

Chapter 25

Hannah sat on the small boulder Father had placed beside the mine entrance. She was never allowed to go any farther than that. But she did . . . once. Hannah shivered at the memory.

The boards X-ed across the opening were cruel reminders of that day. She could still feel the fear and loneliness of being trapped and helpless. The utter darkness had paralyzed her. But she was rescued. Father never was. He was still in there somewhere.

Hannah shivered again either from the memory or the chilly wind coming down off the mountain. She pulled out the first letter, and it was almost snatched from her by a sudden gust. She tightened her shawl around her and headed for the cabin. She sat inside the door on the floor out of the wind, the wall adjusted to her weight.

She opened the first letter from Mr. Coughlin to Father then refolded it. She couldn't do this. It was as though she were betraying Father. She closed her eyes. *Lord, help me read these letters as I promised.* She paused and drew in a deep breath. The next part was hard to pray. *If there is truth in these letters, reveal it to me.* She was ready for the truth. She took another deep breath and opened her eyes.

She read Mr. Coughlin's words. On Duncan's request, Mr. Coughlin had found several investors for the mountain hot springs resort. She folded it back up and caressed the writing on the second envelope from her father to Mr. Coughlin. He loved Mother so much. She turned the

page and began reading. Her father had replied that Mr. Coughlin had been misinformed and declined the offer. He did not like being beholden to others and would manage on his own.

She folded the letter. So Duncan had gone behind Father's back. What kind of friend was that?

The next few letters were between Duncan and Mr. Coughlin after Father's death. They hashed out the details of the sale of the land and the plans for the resort. Father's plans! Had Duncan stolen them? Duncan was specific that they had to follow Sam's plans as closely as possible and it must bear the name Majestic Resort. He had secured the original plans from her mother and the project was moving forward.

How dare he! Taking advantage of Mother like that when she was devastated and vulnerable. Poor Mother. Hannah recalled how mean she had been to her mother. She wouldn't listen to one word on the topic of the resort or the people and blamed her mother for letting it happen. It was years later she understood that the sale of the land was necessary to pay off Father's debts. But how could her mother hand over her father's plans, his dream? Her thoughts drifted back to her father's letter. If he was in debt anyway, why not take on investors. He could have climbed out of the mine once and for all and still be alive.

Oh Father.

What was the verse in Proverbs? "Pride cometh before destruction..." The same destructive pride of her father she could see in herself. Would it destroy her as well? *Lord, don't let the same pride that destroyed my father destroy me as well. Save me from my foolish pride.*

The next letter was from Mother to the Coughlins.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Coughlin,

Up until now Duncan has graciously taken care of all the details communicating with you about the resort. I felt it was time for me to let you know how truly grateful I am for all you are doing. I would not let just anyone build this resort. I believe you understand Sam's vision and will honor his memory in fulfilling his dream for me. I know you have made some personal sacrifices, and I am indebted to you for more than I could ever repay.

Cordially,

Mrs. Sam McConnell

Hannah stared at the letter. Mother? It was all her idea? The Coughlins hadn't practically stolen it. Her mother willingly handed it over.

She pulled out the next to the last letter.

Dear Mrs. Sam McConnell,

We are most happy for this opportunity to help fulfill the dream of a man with a heart bigger than his resources and to help the needy people in Faithful. I only wish your husband had taken me up on my offer years ago. I would have been proud to work beside him.

It is taking longer to raise the capital than I would like but when Sam turned me down, we sought an avenue closer to home to reach out to those in need. Most of our funds are tied up in a local orphanage. But we have found some people to take on this task. The resort seems like just the sort of challenge I will enjoy, and the potential to help those in need is the real appeal in this whole endeavor.

He understood. It was never about the resort with Father but being able to finally help others.

The last letter was from her mother.

Dear Mr. Coughlin,

I have asked for so much from you with nothing to give in return. But I must ask one more favor from you and your wife. I have spoken to Duncan about this. He is not in agreement with me but has conceded to abide by my wishes. I must ask that you and your wife do not reveal to my daughter Hannah your relationship to Duncan. Hannah has not accepted her father's death and is having a terrible time of it all.

Looking back, Hannah could see just how poorly she handled it. She had often come up to the mine, sat on her rock, and imagined her father digging himself out, even though she knew in her heart, it was impossible. He was . . . dead. She never liked to think of him that way, just trapped. Eternally trapped. But it wasn't the mine that had killed him, it was his own pride and stubbornness. He wouldn't let anyone help. Not even her or Mother.

Her mother had tried to tell her, but she wouldn't listen. She searched her memories and recalled several time when Mother would mention either the resort and how beautiful it looked or the people who lived there. Every time she would close her ears. It hurt too much. It was like someone stomping on Father's grave . . . only he didn't have one.

She finished the letter.

I worry about Hannah so. She grieves so deeply for her father.

Nothing had hurt worse.

If you would do this one last thing for me, I would be most grateful. One day I will explain everything to her when she is old enough to understand. I am in your debt.

Respectfully,

Mrs. Sam McConnell

Her mother's last words to her had been, "I love you, Hannah. Please forgive me." Hannah hadn't known what her mother needed forgiveness for, but forgave her for anything she thought she needed absolution for. If she had known what it was she was forgiving, could she have still given it at the time? She had been difficult after Father died and could now understand Mother's secrecy. Mother had been wise. Even now the truth was hard to bear, but she was willing to face it no matter how painful.

Mother had done it for her, to protect her from her own hurt. She was as stubborn and muleheaded as her father. If he had taken Mr. Coughlin up on his offer, he would be alive. Oh Father. A tear slid down her cheek.

One letter remained in her bag; the one that accompanied the news of Duncan's betrayal at the reading of his will. He had betrayed no one. He had only ever done everything Mother asked of him. She longed to read his final words to her. It was dated one year earlier to nearly the day of Duncan's passing.

My Dear Sweet Hannah,

I hardly know where to begin. I have so much to tell you. You were the daughter I never had. From the day you were born I loved you as my own. I have tried to be a father to you since Sam's passing. You are a beautiful and lovely young woman. I look forward to seeing you marry and have children. I have secretly hoped and

tried to arrange your meeting my nephew, Gerrit. By the time you read this you will probably already have met. He is a wonderful young man or so my sister tells me.

Your mother knew for some time that her health was failing. Her heart was never strong. She would be happy to know you have a piece of your father's dream. She had it built for the two people she loved most, you and Sam. I asked Irene to marry me, but she turned me down. She said it wouldn't be fair to me when she knew she was going to die. But before she died she did tell me that she had grown to love me.

Your mother, knowing her time was short, didn't want to spend one minute of it with you angry with her, so she felt it best to not tell you about Mrs. Coughlin being my sister. She meant to spare you pain by keeping this from you. I hope she was right.

I feel a great burden has been taken from me for finally telling you all of this, though you won't read it for some time.

I pray your life is happy and I will miss you.

Forever,

Duncan

Duncan was in love with Mother. He always had been. How she knew this she wasn't sure, but she *knew* it was true. Duncan had always been the father hers had not.

Tears pooled in Hannah's eyes. She blinked to bring the words back into focus.

Everything seemed so clear to her now. And not so much because of the letters. It was as if God had lifted a veil and her whole life came into focus. Like dissolving sugar into water; it's cloudy at first but becomes clear.

Father had put his whole life into making his dream come true. He had literally given his life for it. It was the most important thing in the world to him. More important than anything . . . or anyone. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

She bundled the letters back up into her bag and headed straight for the mine, her father's grave.

She stood in front of the opening. "Why couldn't Mother and I be enough for you? Why couldn't we be more important? You never were a father to me. All you could see was the castle you wanted to build. It blinded you to what was right in front of you. Just as it has blinded me. Duncan was always the father you should have been to me. I love you, Father, but I won't carry your burden any longer."

The wind whipped some of her hair across her face as she knelt by her mother's grave. "I'm sorry I never listened to you. You tried to tell me so many times. All I could see was my bitterness and hurt." The first rain drop landed on her cheek next to her tears.

She tipped her face and heart toward heaven. *Sweet Jesus, please forgive me for all my bitterness. I have been so wrong in this whole affair. Please let Gerrit and his parents forgive me.* Thunder rolled across the sky, vibrating the ground.

Another drop and another. She stood. The wind whipped her hair and flapped her skirt violently as if trying to tear it loose. She looked to the mine for shelter. She would never go in there again and headed for the cabin. Though rickety, it had stood this long, certainly it could weather one more storm. The cabin groaned as she approached. Maybe this was one storm too many. She would grab the bag with the letters and make for the mine.

Chapter 26

From his perch on the ladder, Gerrit reached for a book on the top shelf. The bell over the door jingled. Alice hurried in. He put his feet on the outsides of the ladder and slid down.

She was solemn faced. "Mr. Fin- Coughlin. Hannah has gone off upset. I think she may have gone up to her father's old mine. A storm is blowing in fast." She pointed toward the front windows.

Gerrit hadn't realized how dark it had gotten outside. "I'll find her." He grabbed his coat and a wide brimmed hat of his uncle's and marched up the mountainside.

As he walked, the wind grew stronger, and he had to hold his hat on. He hoped Hannah had not gone up there but to Tiny's instead. He should have checked, but too late now. Best to make sure she wasn't up there. If she was at Tiny's, she would be safe. If she was on the mountain side, anything could happen. He quickened his pace.

He crossed the bridge and a large drop of rain hit his hand. Thunder clapped overhead and rolled across the sky. He started running and caught a glimpse of a figure kneeling. Hannah. She rose and darted inside the little cabin as the sky broke loose. He yelled to her, but the wind carried off his words.

The cabin shifted in the gusty wind and groaned, slowly shifting to the side and folding onto the ground.

“Hannah!”

He ran faster urging his legs to already be at the cabin. “Hannah!” He willed her to crawl out of the wreckage that used to be her home all those years ago. He saw no movement except the rain beating down almost sideways, punishing the old timber.

He knelt where the doorway used to be. “Hannah!”

He didn’t even wait for an answer and pulled loose the first board careful not to shift the remains down harder on Hannah. It came away easily enough. Sam had not built this cabin to last. It had only been a temporary home. He pulled away another board and could see inside. He sucked in a quick breath at the sight of Hannah’s booted foot and the hem of her purple calico dress.

He knelt down to see how she was situated inside. Rain ran off the front of his hat. It was pitch black inside. Then a flash of lightening gave him a brief glimpse of her full body huddled on her side. She seemed to be in an open pocket held up by one wobbly chair. He touched her ankle. “Hannah, can you hear me?”

She didn’t move or make a sound. She had likely been hit in the head and knocked out when the ceiling came down onto of her. He hoped she’d only been knocked out. On the slim chance she could hear him, he explained to her what he was going to do. “Hannah, I’m going to straighten your legs and pull you out.”

He took a deep breath knowing that any movement could shift the boards and trap Hannah more fully. He pulled slowly, watching for any change in the timber. Hannah was lying flat on her back now. As he tried to pull her out, she seemed to be hung up on something. Another flash of lightening reveled that one of her arms was wrapped around the chair leg. If he pulled her, the chair would likely move and bring the rest of the cabin down on her.

He belly crawled up under the boards next to her. She was breathing. He gave a sigh of relief. He could hear the whole structure moan under the weight of the wind. There wasn't much time. Untangling her arm from the chair, he moved it slightly. He held his body over hers and waited for it all to come down on him. When it didn't, he inched out a little and slid Hannah with him, he kept backing out slowing bringing Hannah with him. If the cabin came down, he wanted to protect her from further injury. At the opening he pulled himself up onto his knee and free of the boards then pulled Hannah free holding her close. He lifted her into his arms, heard a crack from inside, and saw the structure go flat.

Gerrit tipped his head over Hannah's face so his hat would help keep the rain from her face and leaned into the wind. Rain hit the back of his neck and ran down his back inside his shirt. He didn't care and headed for the Majestic.