots to serve mankind. Do you like Russian tea?”

“Never tried it,” I said. “And I don’t have any aristocratic—”

“Then you must join me,” she said. “Could you hold this while I look for the extra cup? I always bring one in case I meet a new friend.”

She shifted the Thermos to my lap. Then she rifled through the contents of a large flowered canvas bag till she produced two apples.

“Hold these?” she asked.

I balanced an apple in each hand while she pulled out a box of graham crackers, set it in her own lap and stacked three paperback romance novels on top.

The titles read: *Catherine of Fern Valley*, *Dogwood Hill*, and *Lilith’s Tudor Rose Quilt*.

The reason for her wishful notions about Nestor and me became clear.

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She produced a pale blue glass mug and traded me for one of the apples and the Thermos. When she untwisted the silver cap, a delectable fragrance drifted up.

“I hope you like cloves,” she said. “I always add more than the recipe calls for.” She poured tea in my cup. “There you are—?”

“Agnes,” I said. “Agnes Quinn.”

“What a lovely name. It’s so important what name a person has.”

The tea surprised me. “This is wonderful. What’s in it?”

“Instant tea, powdered orange drink, lemonade mix, sugar, cinnamon, cloves.”

“My friend Flossie would love this,” I said. “I’ll have to write down the recipe for her.”

She snuggled back in her seat. “It’s the perfect comfort drink. I used to make it for my daughter when she was little, but now ... she doesn’t much care for anything I do.”

Her voice broke. She ducked her head; her chin quivered.

Relieved I hadn’t refused her offer of refreshment and conversation, I squeezed her hand.

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“Your daughter is fortunate to have a mother like you, Mrs.—?”

She turned toward me and smiled. “Winifred Parker-Potts. My friends call me Winnie.”

“Parker’s an unusual middle name,” I said, hoping to distract her and cheer her up.

She placed a pink paper napkin on my knee, handed me her nearly overflowing cup and fumbled in her bag till she found a paring knife wrapped in plastic secured by a rubber band.

“Not my middle name. It’s Parker—hyphen—Potts. Two husbands. When I married Arthur, I couldn’t bear to give poor old departed Vernon the heave-ho, so I kept his name, too.”

Once she’d undone the rubber band, she slipped it on her wrist, and then holding the apple in her left hand, sliced a perfect wedge with the paring knife she wielded with her right.

“Very thoughtful,” I said, wincing from the perilous proximity of the knife to her thumb.

“Hyphenated names are so unique,” she said. “I’ve often thought mine would look nice on the cover of a mystery. *The Gladiola Murders* by Winifred Parker-Potts.”

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“You’re a writer,” I said. “I should’ve known. You just happen to have your manuscript in your bag, don’t you?”

“No, not in there,” she said. “All up here.” She tapped her temple. “Even if I had started writing, I’d never carry anything that valuable with me. It might get lost.”

I thought of my own manuscript, *Magnolia Neighbors*, tucked away in my suitcase.

“A sensible precaution,” I said.

Her mouth full of apple, Winnie asked how long I’d been teaching.

“Only a year.”

She swallowed. “And how long have you been hiding your romance from your parents?”

“I told you—I’m not hiding anything,” I said. “If you must know, I’m dating a lawyer named Sefton Wilkinshaw. As a matter of fact . . . he and I are collaborating on a book.”

Even as I said these words, I still couldn’t believe I was talking about myself. Though Sefton and I had been conducting a long distance romance for almost a year, I still felt I was dreaming whenever I talked about my relationship with him.

Winnie, however, was not impressed.

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“Does Mr. Wilkin-whatever-his-name-is know you’re in love with another man?”

“Wilkinshaw,” I said, “and I’m not in love with Nestor. He’s like my brother ... well, not like my brother exactly. Nestor is way more impressed with me than my own brother ever—”

I halted mid-sentence when I spotted the mysterious stranger maneuvering up the aisle. In the same manner as he had on the platform, he glanced at me and frowned.

The silent but poisonous exchange was lost on Winnie, who continued her interrogation.

“If you and this lawyer are so in love, then why did *Nestor* bring you to the train station and why were you crying?”

“Because he’s my friend—one of a whole houseful of friends,” I said. “This is the third time I’ve visited them in a year and I *always* cry when I leave.”

Winnie leaned on the armrest between our seats and cradled her chin in her hand.

“Now we’re getting somewhere. Tell me about these people.”

Since I never tired of talking about the Magnolia Arms, I gazed out the window and pondered where to begin—how to condense the most miraculous year of my

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life into a few sentences. On my first day at Brighton Park when I parked in the wrong space, I began the most important friendship of my life—got tangled up in the rescue of a failed dream—was framed for stealing—left my job and took up residence in the place I’d been dreaming of—reunited my friend Jonas with Margaret, his lost love—found a love of my own.

Not even Winnie would believe the story.

“Tell you what,” I said. “Let’s start with you ... after I get back from the bathroom.”

While we’d been philosophizing about love, I’d been preoccupied with more basic matters. Full of tea and desperate for relief, I’d delayed a trip to the bathroom for fear of encountering the stranger in the narrow aisle. When I could wait no longer, I scanned the aisle, found the way clear and darted safely into the restroom. My return trip was less fortunate. I’d taken only three steps when my nemesis appeared at the opposite end of the car. Like gunslingers at high noon, we advanced. I spotted an empty seat and stepped aside to let him pass.

A copy of *Mumford’s Guide to Civil War Reenacting* clutched in his arm, he raised one eyebrow. “That’s my seat,” he said.

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“Did you want to sit there, lady?” asked a little boy by the window. “Please.”

“Uh ... no,” I said. “I’m sitting with a friend.”

“When you’re ready,” the stranger said.

I stepped back into the aisle and he sat down.

“No more crumbs from you,” he said to the little boy. “Remember.”

The child nodded and clutched a half empty potato chip bag in his hands.

Vowing never to watch *Murder on the Orient Express* again, I walked away. The moment I returned to my seat Winnie placed a full cup of tea in my hand.

“Now where were we?” she asked.

Too rattled to talk, I diverted her.

“You were going to tell me about your daughter,” I said.

Easily sidetracked, Winnie began her tale.

“Darlinda Sue was the dearest little curly-headed thing,” she said.

“Darlinda? That’s an unusual name.”

Winnie laughed. “I wanted to name her ‘Darling,’ but her father wouldn’t hear of it. So we compromised.”

“Probably for the best,” I said.

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“She stopped calling herself Darlinda after she turned twelve. That’s why I was having a hard time finding her.”

“She’s missing?”

“Only to me,” Winnie said. “She warned me if I didn’t quit nagging her about her boyfriend, she’d leave home and I’d never see her again and that’s precisely what happened.”

Winnie dabbed at her eyes with the pink napkin.

“How long has it been since you’ve seen her?” I asked.

“Years,” she said. “Arthur would never let me go after her, but once he died, there was nothing to keep me from launching out on my own.”

“So you’re on your way to find her?”

“Yes, and this is as close as I’ve gotten,” Winnie said. “Maplewood.”

“That’s only forty-five miles from where I live,” I said.

She powdered her nose with a compact from her purse. “Darlinda runs a business there.”

“What kind of business?”

“Entertainment,” Winnie said.

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Since Maplewood was hardly a bustling cultural center, I was concerned what kind of entertainment Darlinda might be engaged in.

“How did you find out she was in Maplewood?” I asked, wondering if I could empty my most recent cup of tea into Winnie’s plant before she noticed.

“Darlinda had an accident while she was performing. She listed me as nearest relative on the form she filled out at the hospital. They’ve just contacted me about her delinquent bill.”

“You’re not going to Maplewood to pay her medical bills, are you?”

“Of course,” Winnie said. “This is the chance I’ve been waiting for. It’s the first time she’s reached out to me. Maybe—if I help in her hour of need—I can win back her heart.”

“But she didn’t contact you. A collection agency did. You’re not responsible for her bills—no matter what they’re for.”

Winnie shook her head. “You’d have to be a mother to understand.”

We ate graham crackers and swapped stories for the rest of the trip. When we reached Maplewood, I held Mary Smith while Winnie gathered her belongings.

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“Thank you, Agnes,” she said. “When I see my Darlinda, I hope I find she’s grown up to be just like you.”

My heart ached as I watched Winnie, flowered bag in one hand, plant in the other, standing on the station platform to survey her surroundings. Though I’d never met the prodigal daughter, I’d already foreseen the outcome of Winnie’s quest. Darlinda had listed her mother’s contact information, knowing full well Winnie would be so desperate to find her she’d gladly pay the bill. I grieved for Winnie’s broken heart, dreaded the disappointment she was facing, and concluded she’d be better off finding new friends than locating her errant daughter.

I moved to Winnie’s seat and closed my eyes. Worried, worn out, lonely, unsettled by the stranger, I fell headlong into the recurring dream I had each time I faced a crisis. I was stranded backstage in a dark auditorium. The curtain was about to rise. I could not recall a single line of my part. The roar of the audience grew louder. My panic increased. I stepped into the spotlight. The train stopped. I jolted awake, realized I was drooling and pried my eyes open in time to see the sinister stranger standing in the aisle next to me.

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“You might want to wake up if you’re getting off here,” he said. He tapped on the corner of his mouth. “You might want to wipe your mouth, too.”

Mortified, I scraped my hand across my lips.

When I stepped off the train, I saw no sign of the stranger, but was relieved to see the little boy safe in the arms of a smiling woman, who was most certainly his mother.

I was even more pleased to find Muriel Porter waiting for me. I rushed toward her, dropped my bag and hugged her.

“The wanderer is home at last,” she said. “But why the tears?”

“I’m glad to see you,” I said. “It was a long trip.”

“You can fill me in over supper,” she said. “I have a new entrée I want you to try.”

Muriel owned the Drifters’ Rest, famous for the best food and the best coffee in town.

“Are Margaret and Jonas meeting us for dinner?” I asked.

Muriel hesitated. “They’d planned to, but there’s been a bit of an emergency.”

My heart stopped. “What’s wrong?”

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“They’ve taken Flo Sloan to the doctor. She wanted to wait till you got home to tell you, but there’s no need to keep the secret now. Buck and Flo are going to have a baby.”

“That’s wonderful,” I said, “but what’s the problem?”

“Flo is one of those women whose ‘morning sickness’ lasts most of the day,” Muriel said. “She’s dehydrated.”

“I’ll go see her tomorrow after school. A visit to the ranch would do me good.”

“From what I hear you’ll need *something* to cheer you up after your first day. Brighton Park is upside down since the new administrator showed up. Everybody’s talking about her.”

“You mean the new provost? Margaret told me she’d arrived, but nothing else.”

“Elsbeth Sherwood,” Muriel said. “But let’s not talk about her—might spoil your appetite. I want to hear all about your summer.”

While I dined on chicken and spinach manicotti, Muriel quizzed me about my friends at the Magnolia Arms.

“Are Posey and Xander still together?” she asked.

“Yes. Xander’s saving for a ring.”

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“And is Ivy Leigh well?”

I nodded. “A food critic from Raleigh gave the restaurant a stellar review. She’s busier than ever.”

Muriel served blueberry pie and coffee and then took me home.

Though I was fond of my roommate, Flossie Bingham, I was relieved to find a note from her saying: “Spending the night at the Sloans. They’ll need help after her doctor visit.” Flossie was a gentle soul, superb cook, and cared for my cat Saturn when I was away, but she rarely stopped talking. Formerly my neighbor, she’d appealed to me for help when her son Warner had brought home a new wife—the owner of the motorcycle stunt show he’d joined—and insisted Flossie move out of their apartment. She’d been staying with me till she “found a new place.”

I left my unopened suitcase by the door and sank down on my favorite spot on the sofa. When Saturn, ever a willing listener, leaped on my lap, I filled him in about my remarkable summer, the eventful trip home, the sinister stranger, and Winnie.

“At least I don’t have to worry about seeing either of them again,” I said. “And as for tomorrow ... at least I’m not a first-year teacher, so I’m no longer at the bottom of

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the food chain. Margaret is chairman of my department. She's the best boss ever. I've made such good progress on my book I'll be able to submit it to a publisher by December. Sefton hasn't proposed, but he hinted. If I work hard and save some money, maybe I can quit teaching after we get married and spend the rest of my life writing books."

On Monday morning I stopped at the Drifters' Rest for coffee and a bagel. Fortified, I drove to Brighton Park and entered the library where faculty orientation was held each year. I sat down at the table farthest from the lectern and watched as the faculty, clutching tattered briefcases and balancing paper plates of stale doughnuts on top of Styrofoam cups, edged toward their chairs and settled down for the long morning ahead.

We lifted our eyes to the imposing banner suspended from the ceiling and read:

Brighton Park Community College

Welcomes Dr. Elspeth Sherwood

Fall 1977

"Striving for the Superior"

The librarian, Elinor Ellershaw, sat next to me and pointed to the sign.

"An unfortunate motto, don't you think?"

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“What does it mean?” I asked.

“I think it’s intended to be rhetorical ... ‘don’t settle for the mediocre; strive for the superior.’ But the way it’s worded sounds like we’re supposed to spend the year—”

“Striving for *our* superior,” I said.

“That’s what everyone is saying.”

“Where’s Margaret?” I asked. “She’s usually early to these meetings.”

“Probably with Lorna Maron.”

“Who?”

“The new teacher in your department. First-year jitters. You remember.”

I didn’t mention I was having second-year jitters.

“Good morning, Miss Quinn. Did you have a nice summer?”

I looked up to find Tallmadge Hampton, our janitor, at the end of our table, holding a tall aluminum stepladder at his side.

Tallmadge, nicknamed “Ham,” was an institution at Brighton Park. He had aspired early to a maintenance career and practiced his craft alongside his father, Torbert, like a medieval apprentice. Ham was neither well-groomed nor well-spoken. He was, however, reliable, hard-working, and completely devoted to the teachers of Brighton Park.

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Only mention the wobbly leg on your desk or the squeaking hinges on your door and the next morning, you'd find your problem solved. Soft-hearted and shy, Ham rarely appeared during school hours. Attention of any kind was painful for him, so we never embarrassed him with either praise or blame.

"I had a wonderful summer, Ham," I said. "How about you?"

"Dad and I got a lot done," he said. "Excuse me." He pointed to a dark corner of the ceiling. "I got to fix that light. You know how dad likes things perfect."

As Elinor and I talked, I watched Ham cart the tall step ladder into place and position it beneath the broken light.

"Anyone else new besides Lorna?" I asked.

"Kennesaw Fleming."

"Ken-ne-what?" I asked.

"Not so loud," she said. "He may be here somewhere. 'Kennesaw.' You know, like the town in Georgia."

"No, I don't know the town in Georgia," I said. "I'm awful with geography."

"I looked it up," Elinor said. "Civil War history, the railroad. They filmed a movie there."

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“Who would name their son after a town in Georgia?” I said.

“Someone did,” Elinor said, “unless he changed his name himself.”

“What does he teach?” I asked.

“History.”

“Of course,” I said. “Only a history teacher would be emotionally charged enough to change his name to a town in Georgia.”

Ham removed the long fluorescent bulb, descended the ladder, and disappeared behind the wall of people.

“Tell me about this Lorna girl,” I said. “What’s her story?”

“If you’d come home a few days earlier,” Elinor said, “you could’ve spent a little more time in your office and found these things out for yourself.”

“I wish I had come home earlier. I could’ve missed the guy on the train yesterday.”

“What guy?”

I recounted the story of the toppling suitcase, trying to sneak to the bathroom, meeting the stranger in the aisle, the frightened child.

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“And of all things,” I said, “when he was getting off the train, he made fun of me when he caught me sleeping with my mouth open.”

“I should be the last person in the world to suggest you’re reading too many books,” Elinor said, “but really, don’t you think you’re letting your imagination run away with you?”

“I’m telling you ... there was something sinister about that guy,” I said. “Haven’t you ever met someone who made you nervous?”

“Actually, yes. Dr. Sherwood.”

“What happened?”

“She and her assistant came into the library last week. She strutted around, pointing at things and commenting, while the assistant made notes on a clipboard.”

“Maybe she’s planning improvements,” I said.

Elinor shook her head. “I’ve seen her type before. She’ll stay long enough to prove how good she is at slashing budgets and trimming staff. Then she’ll leave for a better position.”

“You think she’d go after the library staff?”

“Not only the library. With her it’s all about the bottom line. Mark my word.”

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Latecomers straggled in. The burgeoning assembly jumbled themselves into clusters of three or four, sharing photos of summer vacation, laughing, patting each other on the back.

The clamor swelled from a pulsating hum to a dull roar.

Elinor stood. "I'm going to look for Margaret. She should be here by now. Dr. Sherwood is opening this session by introducing the department heads. If Margaret is missing—"

"I'll save two places," I said.

"Three," Elinor said. "Lorna will be with Margaret."

Since when had *Lorna* become a factor in our plans? I thought.

I scooted a book across the table to hold one place and was sliding my purse to the other, when over the din of the crowd I heard a shrill voice shrieking.

"You there, what do you think you're doing?" it said.

I looked up. Ham, once more at the top of the ladder, was holding the new bulb with both hands, his arms extended high over his head as he positioned the light into place.

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I stood, but couldn't see through the throng of people.

Again the voice screeched. "I'll have your job for this."

Startled, Ham turned to look back over his shoulder. The bulb slipped from his right hand and swung down behind his back like a pendulum.

Without thinking, I charged through the herd of teachers, shouting as I dodged tables and bumped into chairs.

"Hey," I said, "don't yell at him. If you make him nervous—"

Ham tilted backward. The bulb slid down, balanced a moment on its end, fell forward, and shattered. Teachers scattered as the glass flew. Panicked, Ham locked his left arm around the ladder, and pulled himself in, holding on as the ladder wobbled and slammed into the reference section. Ham thudded to the floor.

By the time I pushed through the front row of onlookers, Ham was on his hands and knees, trying to stand. The coach rushed over to help and guided him toward a chair.

"Easy there, big guy," he said. "You may have broken something."

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“I’m all right,” Ham said. “I know how to fall.”

A petite woman in a black skirt and jacket, a long white silk scarf draped over her shoulder, pranced toward Ham. She placed one hand on her tiny waist and swept the other through the air. Though her back was toward me, her voice was unmistakable.

“You shouldn’t have tried to do this by yourself. Our insurance policy states—”

“That does it,” I said.

As I stormed ahead, the geology teacher made a grab at my arm. “Agnes, no. That’s—”

Ham caught sight of me and shook his head. “It’s all right, Miss Quinn. Don’t—”

I approached from behind and tugged on the woman’s scarf.

“I don’t know who you think you are,” I said, “but around here we treat each other with respect, whether it’s the janitor or—”

Dr. Elspeth Sherwood whirled around, tapped on her gold-plated name badge, and demanded through clenched teeth if I knew who she was.

I stared, bewildered, at her and peeked at my watch.

She crossed her arms, tilted her head to one side and looked down her perfect nose.

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“I’m sorry, Miss Quinn,” she said. “Am I interrupting your schedule?”

Dumbfounded by the chain of events, I couldn’t make sense of what she was saying.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re looking at your watch. Am I boring you?”

I fixated on a copy of *Lyrical Ballads* on the library shelf behind her. “Not yet,” I said.

My reprimand concluded, I returned to my seat, my eyes riveted to the floor as I threaded my way through the stunned and silent faculty. Margaret, Elinor and a young woman I supposed was Lorna Maron were waiting at my table.

I picked up my books. “I’m leaving,” I said.

“No, you’re not,” Margaret said. “Sit down and be quiet.”

I complied. Dr. Sherwood stepped to the lectern to introduce the department chairs.

When Margaret’s name was called and she walked to the front, Elinor whispered to me.

“I’m proud of you, Agnes, and so is Margaret, but we can’t get on this woman’s bad side. There’s too much at stake.”

Lorna did not look up.

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When the department chairs returned to their places, Dr. Sherwood asked the new faculty members to stand when she called their names.

My arms folded, I leaned back in my chair and glanced around the room as she read the list: “Jack Arbuthnot. Robert Carlton. Claudia Craig. Kennesaw Fleming.”

When Kennesaw Fleming stood, my elbow collided with Elinor’s as we jabbed each other at the same time.

“That’s him,” she said.

“That’s him,” I said, “the guy on the train.”

“What’s the problem?” Margaret asked.

“Long story,” I said.

“Can it wait? Lorna needs to listen for her name.”

“Sure,” I said, and kept quiet for the remainder of the session.

When Elinor suggested we all go to lunch, I bowed out.

“I have work to do,” I said. “You three have a good time.”

An hour later, Margaret knocked on my office door, entering before I could answer.

She sat in the chair across from my desk. “So ... how are you?” she asked.

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“Fine. How are you?”

She shook her head. “Don’t try that with me, Agnes. We’ve been friends too long.”

“No,” I said, “I’d really like to know how you are. We haven’t had a chance to talk.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “We would have if—”

“I know. ‘If I’d come back earlier.’ Believe me, *that’s* a mistake I *won’t* make again.”

She sighed. “You’re in rough shape, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m in rough shape. I got off to a bad start last year and now the same thing has happened again. I can’t do anything right around here.”

“I wouldn’t say that. If you hadn’t gotten off to a ‘bad start’ last year, you would’ve never come to the Magnolia Arms. We wouldn’t have met and Jonas and I wouldn’t be married.”

“But you wouldn’t be working for Dr. Sherwood either.”

“I don’t work for *her*, Agnes. I work for my students and the teachers in my department. We can deal with her, like we dealt with Olympia Pillburn, but there are *ways* of doing that.”

“And yanking on her scarf is not one of them?”

I was relieved when she laughed.

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“No. But I was proud of you for speaking up for Ham,” she said. “Don’t think I wasn’t.”

“Then why did you tell me sit down and be quiet?”

“Because if you’d walked out, Dr. Sherwood would’ve known she got the best of you.”

“I guess your pal Lorna thinks I’m a first class moron,” I said.

“She’s not my ‘pal,’ Agnes. She’s a broken-hearted girl who needs help.”

“I didn’t make a very good first impression, did I?”

“Actually, she said she admired you and is looking forward to meeting you. Do you have plans for dinner or do you ‘need to work’ tonight, too?”

“I think I could take the evening off,” I said. “Meet at the Drifters’ Rest at six?”

That afternoon when I arrived at home, Flossie was waiting for me on the porch.

She held out her arms as I walked up the steps and hugged me a long time.

“I’m so glad you’re home,” she said. “And I’m sorry to spring this on you so soon, but ... something’s come up.”

“I know,” I said. “Is Flo doing better?”

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“No ... I mean, yes, Flo is better. I’m not talking about her. There’s someone inside.”

“Who?”

“A lady. I was pulling weeds out of the begonias this afternoon, when she came by and asked if I knew the people who lived in the apartment next door.”

“Another bill collector looking for Warner?” I asked.

“That’s what I thought at first. But when I told her I used to live there with my son till he got married, she got a funny look on her face and asked if I’d tell her his wife’s name.”

“Why would she want to know that?”

“She said it might be her daughter,” Flossie said.

“Her daughter?”

“I only needed one look at this lady to know she couldn’t possibly be the mother of a girl whose idea of fashion is a blue leotard and black leather jacket.”

“You said that?”

“No, I only thought it,” Flossie said. “But when I said, ‘The Darla I know can’t possibly be *your* daughter,’ she hugged me and asked when they’d be home. It broke my heart—”

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“—to tell her we haven’t seen or heard from them in months,” I said.

Flossie nodded. “When she started crying, I invited her inside. Can she stay with us tonight? We just can’t send her away to a lonely motel room.”

I took a deep breath and opened the door.

Winifred Parker-Potts sat at my kitchen table with Mary Smith at her feet.