

## Chapter 27

Hannah woke to the sound of whispered voices. Her head throbbed. She blinked several times. The unfamiliar room was dim and a fire glowed in the hearth, but she could tell the furnishings were expensive. The whispers had stopped and a woman moved about the room. Hannah pushed herself up to a sitting position on the chaise lounge.

“Not so fast.” The woman hurried over and set a tea tray on the table then assisted her.

*Mrs. Coughlin!* Hannah swung her feet to the floor and sat up proper. More than her head ached; her shoulder, her back, and her leg for starters. How had she gotten here? And why was she here? The last thing she remembered was being up at her father’s old mine. She’d gone into the old cabin to retrieve the letters.

And it had falling in on her. No wonder she hurt. It was amazing she was alive she supposed. She remembered thinking this was her end. No one knew where she was. But evidently someone had.

Mrs. Coughlin sat on the chaise next to her. “How are you feeling, dear?”

How could she look this woman in the eyes after all the terrible things she had said about her? “I’ll be fine, thank you.”

“I had tea made for you, hoping you would wake soon.” Mrs. Coughlin poured then handed her a cup and saucer from the coffee table.

Tears stung her eyes as she took the offered generosity.

“There is someone who is quite anxious to see you.” She stood.

“Wait.”

Mrs. Coughlin sat back down. “Yes, dear.”

Hannah took a deep breath. “I must beg your forgiveness for the many unkind things I have said about you and Mr. Coughlin that were unwarranted. I thought . . .”

Mrs. Coughlin patted her hand. “It’s all right, dear. We have always understood the difficulties you were under. We don’t blame you at all. You were not told everything you should have been. Those who should have told you are gone, and those of us who could still tell you were bound by promises of secrecy. It was unfair to you.”

Words choked in her throat and a tear slipped down each cheek. She didn’t deserve to be forgiven so easily. “Still I should have . . .”

Mrs. Coughlin patted her hand again. “Now, now, dear, think nothing more of it. It is finally over.”

Hannah dipped her head and sniffled. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Coughlin produced a handkerchief from her skirt pocket. “Now dry your eyes. If I don’t let my son in to see you soon, he’s likely to break down the door. Firemen are trained for that sort of thing.”

Smiling, Hannah dabbed at her eyes. “Is he how I got here?”

“Of course.”

It was truly a miracle that he found her. When she had composed herself, she nodded to Mrs. Coughlin.

Mrs. Coughlin rose elegantly and glided across the room before sliding the parlor door open and stepped into the hall. “Don’t tire her. She’s been through a lot.”

“I know, Mother.”

At the sound of Gerrit’s voice, a lump formed in Hannah’s throat. She turned to the fire. How could she face him after the way she’d treated him and all she had said? She sensed him sit on the end of the chaise.

“Hannah. How are you feeling?”

She turned but didn’t look at him. “Terrible.”

He stood. “Maybe you should lie back.”

“It’s not that. I have been so wrong. Please forgive me for my cruelty to you and your family.”

He eased back down. “Of course. I never meant to hurt you.” His voice was gentle and kind.

“It is I who hurt myself and everyone around me. I took up my father’s dream, his obsession really, and trampled anyone who got in the way, just like Father.”

“You were never told the whole truth.”

She nodded. He had only wanted to set things right by his parents. She had read more into his actions and let her feelings run free once again. “I’ll not speak out against them again. I’ll leave Faithful.”

“But Faithful’s your home. How can you leave?”

“There is nothing here for me anymore. Faithful was built on one man’s dream. A man who was too busy building that dream to notice he had a wife and daughter who needed him. He’s gone, Mother’s gone, and so is Duncan. I don’t even have the bitterness anymore. There is

nothing left for me in Faithful. This town will carry on without Sam McConnell or any McConnell. It's nothing special. It's just like any other town, people come and people go. I need to leave Faithful. I don't know where I'll go yet but I trust the Lord will direct me." Possibly east.

"And your shop?"

She surmised that he was finding it hard to believe she could leave the town she fought so hard for. But once truth had set her free . . . "Alice can handle it or I'll sell it."

"Oh, Hannah."

She didn't want to hear any tender good-bye. She just wanted to go and let her heart heal once again and for the last time. "You cleared your family's name. You got what you wanted."

He caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers. "The reason I didn't tell you my full name was that I didn't want to lose you. I was trying to take away your pain as much as clear my family name. What I want is you."

She met his gaze for the first time. He meant it. He really meant it. Her heart leapt. "How can you?"

"I love you."

Her heart skipped at those words she so longed for. "Oh, Gerrit." Hannah leaned into him, pressing her face against his chest. "I love you too!"

He wrapped his arms around her, then tipped her head up to look at him. "Would I get slapped again if I kissed you?"

She shook her head and closed her eyes in anticipation. His lips were warm and tender. In his arms she knew she had come home and found a place to really belong. The love she had struggled her whole life to attain had come at last with Gerrit . . . a Coughlin!