

PRAISE FOR FOREVER MUSIC - BOOK
ONE IN THIS SERIES

A delightful and important read: I enjoyed Josie and Ches's story as they both grew together and in their relationship with Christ. Ches, in particular, intrigued me as his character began to understand who he was and who he was supposed to be. The contrast between his family and Josie's played well in the story, and I loved how they helped to "put each other back together." I'd put the book down and then keep coming back for more. Loved the Charlotte setting also!

— JODIE BAILEY - WINNER OF RT REVIEWERS'
CHOICE AWARD, SELAH AWARD, AND CBS
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

FOREVER *Home*



HOPE TOLER DOUGHERTY



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

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“*Y*ou’re not getting away with this. Millie left the house to me.” Merritt Hastings schooled her features to give away nothing of the turmoil shredding her insides. Years of practice in front of taunting schoolmates and different foster families had honed her ability to hide her feelings. She buttoned the second-to-the-top button of her blouse.

Allison and Trey Billings. The great-niece and nephew who never called or visited in all the years Merritt had known Millie. The niece and nephew whose wrapped Christmas presents clunked in her car’s trunk until she donated them to a homeless shelter. Merritt recognized them at Millie’s celebration service from high school pictures collecting dust on living room bookshelves.

“You may have the house for the time being because of that so-called will Aunt Mildred cut and pasted together, but it didn’t say anything about the contents of the house. As her closest living relatives,” he smirked, “we get the contents.”

If they’d ever made the two-and-a-half-hour drive from Raleigh to Charlotte to visit her, they would have known she hated being called Mildred. If they’d ever visited her, they might

have received more from her will than the five thousand dollars they'd vowed to contest.

Or maybe not. Millie donated substantial gifts to the church, her alma mater, the public library, and the foster care support group in town ... with glee. The support group dinner. The invitation rested on the hutch. *Gotta RSVP if I'm*—"Hey! Leave that alone."

Allison and Trey inched the upright piano toward the front door. "Get outta the way, Merritt." He glared at her from the far end of the instrument.

"You cannot have that piano. It's my livelihood. You can't take it."

Allison's eyes flew to her brother's.

"We're taking what's rightfully ours." Trey pushed against the instrument.

"You've already been given what's rightfully yours." Merritt planted herself at the front door. "How am I supposed to make a living?" Check your voice. It's getting wobbly and high.

"That's not our problem. I'm sure you'll figure something out. You're resourceful like that."

"Don't take that piano."

"Or what? We'll hear from your lawyer? You'll be hearing from ours first." His gaze flickered passed her head and motioned to the two men who had just carried the couch to one of the waiting trucks in the driveway. "Move, Merritt."



PALMS FLAT against her bent knees, Merritt sat with her back to her bedroom wall, forcing calmness with deliberate, slow breaths. Her head pounded from useless crying. She wiped her wet cheeks and surveyed the room.

Clothes from the chest of drawers lay in sagging piles near the opposite wall. Crumpled sheets and the comforter covered the mattress and box spring. Her to-be-read pile sat between the

markings the bedside table had made in the carpet along with a box of tissues, but the lamp was gone just like the bedroom suit.

She spoke the positives out loud, maybe to convince herself. “No furniture means I don’t have to dust. They left the mattresses. I don’t have to sleep on the floor. I’m not homeless.”

At the base of her throat, she slid the gold chain out of her blouse until she cupped the Venetian glass heart. “They didn’t get your necklace either, Millie.”

She pushed herself off the floor to access the rest of the damage and peeked into Millie’s room. Same vision of drawer contents on the floor, mattress and bedding, bedside table stuff in random piles except for the bean bag chair Millie vowed helped her sciatica.

The bare den held no couch or chairs or end tables. A few magazines littered the floor near the fireplace. Resting alone in front of an outlet, the cable box looked bereft. She could turn that in for a rebate.

Four African violets lined the bay window, and a few framed photos tumbled over each other, emphasizing the absence of the piano. The backs of her eyes burned. She clamped her teeth onto the side of her cheek. No more tears today. At least they’d emptied the piano stool of the sheet music and left the basket of music books.

Moving on, she surveyed the kitchen. Table and chairs ... gone as well. She could have her meals at the bar, but she’d have to do it standing. Would two wooden stools be worth the trouble of carrying them off and trying to sell them? Trey and Allison clearly meant business.

The door to the laundry/mud room caught her eye. She glanced inside and chuckled. “So, they didn’t want you? Well, I do. Thank You, God, for old appliances!” She placed her hands flat on each one. “I love you, you gold washing machine and dryer. No trips to the Laundromat.”

She padded back to her bedroom and flopped on the mattress, pulling the comforter around her. “Let’s recap. I have a

mattress, pillows, and bedding. Nice. The grocery store stoneware plates are safe in the kitchen cabinet. The pantry and refrigerator have food. I have clothes, appliances, and a warm place to live.

“The den. That’s harder to be positive, God.” She blew out a breath and gritted her teeth. Her garage sale-spinet piano had seen better days, but Millie had rubbed linseed oil into the dry wood panels until it shined and kept it tuned every six months. It had good sound.

It was a piano.

A mourning dove cooed from her nest on top of the back porch column. “What a sad song you sing, little bird.” Leaning against stacked pillows, Merritt listened to the throaty murmurs with eyes closed. The melancholy sound matched her mood, provoking the genesis of a melody in her mind. Hoping to catch the tune before it evaporated, she pushed away off the comforter, muscle memory steering her toward her—she halted mid-stride.

Tight fists at her sides, she growled out loud. “The first thing I need is a piano.”

Breathing hard, she clutched her necklace again. She itched to spend time with the punching bag still hanging in the garage but forced herself to delay the temper session.

Millie had always warned against rash decisions. Thinking through problems calmly had been one of the many lessons Millie Ayden stressed after Merritt came to live with her. Learning to cook and celebrating something every day also topped the skills-to-know list.

Yes, she needed a piano for her livelihood, but she should be judicious in her purchase. She couldn’t afford a baby grand, but maybe she wouldn’t have to buy the first one she came across either.

If she could find another place to give lessons for—she counted on her fingers May, June, and July—three months, maybe she could take her time in buying her first piano and have

it ready to go when she began lessons again with the school year in September.

Aside from feeling assaulted, ravaged, and stripped bare, the prospect of choosing a piano, not just accepting whatever she could get by with, lifted her perspective just a tad.

Oh, Millie. *Thank you for teaching me to look for the blessings no matter how bleak the problem.* It's just so hard to do it without you.

Quick tears swelled in her eyes again.

I miss you so much.

She wiped her eyes and headed for her date with the punching bag waiting in the garage.