

## Chapter 9

Hannah had sent Alice home at noon and locked up her shop. She had a regular mission to complete. She had felt better these last few days after being in Duncan's store again and able to mourn there. Gerrit had been so sweet in comforting her. She sensed he was afraid she would start crying every time they met now. There was something about being in the bookstore with all of Duncan's belongings around her that helped her come to terms with his death.

She crossed McConnell Avenue and headed down Jack street. Few people knew anymore that it was named after her father. Most only knew him as Sam McConnell. Her father had laid out straight north-south and east-west streets and named them after his good friends. No crooked deer trails to follow in his town.

Gerrit had stopped by earlier but she didn't expect to see him again until supper time. He had only been in town a week and already had a knack for knocking on her kitchen door just as her supper was ready. Four times they had shared supper, and she was glad for the company. Meals had been lonely since Duncan passed away, and she still couldn't seem to cook for only herself. No matter how hard she tried there was always more than enough food for two. She had become much more familiar with Mr. Finnley than she ever imagined possible in such a short time.

As she crossed Duncan Avenue, a sadness filled her that this street was all people would have to remember him by. And all too soon there wouldn't even be that. Just a street name with no meaning.

Hannah looked up Duncan Avenue and saw Gerrit striding the opposite direction on the other side of the street. "Mr. Finnley!" His head came up, and she waved to get his attention.

He smiled back and crossed the street to her. "This is a lovely day to be out."

"It is a lovely day for a walk. But I didn't mean to impose on you. You looked to be heading somewhere important."

He shook his head. "Nothing pressing. I would love to join you for a walk."

"Far be it from me to stop you from walking wherever you want."

He furrowed his brow much like Duncan used to do. "You won't stop me, but am I welcome?"

She knew she was being difficult with him but he had played along. "I am heading out of town and up that hill. You are most welcome to join me." Did she want company where she was going? She could have easily let him walk on by, but she had called out to him.

At the edge of town stood a wooden bridge barely wide enough for a single wagon, worn and in need of repair. She knew all its vulnerabilities and guided Gerrit safely across.

"You've been up here before."

"A few times." She still wasn't sure if she wanted company. The only other person who had been up here since her parents had died was Duncan.

"What will you do when that rickety bridge gives out?"

"I'll wade across."

Gerrit laughed. "I can actually picture that."

She liked his laugh. It was warm and full. She stepped off the dirt trail that had once been a rutted wagon road and picked three black-eyed Susans. “Or maybe I’ll sprout wings and fly.”

“Like an angel. I can see you as an angel.”

“More like a hawk, keeping watch.” She picked a group of purple mountain harebell and a yellow baby snap dragon.

“Guarding your town from evil doers.” Gerrit handed her a black-eyed Susan.

She stared at it a moment. Duncan had never picked flowers with her. “My father’s town. There wasn’t a saloon in town until after his death. He wouldn’t allow them. Now they are like a disease.”

He plucked some baby snap dragons and another black-eyed Susan for her.

She laid them in the crook of her arm separate from the flowers she picked. “I was too young to understand and by the time I did understand, it was too late. But I have kept more from marring our town.”

“Is there something wrong with the flowers I picked?” He pointed to her two separate bundles, one in her hand away from the bouquet in her arm.

She fingered the ones she picked. “These have a special purpose. Yours I’ll put in a glass of water on my kitchen table.” She saw a smile tug at his full lips.

By the time they reached the end of the dirt trail where a small log cabin stood, the bouquet of flowers from Gerrit exceeded her own. Nearby more than a dozen boards crossed over the yawning opening of the Faithful mine. Mother had made sure that no one could enter the mine and get hurt or killed again . . . especially Hannah. “Papa,” she whispered to herself.

She turned to her first home. The split logs of the cabin stood vertically between the ground and the roof. As she stepped onto the creaky wooden stoop, Gerrit said, “You aren’t going in there?”

“Of course.”

“Is it safe?”

“I was born in this cabin. It’s safe.” She stepped inside the dim interior. Nothing had changed since the last time she was here. Not much had changed since they moved out and down into town when she was small. Though her father had still spent a considerable amount of time up here scraping the earth out for the gold he was sure was hiding. The gold that would help him build his resort hotel and get him out of the hole in the ground. All that remained in the cabin was a broken chair her mother used to sit in by the window to sew, a potbelly stove her mother managed to cook on, and the tattered mattress of her parents’ bed.

Gerrit followed her in. “How long did you live here?”

She could feel his presence behind her. “I was four when Father finally got our house in town finished. He was proud to say he built it all himself. After my father died, Mother and I moved into the shop next to Duncan and began making dresses and ladies hats. My mother taught me everything she knew about fabrics and millinery. My mother could figure out how to make something just by looking at it. She would fuss over it until she got it right.”

“Your mother taught you well. After seeing your work in your shop, I can’t say I’ve seen any finer work back east.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.” She turned and left the cabin. Kneeling beside her mother’s gravestone next to the mine entrance, she set Gerrit’s flowers next to her and divided her flowers. One bundle she placed against the stone. She couldn’t talk openly to her mother or

the Lord as she normally did, but they both knew what was in her heart. Gerrit was probably worried she would start crying again. She had already shed these tears. She took the other bundle to the mine entrance.

“Hannah, please don’t go in there.”

“I won’t.” She placed the flowers at the foot of the cross by the opening. She was surprised that the cross was upright. So often it was laying on the ground. Duncan had tried over and over to get it to stay in the ground, to no avail.

She turned to Gerrit. “My father’s still in there.”

“Cave-in?”

She nodded. “When a second cave-in trapped two other men, Mother put a stop to the search. They rescued those two men. Mother said it didn’t matter where my father’s body was because his soul was up in heaven with Jesus.”

“Did your father pull a lot of gold out of here?”

“Not really, but he always believed it was there and he would find it if he persevered. He believed the Lord had directed him to this very spot.” Long after there was any hope of her father still being alive, she would sit at the entrance expecting him to emerge and tell her how he was going to build her a *castle* on the hill and she would be the resident princess. She hadn’t cared about the *castle*. What it meant to her was her father could stop working in the ground and do all the things he promised to do with her . . . *once the mine came in*.

“Come this way. I want to show you a beautiful view.” She walked around the mine and up the hill above it. She turned to wait for Gerrit but he was right there behind her. “Oh!”

He smiled down at her. “Very beautiful.”

She couldn't keep her mouth from twisting upward, but she tried. "Are you being fresh with me?"

"I like to think of it as candid."

Her heart fluttered at his open attention. "Turn round." Faithful spread out before them.

He let out a long whistle. "This is some view of the town. I knew McConnell and some of the other streets were laid out straight but each block looks to be the same size."

"To the foot. He didn't want any haphazard town. And all the businesses are of stone or brick. Once he got his town built he wasn't going to have it consumed by fire." She stepped back and sat on the boulder she had so many times.

Gerrit joined her. "What about the wooden houses?"

"He encouraged people to build with brick but couldn't stop them from using wood on their own homes."

"What about your little cabin? It's wood." He pointed to the shack below.

"It was only temporary."

She stood and walked across the hillside. "We were supposed to live in the Majestic. He was going to build it as soon as his mine came in. We would sit up here sometimes, and he would describe the lawns and the decorations."

Gerrit followed her with his hands clasped behind his back. "But he didn't build it and someone else did."

"The Coughlins swooped in here," she made a motion like a diving bird, "and had it built in three months! They were just waiting to pounce. I won't let them take over the whole town. It's like the saloons, you have to stand up to them to stop them."

“But with your father gone it never would have gotten built. So in a sense they fulfilled your father’s dream.”

“It was his dream. They had no right to build it!” She picked up a piece of rose quartz and rubbed it between her fingers. “They stole his dream from us, and it killed my mother to see someone else build it. It would have been better if it had not been built at all!” She tossed the rock aside.

“If it causes you such pain, why do you stay in Faithful?”

“My father’s dream was more than a resort. It was the whole town, a community working as one. Where separation of classes didn’t exist and people like Iona Wilson didn’t have to worry if there was going to be food on her table or if her children would go to bed hungry once again.”

“It sounds like your father was a bit idealistic.”

“Maybe he was but the Amish people do it. Do you know my father gave away most of his land to get people to come? He gave it to people who had nothing, offering them a better life.”

“You must get your big heart from him.”

“He didn’t have much growing up. He wanted to build a community where people weren’t looked down on for not having as much as their neighbor. Where people took care of one another.”

“I guess I don’t see how a resort fits in to equality for all. It would seem like your father would sit higher than them all.”

“He could have done so much good for the less fortunate with the money he made from tourists coming to spend their money. Three years ago, the Coughlins wanted to tear down that section of ramshackle housing along the river where Iona lives. If I hadn’t stepped in, Iona and

the others like her wouldn't have a roof over their heads. And that wasn't the first time they tried something like that.

"You asked why I stay. I stay for my father's idealistic dream and the people he wanted to help. With him gone I'm the only one left to keep his vision alive. And Duncan was here." It was so hard for other people to truly understand what her father had been trying to do. But Gerrit was attentive, and she believed he was trying his best to understand.

As soon as the sun dipped behind the mountains, Gerrit headed her back into town. "I have kept you longer than you expected. Let me take you to supper on Hannah Street."

He had kept her, but she enjoyed sharing her father's dream with him. "I would appreciate a good meal, and it's been a long while since I've seen Bert and Naomi."

They walked up to Hannah street and entered the crowded dining room. They would have a wait.

She suddenly looked at her empty hands. "I forgot your flowers." If she went quickly, she could probably return before they got seated.

With a hand on her arm, Gerrit stopped her. "I'll pick you more."

A waitress came out of the swinging door from the kitchen, and Hannah caught a glimpse of Bert. He saw her too and a moment later he pushed through the swinging door.

"Miss Hannah it has been too long. I am so sorry about Duncan." Bert wrapped his thick, beefy arms around her and squeezed her like a bear. "I was afraid you would not come back by yourself, but I see you have found yourself another Duncan."

"Almost. This is Duncan's nephew Mr. Gerrit Finnley." She turned to Gerrit. "This is Mr. Bert Bancroft."

"Bertram!" A female voice hollered from the kitchen.

“The missus calls. She cannot do without me.” He winked “I will see you get seated next.”

“You don’t have to do that. We’ll wait.”

“Nonsense. If I really want to be in trouble, I tell the missus I made you wait.” He scooted back into the kitchen.

“I’m happy to see I was wrong.”

She looked up at Gerrit. “About what?”

“I wasn’t sure if you knew how to say my first name.”

She swatted him lightly on the arm, and he smiled.

The door to the kitchen hardly swung closed when Naomi pushed through. She was a foot shorter than her husband and not much bigger than a sapling topped with a brown and gray bun. Hannah had to bend over to return Naomi’s hug. “You have been away too long.”

“I know.”

A waitress walked near them, and Naomi stopped her. “Sissy, clear that table over by the window. We have special guests to seat.”

“That table is much too big for the two of us. We will be quite comfortable at that one.”

She pointed to a vacant table in the back corner.

“That one is no good. It is small and dark. Bert and I use it when we are not too busy. This other is our best table.”

“You are busy and should save it for someone you will charge full price to.”

“I not charge you full price but I do him.” Naomi tipped her head toward Gerrit and winked.

“I doubt that. This is Duncan’s nephew.”

“I can see that. He looks just like him except for his eyes.” She looked up at him as a mother would her grown son. “Finn was a very good man, and we all miss him. He was a dear, dear man. We are sorry for your loss.” After tapping Gerrit on the chest, Naomi turned back to Hannah and sighed. “Very well. You are as stubborn as your parents. I will seat you at the no good table.”

Gerrit held her chair for her then seated himself.

“If another table comes open I will move you.”

Hannah touched Naomi’s arm. “I’m comfortable here. You better help Bert in the kitchen. I don’t want burned food.”

Naomi put her hands to her cheeks. “Who knows what he has done to my kitchen already. He is always trying to make up new foods. I still don’t know that hiring two other cooks was very good. He has more time to play with food in there. Why he does not stay behind the desk or take the money . . .?” She traipsed off to the kitchen, shaking her head.

“They’re a sweet old couple.”

“I can see that. And they care a great deal for you.”

The meal was pleasant and, Naomi wouldn’t let Gerrit pay for anything. The temperature had dropped since sunset. Hannah hadn’t expected to be out at this time of night and so she hadn’t brought her shawl. She grabbed her arms to try to warm herself. Gerrit quickly swung out of his coat and draped it about her shoulders. She poked her arms through the sleeves. His warmth wrapped around her. “Thank you.”

“It’s the least I can do after occupying all your time.”

“I rather enjoyed today.” She had very much enjoyed his company. It was the first time since Duncan’s passing, she hadn’t felt lonely. She would miss Gerrit too much if he left.

She had to find a way to get him to stay.

## Chapter 10

Gazing around the bookstore, Gerrit knew he was too wound up to go to bed after escorting Hannah safely home, and it was too early for him to settle for the night. Hannah had shared something special with him today, something intimate. He sensed she didn't take many people up to her parents' resting place . . . if any. That was not lost on him. The mine and cabin had meant something to him today as it hadn't when he'd stolen up here by himself.

He strode to the back to do a little straightening up. He had gone through a considerable amount of Uncle Duncan's papers, dividing them into personal and business. He still had much to do. His uncle didn't keep very good business records, and Gerrit would have to inventory all the books before he felt comfortable selling this mess. Then again he could just sell it and it would become someone else's mess.

He picked up an apple crate with personal papers in it and moved it upstairs with other personal belongings. On top in the box was a bundle of letters from his mother. He pulled them out and slipped them into his trousers pocket. He would give them back to her. He went back downstairs and moved several more boxes, had a quick bite to eat, and headed up to bed to read awhile.

As he was getting ready, he pulled the letters from his pocket to set them on the bureau. His mother had written Uncle Duncan often enough. What had she written to her brother? He pulled a letter from the packet and read.

*My Dearest Brother Duncan,*

*I have missed you terribly and do so look forward to seeing you again. It has been too many years. You have written so many time on the beauty of your Colorado, I am anxious to see it. We shall only be bringing Landon with us. As you know, Penelope is attending college to be a doctor. It is difficult being a woman doctor, especially in the east. Maybe she will come west and settle in Colorado.*

And she had.

*Gerrit has one more year of schooling and doesn't want to leave his friends, so he will stay here with friends to finish. I hope with all my heart he comes out after he finishes school, but my heart says he will not.*

He had disappointed his mother on that one. He liked it back east and didn't know if he could settle out here and be as content as in Massachusetts. He was sure his mother understood, but he would make it a point to visit more often. He turned his attention back to the letter.

*I have saved the best for last. Charlotte has married. When we announced we would be moving, her young beau got nervous and had a long talk with her father. His name is Hugh Thompson. He is a nice young man and will be a good husband for her. I have hinted on more than one occasion that Colorado would be a nice place to raise a family. I do so hope they will*

*move out west. It was a beautiful wedding. I cried tears of joy for my baby who has grown into a lovely young woman.*

*Speaking of weddings, shall I make plans for attending yours? Irene is such a lovely woman. I always thought the two of you would make the most wonderful couple.*

What! Uncle Duncan and Irene McConnell?

*It has been a long time in coming. Maybe you have a second chance now.*

He lowered the letter without reading the rest. Uncle Duncan and Hannah's mother? He tapped the letter on his finger tips, then folded it and headed out the door. His mother would have answers for him.

After a brisk ten minute walk, Gerrit entered his parents' living room. "Good, Mother, you're still up."

His mother sat stretched out on a chaise lounge near the fireplace. "And good-evening to you, too."

He crossed over to her and kissed her fire warmed cheek. "Good-evening, Mother. Pardon my rudeness."

"Of course. You're up late. It's after ten. What are you doing skulking about town?"

He pulled his eyebrows down. "Skulking? A visit to ones mother is hardly skulking. And I guess I learned from you and Father the service of staying up to all hours. Where is Father anyway?"

"You know," her hand fluttered in the air, "prowling about doing work, finding some little annoyance to fuss about. The only difference between he and I is I've learned the benefits of

sleeping in. He wakes at the crack of dawn like a rooster was crowing in his head then is cranky as a newborn needing to be fed.”

“He works too hard.”

His mother nodded her consent. “So what brings you *skulking* about at this hour?”

He pulled his eyebrows in again but let the comment go. “How long was Uncle Duncan in love with Irene McConnell?”

His mother arched her perfectly curved eyebrows.

He ducked his head slightly. “I’m sorry, Mother. I came across some old letters you wrote him. I only read part of one.” He pulled them from his pocket and handed them to her.

Tears sprang to his mother’s eyes as she ran a delicate hand over the stack of envelopes. “I miss him dearly.”

He went over to her and rested a hand gently on her shoulder in comfort but didn’t say anything. Silence had worked with Hannah maybe it would his mother as well. He handed her his handkerchief from his pocket and would wait it out.

He had never been close to his uncle. He had only been three when Uncle Duncan moved west twenty-two years ago. Other than his mother talking about him and a handful of letters he had received in recent years he didn’t know his uncle at all. So why had Uncle Duncan chosen to give him a bookstore he knew Gerrit would likely never run?

His mother straightened. “Enough of this wallowing.” She dried her tears and wiped her nose. “Duncan is far better off with the Father in heaven.” She patted Gerrit’s hand on her shoulder. “Thank you, dear. What is it you wanted to know?”

He breathed a mental sigh of relief. Apparently silence had worked again. “In the letter you said Irene was a beautiful woman. So you knew her?”

“You don’t have to stand.” She motioned toward the couch. “Have a seat and stop *skulking*.” Her mouth twitched into a smile.

He smiled too and sat, stretching his arms across the back of the couch.

“I did know Irene briefly before everything, and the move out here. Not well but I could tell she was a lovely young woman even at age sixteen. If she were even two years older, she probably wouldn’t have been impetuous enough to marry and leave her family.”

“How so?”

“Irene came from a family of privilege. And with privilege comes expectations. Her family would have pressured her into marrying who they wanted her to marry. Even a couple years older and she would have likely thought of her families wishes over her own desires and stayed with a broken heart. But, at the time, she had an ungovernable streak in her, a defiance.”

“And Uncle Duncan was in love with her way back then?”

“All the young men were. Duncan more so than most. She was like a beautiful flower whose sweet scent drew the men to her. Hannah gets her beauty and grace from her mother.”

“Is that what Irene looked like?”

“Very much.”

He quirked up his mouth on one side. “Did she get her stubborn streak from her father then?”

His mother’s light laugh was all the conformation he needed.

“Why would Irene marry someone other than Uncle Duncan? Did they quarrel?”

“No. Two best friends in love with the same girl. Irene chose Sam McConnell.”

“Why? Uncle Duncan was such a good man.”

“Sam filled her head with stories of the west and the town he would one day build . . . and build it for Irene. He told her of the resort hotel he planned to build, a castle, and she would be his queen. How could she resist such ardent claims?”

“But unlike Irene, Sam was the poor among the poor, all he had were his dreams. Duncan and I were poor but at least we had a roof over our heads. I don’t even know where he slept. Duncan I’m sure did. Duncan would smuggle food out from our great aunt’s table for him. But having nothing didn’t seem to bother Sam because he lived so much of his life in the future, how it was going to be. He didn’t need anything more until he met Irene. And she only had eyes for him. I’m sure she was aware that Duncan had feelings for her. Sam was strong and confident. He knew what he wanted and went after it. He was a natural leader and people flocked to follow him. He was self-assured and very handsome. How could Irene or any woman help but fall in love with him?”

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “If Irene was so in love with Sam, why didn’t she do more to rescue him? Hannah said he is still buried in his mine.”

“Irene was probably like a lot of women who detested their men going into the ground. It’s dangerous work. She understood that Sam was gone and didn’t want anyone else to lose a loved one.”

Gerrit sat quiet for a moment sifting through all his mother had told him. Something vexed him. “Mother,” he took a slow breath, “could Uncle Duncan be Hannah’s father?”

His mother smiled. “No.”

“How can you be so sure? Sam McConnell was a driven man. He often neglected his wife and daughter.”

“Sam was driven to provide for them. Give them a good future.”

“But Uncle Duncan came here with the man who married the girl he was in love with. Sam was quit ambitious, and Irene impetuous. You’re sure?”

“Positive. First of all, your uncle was gallant, one of the most honorable men I’ve known. He would not do anything to hurt to his best friend or Irene. And second, Irene only had eyes for Sam. Wait here. I have something I want to give you.”

Gerrit stood by the dwindling fire while his mother left the room. She returned a minute later with a hat box. “Gee Mother, it’s a nice box, but I kind of like my hat.”

She stopped in her tracks and glared at him as only a mother could. He ducked his head, duly chastised. She set the box on the end of her chaise and lifted off the lid. She pulled out a few loose letters and a bundle and set them aside on the lid. Then she took out a bundle of letters and looked at them closely. “These are from your sister Charlotte.” She put them back and thumbed through some more bundles. She pulled out another bundle and handed them to Gerrit. “These are from your uncle.” She pulled out another bundle from his uncle and handed it over. She pulled out a third bundle. “These are from Sam and Irene.”

Gerrit took them slowly. “You and Father had correspondence with Sam and Irene?”

“Of course.”

“But . . . but . . .” It was inconceivable.

She picked up the letters Gerrit had brought with him. “Take these as well. I think these letters will give you a broader perspective on things.”

“What things exactly?”

“Most everything you have questions about; Sam, Irene, Hannah, this town, the resort. I don’t think they will necessarily be eye-opening but you may see things clearer . . . like after the fog lifts.”

“What about those letters?” Gerrit pointed to the letters she had set aside on the lid.

“Those are to me from your father.” She put them back into the box.

“You kept old love letters?”

She fit the lid back onto the box. “Some of them aren’t as old as you might think. When your father and I are gone, you are free to read all you like.”

Gerrit kissed his mother on the cheek and turned to leave.

“Gerrit?”

He stopped at his mother inquiry and turned in the doorway.

“Have you told her?”

“Not yet?”

“Gerrit, honey, you shouldn’t put it off. It will only make the matter worse.”

His mother’s advice was sound but it was more complicated than simply telling Hannah.

“It should come from you,” his mother prodded. “You don’t want someone else to tell her.”

He just needed a little more time with her. Time to understand her, to convince her. “I know. I’ll tell her soon.” He wasn’t ready to lose Hannah McConnell just yet. If ever.

“Sooner is always the best course of action.”

He waved his mother good-bye and set out for the bookstore. He would tell Hannah soon. He couldn’t put off the inevitable forever. Nor could he keep the sun from rising in the morning.

Hannah would hate him.