

THE
FOURNIERS

WHEN HANNAH
PLAYED RAGTIME

VERA JANE
COOK

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For my grandmother
Hannah Reilly Ray

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WHEN HANNAH
PLAYED RAGTIME

The Fourniers

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HANNAH
1892 - 1934

Chapter One

The morning was grey and damp. Color drained from the earth, washed off by rain that would not cease, might never cease, it seemed so committed. Hannah listened intently to the wind's menacing murmur, stirring up the ground and whatever was on it. There was a clanking sound coming from the side of the house, which she could not place, perhaps the garden tools she had used the day before. They were like cymbals with the drum of thunder, both playful and irritating. The fire in the kitchen was warm, but the chill in her veins remained. She felt her future being written by the patter and the disarray of the storm.

She could smell her father's pipe. It was usually sweet, but the dampness made it pungent, almost sour. It polluted the air like the large Irish setter at her feet, whose wet hair had a bad smell, like soiled clothes. She reached down and touched his head anyway, and the dog's cold nose brushed past her palm.

She would not argue with her father any longer. She would not beg nor plead nor weep. Her father's mind could not be changed; his absurd obsession with things that shouldn't matter was set in stone. She turned her head toward the window, and the dark wind came at her so fiercely. The windows rattled as if phantasmal lunatics were attempting to reach her, as if phantasmal lunatics were about to shatter the glass and take the very life from her.

"Brutal weather," her father said. "Raining pitchforks."

Hannah nodded. "Yes, I hope there won't be much damage."

He went back to his paper and his politics, back to his unreasonable hatred of the Nationalists. None of it mattered a damn to her.

"Ay, there'll be some of it, rest assured."

"What? Damage?" she asked.

"Rest assured," he said.

"Yes, I suppose there will be," she answered and turned her head back toward the window and the angry gusts that took center stage and

demanded notice.

Her father mumbled over something he had just read and slammed the paper to the floor. He shook his head, cursed under his breath. "Why the hell would we go backwards?" he yelled out.

Her sister was knitting. The action of the needles seemed to calm her. Contentment nestled around her smile as if the storm weren't taking the roof off over them. Her pretty face was placid and untroubled. She whistled every now and then, adding to the drumrolls of Mother Nature's tantrum.

"What's that you got in your head?" Hannah asked her. "On Moonlight Bay?"

"Will you play it for me later?" Anne asked.

"You think you'll be hearing it over all this thunder?"

Anne laughed good-naturedly. Her laughter had a melody, like violins hitting a high note.

"Well, play loudly then, and I'll sing loudly," she called out, eager to be heard above the storm.

Hannah tried to smile, but she felt the tension in her expression, surprising her by its sudden appearance. *Would there be any singing in the convent?* She wondered. Hymns, of course, but certainly not ragtime. She hoped that God was not her destiny. She didn't want it, nor did she choose it. But that's just the way it was. There was God or there was man ... nothing in between but spinsterhood. Well, she would have gladly chosen spinsterhood, a future dimmed by lack of purpose, over a future dimmed by taciturnity and endless prayer.

"I don't think I will be happy as a nun, Papa," she said slowly, though she'd said it before, a hundred times before. She knew it would make no difference. Her father's mind was made. She hadn't the discretion to choose well, the good sense to choose a man with loyalty to Britain. What unearthly difference it made she could not begin to understand but it certainly proved her inability to make wise decisions, according to her papa.

"What's that?" John Reilly asked.

Hannah turned her head away." Nothing," she said.

Her sister continued to knit, but Hannah knew she was holding her breath. She felt her papa's gaze from across the room, felt the complexity of his thoughts. He had heard what she'd said, she knew it.

Hannah looked at the tip of her shoe, avoiding Papa's irksome stare. Perhaps she should have said it louder. Perhaps she should have shouted it. The gray Dublin sky gave way to a cannonade of thunderous drumrolls. Hannah felt a shiver right through to her bones. She saw her

life as one might see a dark cloud descending, swallowing the sun. She shivered again and pulled her shawl closer to her.

John Reilly dismissed what he might have wanted to say, which was rare for him; he always had a response to everything. Hannah knew he wanted to tell her that what she wanted didn't matter, wouldn't ever matter because how could she, a mere child of seventeen, know her own mind better than he? Hannah was used to it by now, her father thought for her, as if her mind wouldn't work without him. She was grateful that this one time he had kept his mouth shut.

"You're too independent, girl," he finally said. "Men don't like that. Not enough good men to go around anyway. Besides, doing God's work is a blessed thing. You should be proud. Happy too, that we've the money for the convent."

"I am not proud," she said. "Or happy."

Hannah knew that if a girl wasn't promised, she became a nun. That's what God wanted if no man had asked for her hand. And of course, God knew best. Her father must have had daily conversations with the good Lord to know his mind so well. But had God forgotten that a man had asked for her hand? Certainly, her father wished to forget. Andy McGregor, with his fine good looks and his golden curls that fell onto his freckled brow, like a perpetual urchin; he had asked for her hand. He'd been teasing her relentlessly since she'd been a girl, too young to realize then that his teasing was boyish flirtation. When it finally dawned on her that he thought she was pretty, she was quick to acknowledge the acceleration of her heart and the flush to her cheeks in his presence. His smile had won her over long ago when he'd stood on the tips of his toes to kiss her. Now it strained her neck to find his smile. But he could never cross the threshold of her father's door again, not with his Labor Party politics. Her father had strong British Unionism roots, and Andy was showing such poor judgment, wanting independence from Britain? How dare he join the Nationalist party and hand pamphlets out around the village that spoke of a return to Gaelic roots and Irish Independence? What absolute rubbish. "You will never marry Andy McGregor," her father had insisted. "He is a dangerous fool, and I will not have a viperous traitor in my family. I will not have us split apart by that man's absurd beliefs."

Hannah shuddered. "Shackled would be more like it," she said softly.

"What's that?" he asked.

"How I feel," she said.

"You'll make me proud, daughter," John Reilly nearly shouted. She knew he was angry with her, frustrated that she didn't bend to his will as

easily as he would have liked.

Hannah nodded in his direction. Acceptance now was all she had left. If she married Andy McGregor, he would not be proud? No, he would be ashamed and defensive and probably never speak to her again. And if she went against her father's wishes she would break his heart. Better her own should break.

"You don't like him because he's poor," she said.

She felt her sister's eyes on her. Her father slapped the table with the palm of his hand. "Yes, you want not only to marry a poor man, but a stupid one."

The kitchen shutter hit the window as torrents of rainwater obscured the view of Dublin's hills. They watched as lightning lit up the sky, leaving behind a tenebrous shadow, blurred further by her tears.

"You are entitled to believe what you will, Father," she said.

"I am more than entitled, I am deemed fit by the nature of being your father. I am wiser than you, I've lived longer."

"Is it His will or your will, Papa, that I give my life over to a God who has never asked me directly for anything? I've received no calling except the one in my own heart."

John Reilly did not answer. He picked the paper up and closed his eyes. "I see it as God's will," he said.

And I have no will? she thought to say but didn't.

"You girls best be putting on the soup now, it's nearing six."

She would say no more. If she didn't take it into her own hands it was to be her fate. She avoided her sister's glance, knowing sympathy was being offered, but it was not sympathy she needed, it was a bloody miracle.

Chapter Two

The very next day the sun appeared like a blessing, as if making amends for the storm of the prior night. Hannah was happy to be greeted by the sun and couldn't wait to feel the heat after such dampness. She nearly skipped to the Sweet Shop. Anne was following along as she always did. They'd been going there for years, for crumpets and hot cocoa. Hannah had a job, meager but respectable. She'd recently been hired by Mr. Smiley to teach his daughter to play piano. The back room had an upright, and Mr. Smiley insisted his daughter learn what to do with it.

“Another day looking for miracles,” Hannah whispered to Anne as she took her place at the piano bench and Mr. Smiley's daughter sat beside her. Hannah felt somewhat giddy, despite the gloom of the convent hanging over her. Smiley's Sweet Shop always smelled of peppermint and chocolate, and she was sure to get a handful of sweet creams at day's end.

“Today we're going to have some fun, my girl,” Hannah said. She was feeling rebellious, though God knows why; her rebellions were nothing but ripples in a mighty stream, never waves, or hurricanes.

Hannah winked at Anne, and the two smiled at each other, conspirators against the world but never with ill intent. They just had a way of knowing what the other was thinking, and Anne knew instinctively that Hannah was about to alter the agenda.

Hannah played ragtime often. Ragtime was her only real defiance. She loved it, though the older people held their ears. She played a few notes of “*Ragtime Land*,” and Mr. Smiley's daughter, Brianna, tapped her foot to the rhythm of it as if she'd been wound up.

“Can I play this, Hannah? I love it.” Brianna moved her shoulders to the tune and laughed.

Hannah smiled at Anne and motioned for her to close the door. “Well, your father is terribly busy today. I don't think he'll hear us, and if he does happen to hear us, we'll return to Chopin quick as a wink.”

“Rather not quickly enough, I'd say,” Anne said as she turned the lock.

“Listen to this and watch what I do. You can do it, too. It's not that hard.”

She played Anne's favorite, “*Moonlight Bay*.” Then she played all the songs that came to mind while poor Brianna tried to follow all the while saying, *oh, I love this*.

Andy tapped gently on the door, as he did each Tuesday and Thursday. Anne got up to let him in. He could never pick Hannah up at home anymore, not since he and Mr. Reilly had that horrible argument about Britain and the iron hand it had around Ireland.”

“Mr. Smiley thinks he's hearing things. Doesn't know what to make of it,” Andy said as he entered the room.

Hannah felt the blush to her cheeks, a blush he always seemed to elicit from her. “I'll tell him I'm playing Bach; his music is a bit crazy,” she said.

“Ay, I doubt he'll know the difference.” Andy smiled at Briana. “No offense, girl.”

“None taken, Mr. McGregor.”

Hannah caught Andy's gaze as he stood there smiling. Then he started whistling.

“If you don't mind ladies,” he said and he began to dance, extending his hand to Briana, who twirled around with him. No one danced to ragtime, it was near impossible, but Andy would attempt it. His brown boots hit the floor like paddles against the sea. Hannah was playing the “*Bacchanal Rag*,” a tune she'd learned from a player piano, and he was acting like he'd had too much to drink, comical in his effort to coordinate his steps. Briana gave up and fell to the bench, laughing hysterically. Andy finally slid to his knees before Hannah, breathing rapidly, with his hands outstretched. She swung around and tussled his hair.

“Don't be trying out for any dance choruses, not any time soon.” She bent to kiss his cheek. “Well, look at that, the hour has come and gone.”

“Come walking with me, darlin',” Andy said, breathless from his rollick. “I've never seen a finer day.” He turned to Anne. “Would you mind?”

Anne glanced his way and smiled coyly. “No, I don't mind, and I'm prepared to tell Papa that Hannah and I knitted after Brianna's lesson, knitted for hours. Hands still stiff from it.” She held her hands up. “That's what I'll tell him if you'll buy me a palmier with Irish cream.”

Andy reached in his pocket and put a sixpence in her hand. “I'll buy you two if you can convince him he's a damn fool.”

Anne and Hannah laughed together. “Ay, it's no use going to the

goat's house to look for wool," Anne said.



The sky had burst forth with a brilliant sun, growing hotter by the minute. It had settled the earth, made peace with it. It was like the bad weather of the prior day was suddenly vanishing and, in its wake, revealed the intoxication of pale blue skies. The heat had dried the dampness and had brought the scent of lavender to the surrounding countryside.

Hannah took Andy's hand, and they walked out toward the farms and the winding lanes of Boyne Valley. They were careful not to be seen. If word got back to John Reilly that his daughter was keeping company with a damn Irish Republican she'd be held under lock and key until the nuns took her.

"If it were up to me, we'd run off tomorrow," he said. "But we need just a bit more money to get to America. Can you stall your Papa a wee bit more?"

"He's got my bags packed for the convent; says I'll be leaving next week. He can't wait for God to take me."

"A week is not time enough for me to get the money together," he said.

"And how will I get out of it?" she asked. "He's so proud of me becoming a nun."

Determination settled in his expression like night falling. "I don't know, Hannah, but we'll find a way. I won't have you disappear from my life like that."

"I'll be coming back and forth; I won't be there all the time. At least not yet."

"I could be caught kissing a nun."

She giggled. "Oh, Andy McGregor, nuns only kiss the foot of Jesus."

He smiled. "We could elope."

She pushed him back. "You'll make me a widow in a week if we do that. Papa will surely come gunning for you."

"I say we go to America now then," he said. "If we wait, you'll be locked away for all time. There's nothing your father could do if we eloped to America." He kicked some dirt under his foot and frowned. "I hear they never let you go once you're promised to God. We've got to do whatever we can to prevent that. Not that I don't believe in those that want to worship our Lord but not you, Hannah. Pray, not you."

"I don't want to be promised to God," she said. "I want to be promised to you."

He looked at her sadly. "Can't you talk reason to your father?" he asked. "He's acting like the most pig-headed man I've ever known. If it will make him happy, I'll never talk politics again, well, at least not in his company."

"And will you be in support of British rule?"

"You know I cannot do that."

"We know how you feel. Our friends know how you feel as well, but can you not lie to my Father?"

"I suppose I could."

"He won't let me marry you because you believe in Irish Independence and he doesn't. Is that reasonable? He's the one who told me that I had the calling from God, is that reasonable? Now I ask you, why would God speak to him and not directly to me?"

"I should approach him and pretend to have changed my mind. After we're married, I won't care what I say."

"He'll speak with his fists if he doesn't believe you."

"We've got to try, Hannah. You're right. We've got to do something. I'll come tomorrow night. He won't throw me out, not if you tell him I've had a change of heart."

"I won't let him throw you out," she said. "But do you think it will make any difference?"

Andy shook his head. "I don't know. I'll tell him whatever he wants to hear. If he believes me then it will be worth it."

He pulled her into his arms. They had walked back to adjoining farms. For miles they had seen nothing but foxtail grass, blue-eyed and green. The land was covered in miles of thistle and butterwort. Only cows grazed peacefully across the hills, indifferent to everything but their own enjoyment of their effluvious field of flowers.

Andy smiled. "Before I saw that farmer there waving to us, I thought we were alone on earth."

"I wish we were," she said.

"Run away with me." He spun her around. "Let's just be done with it."

"My father will only hunt us down. I fear he'll put a bullet in you, or make sure you're spending time behind bars. We must get to America as soon as we can. It is the only place we'll be safe from my father and everybody else's wagging tongues. Besides, America is the best place to be, isn't it?"

"I'll get the money," he whispered as he kissed her mouth and she reached for him. "I'll get it or my name isn't Andy McGregor," he said. "Even if I have to steal it."

"You mustn't," she said, a bit startled.

“I won't,” he said, “but I will get it.”

“You do want to go to America, don't you, Andy?” she asked.

“Sure, I do, if it will bring us peace, sure I do.”

“I think it's the only way we can find peace.”

“Let's give it one more chance; let's be smart about it. Maybe we can put an end to all this talk of the convent. Tomorrow night I'll come by and I'll apologize to him, tell him I've changed my mind about the British. I'll lie like crazy. I'll do anything to keep you from the nuns. Then once we're married, I'll call him a backwards, cantankerous old fool.”

Together they laughed as the warm winds came up behind them, and she tripped backwards. He fell beside her. They were on a hilltop that rolled softly to the grass below, and they slipped down the hill together. She landed on his belly. Their laughter was loud, as if they'd never stop. But soon, their laughter faded, and he put his hands up under her blouse. She felt her skin warm to his touch. She held him tightly and looked around.

“Do we have an audience anywhere near us?”

“Just the birds,” he said. “They are singing loudly, rejoicing in our love.”

“Pretend they're marrying us, giving us vows, making us man and wife.”

Hannah spread her legs and lifted her skirt. She would have her lover the way she wanted him. She would have him completely. She would not be a virgin bride if God put a ring on her finger; that was for sure.

Chapter Three

Hannah knew she would feel differently after giving up the one thing that made her pure, and she did feel differently. She felt like a woman, no longer a virgin girl, but a woman who had given her body to the man she loved. It was an insatiable delirium, having him inside her, his sweet lips against her ear. He was like music entering her. She didn't think she would ever feel so alive again, not until the next time and the next and the next.

She wanted to tell Anne that it was like a great concerto, to have a man enter you, an answered prayer, two souls in sync. But she would not tell Anne, not yet. It was so sacred that it needed to be kept hidden. Besides, Anne was too young, just a girl. But perhaps she would know just because it must show. She feared her father would take one look at her, and he'd know she'd sinned. She would be a wanton woman in his eyes. But her father did not know anything, nor did her sister. When her Papa looked at her he saw only his virgin child, sweet, virgin child who would make him proud by marrying Christ, and not the man she loved, the flesh and blood man she loved.

Andy rapped upon the window. "Is it safe?" he whispered as she raised the window up, and he stood there glowing in the moonlight. "Have you told him?"

"Yes, yes, I have."

"What did he say?"

She bit her lip a bit. "He huffed."

"Huffed?"

"Well, he didn't really say anything except he'd welcome you if you were like-minded."

Andy nodded his head up and down slowly. "Okay," he said.

"Go to the door and enter like a proper gentleman."

"Look, look at the suit I wear just for you and dear Mr. McGregor."

Hannah laughed. "How smashin' you look," she said as she took him

in. His pale grey slacks had black lines going through to his cuffs, and his long coat was made of wool. The black bowtie he wore was perfectly tied around the collar of his pale-pink shirt.

“Thank you, my dear,” He stole a peck on her cheek. “May be the last time for that tonight.”

“I told him you had changed your ways, and you want to apologize for being such a fool.”

“And the words will stick in my throat, I'm sure.”

“What we do for love,” she said.



Mr. McGregor stood with his back to the fire. Anne sat with Kieran by her side. She stroked the dog's fur as she spoke.

“You look like such a proper gentleman tonight, Andy,” she said.

Andy extended his hand to Mr. McGregor as he entered the room. Hannah saw the skepticism in her father's expression.

“Evening to you, Sir,” Andy said.

“And to you, young man.” He gave Andy's outstretched hand a brief shake.

Hannah watched as the two sat in the living room, and she brought them beers while she and Anne remained in the smaller room. The fire made a lot of noise, and she could not hear the conversation between Andy and her father. She and Anne sat holding hands behind the door her father had closed.

“They seem to be getting on well,” Anne said.

Hannah didn't answer her; she was too frightened to speak. She wanted to send hidden signals to her Papa so that he would know what was in her heart and that the only thing on earth that would make her happy would be her wedding to Andy McGregor.

“He must care what it is I want,” she said.

“Oh, I'm sure he does,” Anne said.

Hannah got up and put her ear to the door, “My God, I think they're laughing,” she said and smiled.

A moment later Anne sat upright, “Oh, and what was that?”

Hannah got up and put her ear to the door again. “Perhaps I should enter, I think one of them has spilled his beer on the floor.”

“By all means,” Anne said.

Hannah returned with a pained expression. “Will you get the dustpan, Anne, one of them has broken a glass.”

Anne got up quickly and hurried in. “I'm sure it's fine,” she said.

Hannah began to rub her hands together because she didn't know

what else to do. Finally, Anne appeared with the broom and dustpan.

“Will you get Father another beer? It was him that spilled it on the floor.”

Hannah had an uneasy feeling. As she entered the room with her father's beer, she noticed that both their cheeks were flushed.

“Everything is all right now?” Anne asked as Hannah returned.

But Hannah didn't answer; she sat before the parlor listening as their voices rose. Anne looked at her doubtfully.

“Glory be to God but they seem to be shouting.”

Andy's face was flushed with rage as he emerged with his fist clenched. He stared at Hannah with the most pained expression she'd ever seen. He shook his head.

“I'm sorry, but I can't agree with him, or listen to another word out of his mouth.”

She watched him leave and looked back at her father. He was standing; his face seemed lit up, it was so bright.

“I'll not have him in my house again,” he shouted. “He is a traitor.”