

Chapter 3

Hannah climbed the porch steps of the little yellow house. One of the original houses in town, a cottage really. She knocked on the door. Tiny had lost everyone in her life; all those who had come before her as well as those who were supposed to out live her. And yet, with all her losses, she still praised God even in their deaths. Hannah struggled to praise God in her own losses, but she did and always felt better, an inner peace. When Tiny opened the door, Hannah wrapped her arms around the petite old woman. No one knew just how old Tiny was. She had been old when Hannah was little. People guessed her to be around eighty.

“Dear child, it’s so good to see you. Have a seat.” Tiny waved a hand toward the table. “Supper is all ready.” She shuffled over to the stove where three bowls draped with towels sat warming on the stove.

Hannah followed her over and tried to take the biggest of the three bowls from Tiny’s hands. “Let me help you with that.”

Tiny kept her grip on the bowl. “I’m perfectly capable. I’m not ready just yet to be put under. You are my guest, and I’ll be serving you. Now sit yourself down. I’ll only be a minute.”

Hannah knew better than to argue with Tiny and sat down at the small, wooden table in the kitchen.

Tiny set the first bowl on the table and removed the warming towel she had draped over the fried chicken in it. “When I can’t do for myself no more, people will be digging a hole in the ground to put me in.” She went back to the stove. “They probably have it half dug already. But I’m not ready to meet the Almighty just yet. And He’s not ready for me.” She brought over the other two covered bowls and eased herself slowly into the chair. “I feel He’s got more for me to do in this life before He takes me to the next. Shall we ask the Lord’s blessing on this bounty?”

Hannah smiled as she bowed her head. Tiny’s crackly voice was deceptively strong for how frail she looked.

Hannah added a silent blessing for Mr. Finnley. Tiny took off the warming towels from the biscuits and stewed tomatoes. Hannah placed her napkin on her lap and dished herself a piece of fried chicken, stewed tomatoes, and took a biscuit. “Sophie, came by today with her new doll.”

“Well, it’s about time. I was beginning to wonder if something had happened to it. Did she like it? Of course she liked it.”

She recalled the girl’s face when Mr. Finnley called her lovely. That had done more good than the doll ever could. “She was disheartened that it was send without a body or clothing.”

“You can fix that right up for her. I’d do it myself but then she’d know it came from me, and my eyesight isn’t what it used to be.”

Not the Hannah wished poor eyesight on the aging woman, but Hannah really wanted to do this for Sophie. She had planned a nightgown, a walking suit, and a fancy lavender dress. “I promised her a body and at least one dress.” And as she had fabric scraps, she could make more dresses for the girl’s doll.

“Iona is a proud woman who doesn’t want to be a burden to anyone.”

“Like you?”

Her lips curved up in an impish smile. “Maybe that’s why I like her so well. But the Lord has put her and her sweet little ones on my heart daily. I’m just not sure what He wants me to do for them besides pray.”

“The Lord will guide you.” She broke her biscuit in half and took a dollop of butter. She wished she hadn’t had plans to come here tonight. She would have like to have accepted Mr. Finnley’s invitation. Would he ask her again? “Duncan’s nephew is in town.”

“Is he now? So is the bookstore open?”

“I don’t think he has any plans to ever open for business. He wants to sell the store and return east.” She truly hoped he changed his mind.

Tiny caught her gaze. “And you don’t want him to leave?”

“Of course not. Duncan wanted his nephew to have his store. If he wanted it to go to a stranger, he would have done so himself.” He just couldn’t sell it. It would be like losing Duncan all over again.

“And what about you?”

Hannah shook her head. “Me?”

“You know what I mean, child. You want him to stay for you.”

Hannah ducked her head and spread her butter on her biscuit.

“Is he very handsome?” Tiny prodded.

She couldn’t confess that she noticed such a thing on a first meeting! “He looks a lot like Duncan.”

“Ahh. Then you best smile pretty at him for he will have every young lady in town fluttering about him.”

Her eyes widened, and she looked up aghast at Tiny’s forwardness.

Tiny waved a hand at her. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m too old to waste time with all the social formalities, proper manners, and propriety. I know you have considered him long before now with Finn talking him up to you all the time. Do you not believe you are the reason Finn chose his nephew to inherit his store so he would have to come out here and you two could finally meet? Finn could have easily left his store to you or his sister.”

She didn’t want to talk about the possibility that Duncan was playing matchmaker, even after his death. Didn’t even want to think about it. “But he already left me my shop. How would I run them both?”

“Trust me when I tell you Finn was playing matchmaker for you. He always looked after you.”

Hannah’s cheeks warmed. Now she wished she really hadn’t come.

“I see that you have considered Finn’s nephew. Tell me all about him.”

“Tiny, I really don’t think—”

“Nonsense. I’m an old woman who doesn’t have much to entertain me these days. I remember what it was like to be young and in love.”

Hannah sucked in a breath. Love? “I’ve barely met the man.”

“But you like him?”

“Well . . . he seemed nice enough.” She did like him but wasn’t going to come right out and say so on the day she’d finally met the man she’d heard so much about.

Tiny’s eyes twinkled. “Did he like you?”

She hoped so. “How would I know that?”

“Did he look into your eyes? Did he smile at you?”

He had. More than once, but she wasn't going to tell Tiny that. It would only encourage the old woman.

"Ah, I see that he did."

Hannah widened her eyes. "How?"

"Your blush is a becoming shade of pink."

Hannah instinctually put her hands to her cheeks. They were warm.

"Did he talk with you long?"

She had to discourage Tiny. "No, not long." Hopefully that would end this conversation.

"But it was more than a passing good-day?"

"Well, yes but . . ."

"Did he ask to see you again?"

She tried to sound gruff to get Tiny to stop, but the smile she couldn't stop from stretching her mouth made her words come out as a half giggle. "I don't think that's anyone's business but my own."

Tiny smiled and her aged eyes twinkled more. "The pink in your cheeks has spread to the rest of your face. You said yes, didn't you?"

How did one keep from blushing? Was it even possible? "No."

Tiny's smile slackened. "Why not, child?"

"I had other plans."

Tiny narrowed her eyes. "To come sit with an old woman? Next time you say yes. I'll understand." She patted Hannah's hand.

"I couldn't do that to you. I enjoy our visits."

“Then you bring him with you the next time. I want to meet him. I expect a report on how things are going with you and our newest resident.”

Why was she even trying to resist this woman? Tiny was tenacious. More tenacious than a crusty miner the size of a bear.

Supper dragged on with Tiny asking for details of young Mr. Finnley. When it was finally over, Tiny transferred the leftover Chicken and biscuits into a rectangular cake pan and covered it with a towel.

“Mercy, there’s still a passel of food. I’d hate to see it go to waste. Do you think you could drop it off at Iona’s on your way home? Tell her if they can’t use it to toss it out.”

This wasn’t the first time Tiny had *accidentally* made too much food. And Hannah knew the old woman chose the nights she came to supper to cook an abundance so Hannah could drop it off on her way home. For all her boasting, Tiny knew her limitations and carrying enough food to satisfy the Wilson boys was beyond her abilities anymore. She may not be as spry as she once was but that wasn’t going to stop her from finding a way to help people in need. And Hannah would take any excuse to scoot out of there earlier than usual.

Chapter 4

Hannah stepped out into the cool night air with the rectangular cake pan heaped with food. In a cloth bag hanging from her elbow were two carefully wrapped jars of canned stewed tomatoes.

Hannah hadn't gotten more than half a block of the nearly three blocks it was to Iona's place when Mr. Finnley happened upon her.

"Let me take that for you." He relieved her of the pan of chicken and biscuits.

Her arms were grateful to be free of the load and her heart was grateful for his company. Tiny had obviously cooked more than usual for the Wilsons. But then the boys were growing bigger all the time and eating more and more. "Thank you, Mr. Finnley. Your help is much appreciated."

He sighed and shook his head. "If I could only get you to call me Gerrit, I know my apology would be accepted."

"I wasn't aware you had done anything that warranted an apology and certainly not from me."

"It's a matter of trust, *Miss McConnell*."

"I trust you, Mr. Finnley." After all he was Duncan's nephew.

A muscle worked in his jaw at his name, but he didn't press the matter. "It was I who failed to trust you. I found it hard to believe that a beautiful young woman such as yourself wasn't off to meet her beau."

Was he jealous? Something deep inside her smiled at that thought. "But I told you where I was going."

"Yes, you did. And because I found it incredible, I must beg your forgiveness, I asked about this *Tiny* you were going to see."

He was checking up on her? It sounded like something Duncan would have done. "There is really nothing to forgive, but it is yours if you need it."

"I shall never doubt your word again." He lifted the pan a little. "I smell fried chicken. Since this appears to be more food than one person could possibly eat, I can only assume it is to be delivered somewhere around here."

"Tiny asked me to take the leftovers from supper over to the Wilsons'."

The boys who came over to clean behind your shop?"

She nodded.

"I'm sorry that I missed them. This will give me a chance to hire them to do some work for me."

"Thank you for doing that. They can really use every penny any of them can earn. But don't make it seem like charity."

"It's no charity. I'll work those boys good. Uncle Duncan left the storeroom a mess. There is plenty of work to be done."

Iona's protesting lasted only until she saw the hungry looks in her children's eyes. Gerrit hired the two oldest boys for the next day.

She bid Iona good evening, and she and Gerrit left.

Once they were out on the street, Gerrit said, "If you are heading home, may I have the honor of escorting you? And if you are not, may I also have the honor of escorting you to your destination?"

She looked up at him sideways. "Are you checking up on me again?"

He shrugged. "I like your company."

"I am headed home and would enjoy your company as well." Hannah pulled her shawl up around her shoulders. The night air was chilly, but she didn't feel cold with Gerrit next to her. They walked in amiable silence.

He cleared his throat. "I saw Mr. and Mrs. Coughlin this evening. Beau and Eleanor seem like nice people."

She walked a little further away from him and readjusted her shawl. She didn't really change anything, just fussed with it. "Well appearances can be deceiving."

"Why do you dislike the Coughlins so?" His voice was soft and smooth as new honey.

"They stole my father's dream," she said more curtly than she ought.

"I can't imagine how one person could steal another's dream."

They came to McConnell Avenue. She stopped and looked up to the end of the street. Sitting large on the hill illuminated by gaslights the Majestic Resort. If her father'd had a chance to build it, he would still be alive. "That was my father's dream. As long as I can remember he had drawings of the place he wanted to build. The drawings looked exactly like that. They didn't even have the decency to choose another name." She stepped off the boardwalk and crossed McConnell Avenue.

Mr. Finnley caught up to her. "Look now, I've spoiled your good mood."

“I just feel that if it weren’t for me being here, the Coughlins and others would wipe my father’s good name from this town.” She waved a hand in the air over the quiet town. Well, it used to be quiet before her father died and the saloons were built.

“I wish I hadn’t brought them up.” Real regret in his voice. He drew a fake sword and pointed it down the street. “I’ll storm the castle and break the evil spell.”

Her mouth pulled into a wide smile. She stepped around in front of him and pointed to the resort behind him. “The castle is that way.”

“Ahh!” He spun around and feigned fear. “I-It’s so...so large, m’lady.” He turned to her when she giggled. “That’s better.”

Just as Duncan would have, or used to try to cheer her up. She stepped up onto the boardwalk on the opposite side of the street. Mr. Finnley matched her pace and stopped in front of her shop. She took her key from her handbag and placed it in Mr. Finnley’s outstretched hand. He opened her door and handed back the key.

“You aren’t really going to leave Faithful before it has a chance to work its magic on you?”

He studied her a moment. “Maybe it already is.”

“Good.” She smiled to herself. Faithful needed more fine men like him. She stepped past him and turned on the threshold. She kept expecting his eyes to be blue-gray like Duncan’s not a warm, inviting brown. “Thank you for escorting me, Mr. Finnley.”

Mr. Finnley shook his head. “When are you going to drop that silly formality? I would much prefer you call me Gerrit. All my friends do. And I’d like to think of you as my friend.”

“Calling a stranger by his first name the very day you meet him?” She felt as though she had known him much longer. “Even though you are Duncan’s nephew, I hardly think it appropriate.”

“You were close to my uncle?”

“Very. He was like family.” He was all she had after both her parents died.

“And I’m his family, so that makes us almost family.” His genial smile pulled at her heartstrings.

But he wasn’t and of that she was glad.

He furrowed his brow. “Is there nothing I can say to convince you to call me Gerrit?”

“Maybe tomorrow.” She eased the door shut and turned the lock. “Yes, Gerrit, maybe tomorrow.”