

Chapter 21

Hannah grabbed her shawl and the key to her shop. She needed to find Alice. When Alice told her that Holace had finally proposed, she'd lashed out at her this morning. Alice had left upset, and Hannah needed to apologize.

Last night, Hannah had tossed and turned. Her bed looked like a cat and dog fight. Then this morning she couldn't stomach any food and had only a cup of tea which she didn't finish. Alice hadn't deserved the tongue lashing she had given her on the uselessness of men. There was only one man in particular that she found utterly impossible. She swung on her shawl and headed for the door.

Before she got halfway across the shop, Holace Bourne stormed in like a rabid grizzly bear. He jabbed one thick finger in the air. "Never thought you would let your bitterness hurt some one you claim to care about."

"Holace, I kno-"

"Alice is weeping all over the place and threatening to call off the wedding!"

Oh no! Her temper had certainly gotten the better of her.

"You had no right to come between us." Holace's face was red and his voice loud. "Just because you're unhappy doesn't mean you have to make everyone around you miserable!" He took a breath to continue.

He was correct, and she would fix it.

Another male voice spoke, equally as angry. "You can't speak to her that way!"

Holace swung around to face Mr. Coughlin.

She glared at Gerrit. "What are *you* doing here?"

Gerrit stepped between her and Holace. "I think you owe Miss McConnell an apology."

"I would sooner kiss a hog!"

"I could arrange that!"

Hannah took a deep breath and exhaled. Would it do any good to talk to these two while they're locking horns? She turned and walked out, hoping they wouldn't get into a fight and ruin her shop. She walked straight to Alice's house.

Alice sat on a lawn swing Holace had made for her. Hannah sat in the seat opposite her. Alice sniffled. "Alice, I'm so sorry for upsetting you. I'm just ill-tempered today. Will you forgive me for my abominable behavior?"

Alice nodded.

"Now, what's this about you calling off the wedding?"

"The things you said kind of made sense." Alice dabbed her eyes with a wadded up handkerchief.

"No they didn't."

"I'm not sure if I should get married."

"Of course you should. You love Holace, don't you?"

"Yes, I think so - or at least I thought I did."

"Holace is a good man and will treat you well." Both women turned and saw Holace, hat in hand, standing in the yard a few feet away.

Hannah stood. “I’ll see you in the shop tomorrow, and we can start designing your wedding dress.”

Alice bobbed her head and gave her an appreciative smile.

As Hannah passed Holace, she said, “I didn’t mean to cause all this trouble.”

Holace gave her a tentative smile. “Thank you.”

Hannah nodded and returned his smile, then left them alone. At least that was one thing she could fix. Other problems in her life weren’t so easy.

Chapter 22

At the sight of Hannah returning, relief settled on Gerrit like a warm blanket in the winter. When Holace had stormed out, he wasn't sure if he should follow him or not. "I didn't want to leave your shop open with no one to attend it."

"I'm here now." She swung off her shawl and set it aside.

Her words were a dismissal, but he wasn't ready to leave just yet. "He shouldn't have spoken to you that way."

"It's none of your business." She perched her fists on her hips.

"But he--"

"It's all taken care of. Good-day, Mr. Coughlin!"

He clenched his teeth. "I was only trying to help."

"I never asked for your help."

His hands clenched. "You are the most obstinate, opinionated woman--"

Hannah held her head high. "Many women hold very strong opinions about a lot of things but choose not to say anything."

"So why don't you?"

Hannah set her jaw and thinned her lips then walked toward the door.

He caught her by the arm and turned her around. "No words of wisdom?"

“Let go of me!”

“Not until you answer my question.”

She jerked her arm but his grip held. “What question?”

“Why don’t you keep your opinions to yourself like other ladies?” He really didn’t care if she held her tongue. He didn’t have to guess what she was thinking that way. And he wanted to keep her talking to him.

“I didn’t realize that was a question. I thought it was the polite Coughlin way to tell me to be silent.”

“I would never do that.”

“Isn’t that what Coughlins do,” she glanced at her arm in his grasp, “control people?”

He released her. “No, we don’t. And I’ll have you know that my parents weren’t trying to take away the Wilsons’ home or anyone else’s home. They were trying to fulfill a promise they made to your mother to help those less fortunate. They will build better housing for the people who live down on the river whether you like it or not. Just because you protested didn’t mean my father backed down, he has made all the plans. He was trying to include you in it. Once they are built you will see for yourself that my parents aren’t the evil overlords you have made them out to be.”

“Good day, Mr. *Coughlin*.” She yanked the door open and held it.

He growled. She was the most infuriating woman he had ever met . . . and the most intriguing. “Can’t we at least talk about this?”

“You have nothing to say that I want to hear.”

“I think I do.”

“I don’t want to hear another lie from you. Now, please leave.”

“Very well, I’ll show you.” Gerrit swiftly cupped her face in his hands and kissed her.

Hannah shoved him away and drew back her hand. The smack was loud but the sting to his cheek was greater. He thought to surprise her and didn’t expect her to react so fast. The slap didn’t hurt nearly as much as the menacing look in her eyes.

“Get out!”

Should he play stubborn too? Nothing came to mind, so he turned toward the door. He stopped at the threshold, hoping it wouldn’t be the last time he crossed it. He needed guidance from the Lord and his parents’ counsel.