

Chapter 5

A well-kept secret.

True to his word, Connor Latham arrived punctually at four o'clock. He had seen a few black-and-white plus sepia photos of Treasure, but was unprepared for the stunning redhead who opened the door to his knock.

"Same occupation and business, different name," he answered her politely.

"Ella," Treasure called out, "The lawyer is here. We'll be in the study." Following this, she led the way, walking straight into that room to sit professionally.

"Hello, Mr. Latham." With a puzzled expression, she held out her hand to shake his firmly. "I thought I was dealing with Granny's lawyer, who has served her for years." She waited for an explanation.

Her physical attraction to this man staggered her. After meeting and being pandered to by some of the world's most handsome and charismatic men, this was the first time she had felt any inner commotion by a man's appearance and voice. Her heart hammered as she waited for him to inform her of the will's contents of specific importance. Wasn't it a simple matter of her grandmother leaving her estate to her aunt and

then her aunt leaving that estate to her? What could be problematic in that?

“Miss Gilroy,” he began after holding eye contact for a puzzling time. “First, people in this area know very little about you, aside from the fact that you are Lady Seymour’s granddaughter. Your grandparents held a position in this town. Just because your grandfather came from generations of landowners around here was enough. But then your grandmother did significantly well through her nursing experience to improve health conditions, even teaching the area’s women. This gave them excellent standing.”

Treasure sat with her hands clasped together in her lap, wondering where this was going. He was earnest, which led her to believe she could learn something unpleasant and perhaps even distressing.

“I have the tough job of informing you of certain personal matters, and I am sorry that I, a perfect stranger, am the one to do.” He bent down to open a case and withdrew something that looked like a letter. Leaning back in his seat, he regarded her with sadness etched on his face. “I want you to know that I will share something with you I have kept in the strictest of confidence and will continue to keep.”

Treasure just nodded without speaking. She didn’t wish to break his train of thought.

“Miss Gilroy, this is a small town, and your grandparents had a position to uphold. Because of this, what happened to your mother -your birth mother-was always kept from you. There is no easy way to say this. The couple you considered being your parents were, in fact, your maternal aunt and uncle. And your Aunt Primrose was your natural mother.”

Treasure sat stunned and stared at him! She felt like someone had slammed a door in her face! Numbness gripped her features. This information ultimately rocked her world. “But -, why was this kept from me? It explains everything!” She rested her elbows on the table to support her head in her hands. Her eyes downcast, tears silently tumbled, sliding down her cheeks, and onto the desk. Her flat raw feelings left no room for embarrassment.

The lawyer fumbled around in his pocket, producing a clean handkerchief with uneasy calm, and pressed it into her hand.

“I’m so sorry to be the one who dropped this bomb!” His tone portrayed compassion. “Believe me; I kept telling your grandmother that either she or Primrose were the ones to tell you!”

Treasure couldn’t speak. She didn’t want to talk; she just wanted to be alone with her thoughts and try to make some sense out of all this. Life was unfair - and then a new idea came. *Who then was her father?* What a mess! Wiping her eyes and blowing her nose, she cast those watery green eyes at him, waiting for whatever else he had to say.

“Look,” he began. “I think you have heard enough for one day. I have a letter written by your mother, Primrose, to you; perhaps it will clarify and

make sense of everything.” He handed her an envelope with her name on the front in her aunt’s—err, mother’s handwriting.

Not knowing what else to do, he placed the rest of the papers back into his case and clicked it shut. Standing, he gazed first at Treasure and then around the room. His eyes ended on a portrait of her grandparents with their two daughters. “Not that it’s much comfort at this time, but many families have their secrets. I am sure what your mother did was with the very best intentions.”

Treasure pushed herself up from her chair, using its arms as if to strengthen hers. Without a word and holding the letter clutched to her bosom, she walked with him to the front door and opened it. Halting nearby, he now used his free arm and placed it around her waist, unexpectedly drawing her up against his chest. Just as quickly releasing her, he stepped back onto the verandah as he whispered.

“You’re too beautiful to mar your face with tears. Smile and be happy for all the gifts God has given you. It would help if you looked forward to the joys coming into your life. That’s why God placed your eyes on the front of your head, to look forward and not back. I’ll return and see you next week after my trip to Melbourne. In the meantime, read that letter and pray to God to give you understanding, forgiveness, and love.” With that, he turned politely and walked away.

She watched his straight-backed casual saunter on the dusty road. His black hair, longer than a man's usual length, curled on the top of his collar. He left an impression on her heart of pure goodness. *Why was that?* She did not know. And he was right; it was no use crying over spilled milk. What had happened was in the past. Now she needed to tell Ella about this and read the letter aloud between them. No more family secrets. Ella was now her family and would understand.

“Ella, where are you.” Receiving no answer and closing the front door behind her, she ran through the house to the back, supposing Ella was with the dog. Treasure was right. “There you are. I need us to sit down and talk.”

Ella looked up from chatting with the pet. She had him clean, his hair cut, and she was busy brushing his coat. The dog looked almost happy; he lifted his head at Treasure’s voice and wagged his fluffy tail.

“Why, don’t you look pretty?” Fondling his ears and patting his head made her feel serene. This poor dog suffered alone and almost starved to death, and now he accepted his new home with trust.

Shouldn’t she be accepting of her blessing? Of course! *Why make life complicated?*

Ella looked relaxed. “Guess what, Treasure? He is a she!” She smiled. “And if you agree, I think I know a good name for her. What would you think about naming her Paris? She’s sweet, and I think she deserves a

pretty name. Once she gets some meat and muscle on her bones, she will be the most beautiful dog in the town.”

Treasure stood there in disbelief! A female dog. Why that meant puppies galore, and what would they do then? *What was that about complications?*

“Ella.” Treasure attempted to stop her voice from sounding vexed! She failed—. “You will need to do more than make her pretty; you will need to see a vet and find out how to stop her having puppies all the time. We can’t keep lots of dogs here; one is enough!” As usual, Treasure was logical, but there had to be a solution, and it would be Ella’s responsibility to find one.

“Please come inside for now, and since Paris is all cleaned up and hopefully flea-free, she can come with you.” With that, Treasure walked back into the house and made her way to the sitting room while opening her letter as she went. She wanted to get this over with and listen to Ella’s opinion. Sitting on the settee, she unfolded the pages and stared at her aunt - mother’s letter to her! Watching as Ella seated herself, she read aloud.

“My dearest darling, how I love you, you will never know how very much. I often wanted to tell you this, but the moment never seemed right. Firstly, I had to fight for you to be born, and then I have been struggling for you to have a happy life. You once asked me, not so long ago, how you would

know when you fell in love. Well, you will know. It's like you get struck by thunder, and that person will mean more to you than anyone else in the entire world. He may not be handsome, tall, affluent, educated, or of the same nationality.

It's got nothing to do with that; it's to do with an inner connection that some call a soul. It's profound. That's how I felt about your father. I loved him more than I can tell you, and I believe he loved me as well.

Our problem was surrendering to that love without a pledge and a promise until death do we part. He was working for the government, surveying land in Glen Arbor. I was an impressionable young girl and didn't consider that he may leave one day. All I thought about was the now. He tried to tell me he couldn't stay, but I wouldn't listen. He was on a contract and needed to leave and return to England when it was over. There was no way my father would let me leave and go far away over the ocean. So, when his time was up, he left. He wrote for a time and then stopped.

By then, I knew I was expecting you, but didn't tell him. I wanted him to return because he loved me, and perhaps he thought about it, but it was a long trip, and I don't think he wanted to make his home in Australia. I kept my pregnancy to myself as long as I was able. My mother, as a nurse, considered I should have an abortion when she found out, but I could not do that. I wanted his baby more than anything. I thought that one day we would travel to England and find him, and we traveled there, but I only half found him.

If he was happy to meet you, then maybe, just maybe, life could have been different. By the time I found him, there were other problems. My life

with you was the best gift in the world; you made up for everything. The most vital part of your father you inherited was his green eyes. And every time I looked into them, I saw him. Why did my sister and her husband adopt you? She was younger than me by a year, and she was married. As far as society goes, it seemed the best solution to pass you off as my sister's child. She had her appendix out at fourteen, which ruined her insides so she could never have children. Your uncle Marcus showed no interest in children that I could see. I don't think he was normal because a marriage of convenience was all he seemed to want, or so I thought at the time. I learned differently from him later. But to you and Ella, I became a star. Thank you both for that.

So that is my story. I know I am dying, so your grandmother's home will become yours. I hope Ella is there with you, as she is a special girl. This will not be the end of the story. I want you to live three months in the valley, and then my lawyer will give you a clue about your father. I believe it will surprise you. But you and Ella need a good rest, as you have worked very hard, and the valley will recharge you both. I do genuinely love the pair of you.

Your Mother - Primrose xx."

"That's strange." Ella took the letter and studied the signature. "Why did your aunt - or mother, as we now know her to be, sign herself as a mother? Almost to the both of us? Do you suppose she saw herself as my mother also?" Treasure reached out and took the letter back, studying Ella's referral.

“Yes! I see what you mean; that is strange indeed -but like you said, perhaps she saw you as a daughter as well; I know I have always looked upon you as a little sister. And she always looked out for your welfare and mine. She was a truly wonderful person, and I believe I am delighted she was my mother. I wish she could have shared that with me when she was alive.”

“Life isn’t always how we would like, is it? I mean, perhaps she also had her husband to consider. Even though they may not have had a normal marriage, he was also convenient for her, wasn’t he? He supported her money-wise; perhaps he paid for her to take you to France and travel to England. We will never know. He may have also known you were her child!”

Treasure put her hand to her mouth. She had not thought that far ahead, but perhaps he did. She now felt she owed him an explanation for departing and not being at the house after the funeral.

“I can’t phone him, but soon I will write him a long letter and explain that it was too much for us to be there for the wake. I will tell him we are here and invite him to come and visit whenever he would like. I am sure he would appreciate me having some manners. I will also thank him for his goodness to myself and my mother over the years.” She pondered this some more before adding. “Before I put that last bit, I will ask him if he

knew about my beginnings and what I meant to aunty, and then I'll see his answer."

Treasure folded the letter and replaced it inside the envelope. She needed to light the lamps and decide what was for dinner. Later, she would talk to Ella.

Ella took care of clearing up and washing the dishes. It had been a quick meal of fried liver and vegetables with some lovely apple cobbler purchased from the baker's shop. Paris devoured the leftovers, even the veggies. She would receive porridge in the morning for breakfast, which was the same as her owners. Seeing her lying contented on a floor rug between them was good.

Treasure still thought of her as him, having purchased a new collar with a length of rope. Ella promised to take Paris for a walk to the produce store the following day to talk to the vet. They had learned a Mr. Wallace—; new in town, had a small room for an office at the back of the store, and he was preparing to build a house with two rooms on the front as a veterinary clinic. Treasure met his young wife and little son Jason when she purchased the collar and found them very pleasant.

Pleased to find another new residence in the town, Treasure spent half an hour listening to Mrs. Wallace's excitement about having her house built. In the meantime, the family lived at the hotel. The following day was

Wednesday, so Treasure thought it might be nice to invite Mrs. Wallace and her son over the week after. By then, they would have settled in and would have time for company.

