

Chapter 23

“Let me ask you a question. What do you find so appealing about Miss Hannah McConnell, besides her beauty?” his mother asked from the chaise.

“Everything. I think I’ve always been in love with her - or at least a vague image of her - and finally met her. I feel like I’ve known her for years and still every time I see her it’s like the first time.”

“That’s how it was with Irene and Sam.” She paused. “I’ll tell you what you see in Hannah. The very things Irene saw in Sam, a strong backbone and a sharp mind. And she has Irene’s grace and spiritedness.” His mother sighed. “I always wondered if you would ever find a good woman and settle down. You have fallen hard but with the one woman who won’t have you. You always did like a challenge.”

His mouth hitched up on one side. Was it the challenge that drew him? Or the reward if successful?

Later, Gerrit walked inside Hannah’s dressmaker shop. She glared at him and went to the back room, returning a moment later with a wrapped parcel. “I was going to have Alice deliver this when she came back.” She tossed it at him.

My shirt. He nearly dropped the letters he brought catching it.

“We have no further business.”

“Oh, but I do have further business with you.” If he could just make her understand the truth . . . “I have debated with myself about giving you these personal letters. I prayed and believe the Lord would have me give them to you.”

“I’m not interested in your letters.”

He set the bundles on the table she used to cut fabric. “These are correspondence between Uncle Duncan and my father regarding the Majestic Resort.”

“I said I’m not interested.”

“There are a few from your father and mother.”

Hannah jerked her head up. He had surprised her but then she lowered a veil of indifference. “I’m not interested.” She turned and walked toward her living quarters. He stopped her in the hall, trapping her between his arms with his hands against the wall. A little Coughlin control, but that was tough; she had to know the truth. “Promise me you will read those letters.”

She pushed on his arm but he wouldn’t relent. She ducked to go under but he slid his hand down the wall.

“I’ll stand here until you do.”

The bell over the door jingled. “I have a customer.”

He could wait her out.

She shoved his arm and appeared to be putting all one hundred or so pounds into it. Then she looked up with a sly resigned hitch to her mouth.

He didn’t like what he saw in her eyes and wouldn’t let her make a false pledge. “All you have to do is promise, because I know a McConnell’s word is good.”

She gritted her teeth and glared at him.

“Let me make it easy for you. Promise or I’ll kiss you.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

He most definitely would. He felt an obligation to fix this misunderstanding before he left town. “I’ll count to five. One.”

“How dare you!”

“Two.”

She stomped her foot on the top of his boot.

He clenched his jaw, trying not to show the pain her heel caused. “Three.”

She pushed on his arm. “You’re going to lose me a customer.”

“Four.” He could see in her eyes that she knew she was trapped. Either way, he won. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Fi-”

“I promise, I promise, I promise.”

Neither moved or breathed. The bell over the door rang again.

“You promise what?”

“You know good and well what.” She pushed and swatted at his arm.

“I want to hear you say it.”

She huffed. “I promise to read the insidious letters, but they won’t make one bit of difference. May I go now?”

“I’m disappointed. I would have liked to kiss you.” He turned and walked away. “Good day, ma’am.” He tipped his head to the customer. He tipped his head to Alice who must have come in on the second bell. “Good to see you again.” Then he walked out, leaving part of himself behind.

It was all in the Lord's hands now. He could do nothing more to make her see the truth. It was time to head back east and forget all about Miss Hannah McConnell. If that were even possible.

Chapter 24

Hannah glared at the letters Mr. Gerrit Coughlin had given her. Her hands trembled as she picked them up. She had nothing to fear from them. They meant nothing. But something inside her told her they could change her life...if she let them. But she wasn't about to let that happen. Her world had already been shaken with the news of Duncan's betrayal being related to the very people whom she disliked. Why hadn't he told her? Why hadn't Mother told her?

The last thing she wanted to do was read more lies of Duncan and the Coughlins'. Alice's laughter crossed the room as she showed Anna Isabelle the millenary sample book.

She pulled the letters tight to herself. She couldn't read them here. The mine would give her the strength she needed to fulfill her promise and get this over with.

She wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders and put the letters in a crocheted bag. Then she gathered up her two bundles for the Wilsons and headed for the door.

"After I'm done here, I'll finish the lace on..."

Hannah barely heard Alice as she spoke. "I have to go out."

"It looks like it could rain." Alice motioned toward the window with the darkening sky on the other side.

"I'll be fine." She walked out the door. She had an important visit to make.

She had made two dresses for Sophie's doll; one out of some left over peach satin, the other a red gingham to match the dress she made for Sophie. She also had made Sophie a blue calico dress to match the one she hoped Iona would accept for herself. A customer had ordered it then changed her mind. But Hannah thought it would fit her.

Without too much protesting from Iona, Hannah left the doll and dresses with Iona and Sophie. Iona offered to pay her but Hannah refused. Iona didn't have the money to spare. And Hannah would not take money that could put food on the table for the Wilson children.

Hannah headed up to the mine, the one place that always gave her strength.