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Hettie of Hope Street

Annie Groves

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ONE

'Mam, Mam, just wait until you see this.' Excitement sparkled in Hettie's dark eyes as she thrust the open page of the *Liverpool Post* underneath her mother's nose. 'They're advertising for a "young lady" to sing to people during afternoon tea at the Adelphi hotel in Liverpool. It says you have to write to this address here. Oh, Mam, I'm so excited. It would be the perfect job for me. Just imagine – I could sing every day and get paid for it!'

Ellie Walker looked at the advertisement her step-daughter had shoved in front of her, her face clouding slightly. 'Oh Hettie, love.' Ellie said uncertainly. 'I don't think . . .'

Immediately Hettie's excitement gave way to anxiety. 'But Mam, you know how much I love to sing and everyone said how good I was when I sang in *The Mikado*. Miss Brown said I had the best voice of any girl she had ever taught.'

Ellie sighed. 'Yes, Hettie I know that, but singing

in a small private theatre to help raise money for charity is a very different thing to singing in public and,' she hesitated, 'and for money.'

Ellie hated to see the excitement dying in Hettie's eyes and being replaced by mutinous disappointment. But Ellie was very protective of all her children and even though Hettie was eighteen, she was still a child in so many ways. In so many ways, but not in all. Ellie glanced discreetly at her step-daughter's body. Although slim and delicately boned, Hettie nevertheless had a very well-developed bosom. And then, of course, there was her unusual, sultry beauty – that mingling of the delicate bone structure Hettie had inherited from her Japanese mother together with some features from the Englishman who had been her father and Ellie's first husband.

Ellie had waited until she had felt Hettie was old enough to understand properly before explaining to her step-daughter the troubled circumstances surrounding her own birth and her parents' deaths.

Hettie had never known her father, having been born after he had left Japan to return to Liverpool. Her Japanese mother, as Ellie had explained to her, had pined so much for the English lover who had sworn undying love to her, and promised he would return to her, that she had set sail for Liverpool with her baby to find him. To arrive there and discover that her beloved Henry-san had taken his own life had broken her heart, Ellie had told Hettie

gently, adding that two such sensitive people as her parents had suffered dreadfully because of the separation imposed on them.

'But my father was married to you,' Hettie had pointed out unhappily.

'Indeed, Hettie,' Ellie had concurred. 'Unfortunately, as sometimes happens within families, both your father and I were pushed into marriage with one another even though our hearts lay with other people. Naturally, as Henry's widow, I felt responsible for your mother and for you . . .'

'You were kind to us,' Hettie had interrupted her, remembering the comforting warmth of Ellie's voice and arms.

'Your poor mother had no wish to live with your father gone. She went out one cold winter night and accidentally fell into the dock and drowned there, poor lady.'

'And then you married Gideon and he adopted me and I had a new mother and father,' Hettie had stated matter of factly.

'Indeed you did,' Ellie had agreed tenderly. 'And you must never forget how much we love you, Hettie.'

And Ellie did love Hettie, even though she sometimes feared for her a little, as all mothers must for a pretty, sometimes wilful daughter. With those flashing, faintly almond-shaped eyes, the rosebud fullness of her mouth, the thick poker-straightness of her long black hair in striking contrast to her

pale, almost sweetly doll-like round face, it was no wonder the people of Preston turned their heads to look at her beloved Hettie.

Stubbornness now flashed in Hettie's eyes, causing Ellie's maternal heart to suffer fresh misgivings. She could well remember the turbulence of the early years of her own young womanhood, and the pain they could bring. The love of her own life at Ellie's age had been her beloved Gideon, now her husband, but at that time he was the young man her mother had forbidden her to see.

'But I want to do it so much. I have to do it. I *need* to sing.' Tears glistened in Hettie's eyes. 'It's all I want to do,' she continued passionately to Ellie. 'It's all I've ever wanted to do, you know that.'

Ellie sighed. Hettie was such a fiercely intense girl, her emotions like quicksilver, changing from laughter one minute to tears the next. Ellie couldn't help but worry for her. She seemed to feel things so much more than other people, especially when it came to music, and her singing. Ellie had seen her reduced to anguished tears when listening to a particularly sad song and then the next minute dancing around happily when she heard a more gay one.

'Hettie, I do understand.'

'How can you say that? You don't understand.' Red spots of emotion burned in her pale face. Even when Hettie was angry she still looked so very pretty, Ellie acknowledged; coupled with her beautiful voice, it was little surprise that those who

had bought tickets for the little show put on by Miss Brown, Preston's foremost music and singing teacher, had given her a standing ovation.

'To you singing is just . . . just a . . . a pretty accomplishment, something to pass a few pleasant hours,' she told Ellie almost scornfully. 'But to me it is so much more than that. To me it is everything, and if I cannot sing as I want to sing then I think a part of me will die!' she finished dramatically before rushing out of the room.

Why couldn't Ellie understand how she felt? Hettie wondered miserably half an hour later as she stood in front of her bedroom window, the view of Preston's fashionable Winckley Square, which lay beyond it, blurred by the tears filling her eyes.

She loved her step-mother, of course she did. Ellie and Gideon were in reality the only parents and the only family she had ever known. And Ellie loved *her*, she knew that too, even if certain members of Ellie's family – like Ellie's starchy aunt, Amelia Barclay, who lived almost opposite them on the other side of the square – had made it plain that they did not approve of Ellie having brought up Hettie, the illegitimate child of her first husband's Japanese mistress, as her own daughter.

Hettie could actually remember overhearing Amelia say to Ellie that Hettie's birth was a scandal that could give the whole family a bad name. But Ellie had replied firmly and calmly that her aunt was mistaken and that, in Hettie's mother's

land, it was perfectly respectable for a man to take a 'pillow friend' and for this lady to be treated with respect and included within the family, along with her children, and that only the ignorant and narrow minded would not be aware of this.

It had seemed to Hettie that, after this exchange, Amelia Barclay had ceased to make references to Hettie's parentage and background.

But even though Ellie had treated her just as she did her own children, Hettie knew she was different to them. And not just because she *looked* different.

Music and singing were important to her in a way that was not shared by the rest of her adopted family. Not even Ellie's younger sister, Connie, who was so much fun and who loved nothing better than a music hall show.

Hettie loved being asked to stand up and sing for people. It gave her such a wonderful rush of exhilaration and happiness and for as long as she could remember it had been her dream to become a singer. She could recall how much she had loved it as a young girl when Ellie's younger brother, John, had called to see them, and Ellie had urged him to accompany her on the piano whilst she sang. There had been a special rapport between her and John in those days, but he no longer visited them as frequently, mainly because he was busy with the flying school he and two friends had set up. John, she knew, felt as passionately about his flying machines as she did about her singing.

John had been her best and most special friend for what seemed like for ever. She had always felt she could talk to him about anything and everything, and had spent many happy hours as a child strolling with John along Preston's fine walks and the banks of the River Ribble whilst he photographed the countryside and taught her to appreciate its beauty. John had teased her and protected her. And she in turn had given him her heart and her trust.

'What do you think, Gideon?' Ellie asked her husband later that evening when they were alone in the comfort of their bedroom. They had been married for fourteen years now and, thanks to his inheritance from his mother, and his own hard work, Gideon had risen from being a mere drover – living virtually hand to mouth and nowhere near good enough to marry Ellie, the daughter of the butcher whose brother he had once worked for – to being a person respected and admired within the town. Ellie knew how much this meant to him, especially after his struggles; and she too, if she was honest, welcomed the manner in which she and her family were treated, especially when she remembered the hardship and poverty of the years following her own mother's death when she and her siblings were separated and life seemed something to be endured not enjoyed.

'No respectable family would allow their

daughter to go on the stage,' she continued without waiting for him to answer her, 'and I can just imagine what my Aunt Amelia would have to say about it.'

'Aye, she'd blame what she chooses to call Hettie's "bad blood", no doubt,' Gideon agreed.

Ellie shook her head. 'Hettie is so spirited, Gideon, and so very, very pretty. She looks so . . .'

'Beautiful?' Gideon supplied.

'Vulnerable, I was going to say,' Ellie told him.

Silently they looked at one another.

'I worry for her, Gideon. She is reaching that age where a young girl's thoughts and feelings can so easily lead her astray. Perhaps if her own mother had lived . . .' Ellie sighed, remembering the tragic circumstances surrounding the death of Hettie's real mother. 'I love Hettie so much but sometimes I fear she may feel that she is less loved than our own two boys, even though, if anything, I tend to favour her above our Richard and David.'

'Ellie, my dearest love.' Gideon took hold of his wife's hands and looked at her tenderly. 'I know you are only concerned for Hettie, and you want to protect her. But you and I know that, much as we love Hettie, we must be careful that in protecting we are not trying to re-create her as we wish her to be rather than as she actually is. Hettie is very gifted, we both know that, and her singing teacher has told us herself how very special Hettie's voice is – that, after all, is why we agreed that she could have these extra lessons with her.

Who knows what trouble we might cause by not allowing her to use that gift?'

'What are you trying to say to me, Gideon?'

'I think that first of all we should check with Miss Brown to see what she thinks, and then, if and only if she thinks it right, we should allow Hettie to apply for this position she has seen advertised – the Adelphi hotel is, after all, a highly respectable establishment. Hettie would only be singing during the afternoon and, I dare say, in front of a mainly female audience, for I cannot imagine that many men, never mind the unsavoury sort you fear her being exposed to, would be taking tea at the Adelphi hotel in the middle of the afternoon. Apart from anything else, such types would not be allowed in.'

Gideon watched as Ellie struggled to accept what he had said. He hated the thought of anything upsetting or hurting her – especially now – and he knew how much she loved and worried about Hettie. 'Ellie, neither of us would want to see Hettie take the same path as Connie,' he added quietly.

'No,' Ellie agreed, 'although Connie is very happy and settled now with Harry and their children.'

'Yes indeed. But both she and you had to suffer a great deal of pain before she found that happiness. Remember how she got herself involved with some awful types and we didn't hear hide nor hair from her for years when she took off like that?

Hettie, like Connie, possesses a certain stubbornness and a very strong will.'

'She can be the sweetest girl, though, Gideon.'

'You need not defend her to me,' he assured her. 'I love her as much as you do, and it is because I love her that I am saying these things to you, Ellie. She is very young. Who knows, she may very well find that she does not like singing and the stage as much as she now believes she does. And if that is the case, I know we would both want her to know that she will always have a home here with us.'

'Yes, you are right. I suppose I am being selfish in wanting to keep her here by me. They are all growing up so quickly, though, Gideon. Richard is already talking about wanting to learn to fly, even though he is still at school, and . . .' She placed a protective hand over her stomach.

'Have you told Iris yet?' he asked her, concerned.

Iris, in addition to being one of Ellie's closest friends, was also a qualified doctor.

Ellie shook her head. 'It is too soon, and after all it is not as though I have not had a child before,' she reminded him with a small smile.

In the early days of their marriage they had both hoped there would be the proverbial quiverful of children, but there had only been the two, so to discover now that she had conceived again so many years later had been rather a shock.

'Gideon, please don't look like that. I want you

to be happy about this new baby we are to have,' she told him when she saw the anxiety he couldn't hide. 'I know why you are worrying.'

'I am worrying because I think you worry too much about everyone else.' Gideon stopped her with false heartiness, but both of them knew the real reason behind his anxiety.

Ellie had been just sixteen when her own mother had died in childbed, having been warned not to have any more children. Gideon knew how dreadfully the little family she had left behind her had suffered. But he was not Ellie's father, and she was not her own mother. Ellie had not been warned, as her mother had, that she must not conceive more children because of the risk to her health. But the length of time since the birth of their last child had, Gideon admitted, brought home to him how relieved he had been to think there would not be any more, and that Ellie therefore wasn't going to be exposed to even the slightest risk. He had said as much to Ellie only weeks before they had discovered that there was, after all, to be another child.

'You really mean it. You really mean that I can audition? Oh Mam, thank you, thank you, *thank you*. Oh, I love you so much.'

Giddy with excitement and happiness, Hettie ran to her step-mother, hugging her fiercely and kissing her, before turning to dance round the sitting room, singing as she did so.

'Hettie, dearest, do calm down a little and listen to me,' Ellie protested lovingly.

Gideon told her a little more firmly, 'Hettie, that is enough. Come and sit down, please.'

Hettie sat down next to Ellie, taking a tight hold of her hand, her whole body almost quivering with excited impatience as Gideon explained: 'I have spoken with Miss Brown and she has assured me that she knows of no reason why we should feel concern. She knows the pianist at the Adelphi, and his wife, who are both fellow music teachers. Miss Brown has asked us to warn you, though, that even if the Adelphi Hotel does grant you an audition, such a position is bound to attract many applicants.'

Gideon glanced at Ellie, well aware that she was half hoping Hettie would not be accepted and would remain at home with them in Preston where Ellie could keep her under her motherly eye.

'Oh yes, I know that.' Hettie was all impatience and excitement. 'But did Miss Brown say whether or not she thought I might get the job?'

'She said you are an accomplished pupil, but that you have a tendency to consider – what were her exact words? – "little acorns to be fully grown trees".' Gideon answered her with restraint, mindful of the music teacher's additional comment to him that Hettie was extremely talented but not wishing his adopted daughter to spoil herself by becoming swollen headed. 'But Miss Brown has suggested she should write in response to the advertisement,

recommending you as a possible candidate,' he continued, unable at last to conceal his pride.

Hettie glowed with fresh excitement. 'You mean that Miss Brown is willing to recommend me?' Immediately she was off again, springing up from the sofa, trying to drag Ellie with her and, when Ellie resisted, whirling into a dizzy polka, her cheeks flushed with happiness.

'My goodness, what's this?'

'John!' Hettie exclaimed in delight at the sight of her old partner-in-crime, laughing herself as she heard the amusement in his voice and saw the teasing look in his eyes, and abandoning her impromptu dance to run to his side.

'Where have you been?' she demanded. 'It seems an age since we last saw you. I suppose you've been too busy taking photographs from your flying machine and teaching other young men to be as besotted with them as you are to think about coming to see us.'

'Oh, besotted is it? Well, that's rich coming from you.' John grinned. 'Does she still terrify the neighbours practising her scales before cockcrow, Ellie?'

Ellie's heart warmed at the sight of John and Hettie slipping instantly into their old banter and routine, and she acknowledged that her younger brother and her adopted daughter, with no blood tie and only a mere eleven years between them, were the closest thing she had even witnessed to a true friendship between the opposite sexes.

Right from the start John and Hettie had formed

a close bond. There had never been a time when Hettie had not been able to wind John around her little finger, but Ellie knew that Hettie was equally fond of John and would do anything for him.

Pouting flirtatiously and tossing her head, Hettie informed him pertly, 'Well, for your information, soon I shall be singing a lot more than just scales!'

'Oh?' John cocked an enquiring eyebrow in Ellie's direction. 'Is Miss Brown to put on another charity piece? I was – ahem – disappointed to have missed the last one.'

'No, you weren't,' Hettie told him forthrightly. 'Why don't you admit it, John? You have no ear for music, unless it's the horrid whine of your flying machine engines.'

'I'll have you know that requires a very finely tuned ear indeed. In fact, a flyer's good ear for the healthy sound of his engine can make the difference between life and death.'

'Oh John, I wish you wouldn't remind me of just how dangerously you live,' Ellie protested.

'Flying is not dangerous at all if you obey the rules, Ellie.'

Behind Ellie's back Hettie shot John a look of pure enchanting mischief and challenge. 'You are such a fibber, John,' she accused him. 'I haven't forgotten you telling me that the reason you love flying is because it is so thrilling and exciting.'

John shook his head. 'Indeed it is, but that doesn't mean it's dangerous.'

'So, what brings you to Winckley Square,'

Gideon asked him cheerfully, desperate to change the subject and stop Ellie worrying even more about her impetuous younger brother.

John gave him a sheepish look. 'I have a favour to ask you, Gideon.'

Gideon frowned slightly. Of all of Ellie's family, John was his favourite, and he had happy memories of the friendship John had shown him years before when he had been Ellie's poor and, in her mother's eyes at least, unwanted suitor.

'If you're going to try to persuade me to take on another of your lame dogs, John, let me tell you that the last ruffian you persuaded me to hire turned up for work so drunk that it took three days for him to sober up.'

The whole family knew that John had a soft heart and was inclined to take up the cause of anyone he thought was hard done to.

A faint tinge of guilty colour crept over John's handsome face. Like his father, John was an extremely handsome man, tall and broad shouldered with bright blue eyes, strong white teeth, and thick dark curly hair.

'Well, she is neither a ruffian, nor lame . . .' John began awkwardly.

'*She*?' Gideon and Ellie demanded in unison.

A big grin split John's face. 'Yes "she",' he replied. 'Just wait until you see her. I've left her in the kitchen with Mrs Jennings. Gideon, she is just the prettiest thing and so affectionate, you will have her eating out of your hand in no time at

all. She's only young, not fully grown, and with no bad habits. I'd keep her with me but I'm away such a lot that it just doesn't seem fair. I confess I had no intention of having her, but when I saw the way she was being abused. The poor little thing was cowering and shaking . . .'

Ellie was looking unhappier with every word her brother uttered, but Gideon had begun to relax. It was Hettie, though, who burst out laughing and exclaimed, 'Mam, don't look so worried. John is talking about a dog, aren't you, John?'

'What? Oh yes, of course. She is the prettiest little collie bitch, Gideon, and the chap I bought her off was treating her dreadfully.'

'Oh John!' Ellie scolded him, shaking her head.

'I must leave soon,' John told them. I have some new pupils to collect from the station and take back to the airfield.'

'How is business?' Gideon asked him.

'We are not yet making a profit, and I doubt I shall ever be able to match your success.' John smiled. 'But we are just about managing to make ends meet, thanks to you. Without your help I'd never have been able to set up the school in the first place.'

'Think nothing of it,' Gideon assured him clapping him on the shoulder. 'I suspect Ellie thinks I've done you more of a bad turn than a good one by helping you. She worries that living in a wretchedly ill-equipped and damp farm worker's cottage will ruin your health.'

John laughed. 'The cottage may not be Winckley Square but it suits me.'

It was now three years since, with Gideon's help, he had bought the large area of flat farmland with its worker's cottage. The flatness of the land meant it was perfect as an airfield, and, whilst neither the cottage nor the barracks-like building which housed the pupils could be described as anything other than extremely basic, John had lavished as much money as he could spare on the hangars for his two aeroplanes.

'So, minx,' John teased Hettie expansively. 'What charity is Miss Brown supporting this time? I dare say I shall have to buy tickets for it, even if I don't get to come along and hear you cater-wauling.'

'It isn't for charity and it isn't for Miss Brown,' Hettie answered him indignantly. 'It's a proper singing job, and in public, so there!'

'Singing in public? What do you mean?'

The good humour vanished from John's expression. Sensing her brother's disapproval, and seeing Hettie begin to pout, Ellie was about to explain but Hettie spoke first.

'I shall sing for the ladies of Liverpool whilst they take tea, and they will love me and I shall become famous,' Hettie trilled giddily, oblivious to the shadow that had crossed John's face.

'What Hettie means, John,' Gideon explained hurriedly, 'is that Miss Brown is recommending her for a recently advertised position as a soloist

to be accompanied by the pianist at the Adelphi Hotel.'

'Oh John, just imagine.' Hettie clasped her hands together and stood in front of him, her whole face alive with happiness, her eyes full of dreams. 'It will be just as though I were on a stage. Only, of course, I shall not be because it is only a hotel, but who knows what it may lead to?'

'I can't see that any good will come of it, Hettie, other than filling your head with even more nonsense,' John told her so sharply that her face flushed.

'What are you saying?' she demanded hotly, but Ellie hurriedly intervened before John could answer her.

'Hettie, love, I was looking at your blue dress this morning and I thought we might re-trim it.'

'Thanks for agreeing to home this little lass for me, Gideon,' John said gruffly a few moments later, bending to rub the collie bitch's ears. They had moved down to the kitchen so that John could introduce Gideon to his new charge before leaving, Ellie and Hettie having remained upstairs.

'I'm sure both Philip and Richard will enjoy keeping her company when they're at home,' Gideon replied with a chuckle.

John smiled. Philip was the youngest of the Pride children, the baby whose birth had resulted in his mother's death, and who Gideon had firmly insisted Ellie's aunt hand over into Ellie's care to

be brought up alongside their own children.

'Gideon, are you sure it's wise for Hettie to go to this audition?' John asked abruptly. 'After all, she's still so very young. Hardly more than a child.'

Gideon shook his head. 'You may not be aware that she has become a young woman, John, but I can assure you that she believes she has, and so too do the young men who hang around after church on Sunday hoping to be introduced to her. She's eighteen now, you know.'

'Even so, she has led a very sheltered life, and for all that she claims to want to sing on the stage, I believe she has no real idea of what such a life entails.'

'Maybe not, but I would far rather she discovers that in the safe environment of the Adelphi hotel, where she has Connie close at hand should she need her, than risk having her do as Connie herself did and run away from home.'

'Connie left our aunt's because she was ill-treated there, and fancied herself in love,' John protested.

'Well, whilst I hope Hettie will never feel that she has been ill-treated, she too is passionately in love, you know.'

'What? She might fancy herself in love with some lad, but she's too young even to know what love is.'

John's voice was grim. 'What I meant was that she feels very passionately about her music, just as you do about your flying machines. Besides, it

may be that she is not called to audition for the post. Miss Brown, her singing teacher, believes there will be many applicants.'

Gideon was wrong in thinking he was not aware of how much Hettie had grown up, John reflected sombrely as he left the house. He was only too aware of it, and had been for some time. But it had been most obvious to him that, whilst his feelings for her had undergone a change, the old companionable affection he had always felt for her replaced by a man's longing and love, Hettie's feelings for him had remained as they always were. And nothing could have proved that more than her behaviour today, he admitted bleakly.