

## Chapter 17

Gerrit ran as fast as he could toward the explosion. He had just left Hannah standing there without a word. He would explain later. Smoke rose from a nearby house. He had hoped it was a business closed for the night.

In the front yard lay a woman with a charred skirt. He rushed to her, unconscious but still breathing. He dashed to a man lying on the front steps. His head was bleeding. Had these two been thrown by the explosion from the house?

Hannah came up beside him as other neighbors gathered. "Is Mr. Howard dead?"

Not yet. "They both need a doctor. Stay here, I'll get one."

"What about the children?"

Gerrit looked at the smoky house in horror. *Oh sweet Jesus, no.* Flames began to spill out the broken front window. "How many?"

"Five little ones."

Gerrit turned to the gathering neighbors. "Someone find the doctor." He pointed to several men. "Come with me." Hannah followed as well while neighbor women ministered to Mr. and Mrs. Howard.

*Father in heaven, protect these little children and help me find them and get them all out safely.* A familiar energy surged inside him. It would give him the strength he would need. Everything from here on out would be like the beat of his own heart. He knew what needed to be done and would just do it.

He went to the side of the house farthest from where he guessed the explosion occurred. “Stand below this window.” Gerrit grabbed the trellis that flanked the window and climbed like a squirrel. It was old and should be replaced, but he needed it to hold his weight a little longer. He kicked the glass with his boot, clearing as many shards as possible. He took a final breath of clean air and stepped inside the smoky interior.

He could hear frantic crying immediately and picked out the huddled figures on the far side of the dim room. The bulk of the smoke had not found its way to this room yet. “Come on, children, let’s go!” Two small ones stood up, and he ushered them toward the window. He went back for the others. Only a young girl, crying hysterically, with a baby in her arms remained. He hauled her to her feet and half carried her to the window. “Where’s the other one?” The girl tried to answer but he couldn’t understand anything through her frenzied panic.

“Oliver ran in the other room,” one of the little boys said through tears. “Is he gonna die?”

“No. Where did he go? In that room?”

“He hides under Prissy’s crib when he gets ascaresd.”

He scooped up the first boy and hoisted him out the window. “Move closer together,” he called to the men below.

The men squished in shoulder to shoulder, arms tangled together. “We’re ready. Drop him.”

The boy’s eyes were huge with terror. “You’ll be fine,” Gerrit soothed and released him.

By the time the men had caught him and set him aside Gerrit had the next boy out the window. This boy was struggling to grab hold of him. "They'll catch you," he said, releasing the child before he could get a good hold.

Gerrit reached for the baby. The girl resisted. "Give me Prissy!" He wrestled the baby from the girl's tight grasp and dropped her down.

The girl stepped away from the window. "Oliver," she managed to sob.

Gerrit yanked her back to the window. "I'll get him." He swung the girl into his arms and pushed her through the window opening. She clutch him in a death grip around his neck and screeched. He grimaced at the pain to his ear. "Let go. They'll catch you, I promise."

"No. I can't." She scrambled to climb over him.

He pulled her back inside. He didn't have time to cajole her. "You stay put by this window. I'll get Oliver." She nodded her consent.

"Which way is Prissy's crib from the door?"

She pointed to the left.

He took a gulp of fresh air before continuing. He kicked a few things on the floor in the dark, but managed to make his way across the darkening room to where he remembered the vague outline of a doorway had been. He went left and groped in the thickening blackness until he located the crib. A weak cough sounded from underneath. Reaching under, he caught a foot and pulled Oliver out. The child was practically lifeless in his arms. Making his way back to the window, he dropped the child to safety and turned to the girl.

"I can't." She turned back into the smoky room.

Gerrit caught her wrist. "Will you go piggyback on my back?"

Her timid nod was not convincing.

“Okay, climb out after me.” He kept hold of her and spoke to the men. “Stay below us.” He swung out the window and straddled between the windowsill and the trellis. He hoped it would hold the two of them. He wouldn’t let go of her wrist until she started climbing out, reluctantly. Once she was on his back, he descended the trellis slowly. The trellis wobbled free from the house. “Catch her!” he yelled as the trellis broke away from the side of the house. The girl’s scream was cut short when the men broke her fall. Gerrit turned in the air like a cat, knocking two men down as he fell to the ground but no one was hurt. The men rolled over and slapped Gerrit on the back for a job well done.

Hannah ran over to him. “Are you all right? I was so scared.”

“I’m fine, but this is far from over.” He pulled away from her and moved to the front of the bucket-brigade at the threshold of the front door. When a bucket came to him, he took a step inside and tossed the water. It hissed on the hot flames. The volunteer firemen arrived and attacked the fire from the back of the house.

Hours later the fire was out, much of the house destroyed. As far as anyone could determine this soon, it was a coal-oil gas leak ignited by a spark. Mrs. Howard had a concussion and was being taken care of. Mr. Howard had some burns and a gash on his head. The children were safely tucked away at a neighbor’s house.

With most of the people gone, he took Hannah by the hand and escorted her home. She didn’t seem to mind his sooty hand around hers. He didn’t want to say good-night but he did.

He headed off in the direction of the Faithful mine. He had too much blood pumping through his veins and never was able to sleep after a fire for hours. So he hiked up the mountain toward the little cabin where Hannah McConnell began her life.

What was he still doing here in Faithful? And what was he doing with Hannah? Toying with her affections? He hadn't meant to. He would be leaving and should have left a week ago. Hannah would likely stay in Faithful the rest of her life, protecting the town she loved from an enemy who wasn't a threat. Could he go back to his life in Harwood without Hannah? His mother always wanted him to move out here after Aunt Enid passed away. Could he do that? Did he want to?

He walked past the mine and up the hill behind it. *Lord, what would you have me do? Do I give up my work with the orphans back east and move here? Toby is such a great boy. I had thought before I came to adopt him myself, with one leg half gone, he is virtually unadoptable. I could go back for Toby and bring him here. But would Hannah accept him?*

He looked out over Faithful and tried to locate Hannah's shop. If he had it figured right, her lights were out. He hoped she slept well.

*Or do I give up Hannah and go back to the work You put before me? But then I won't likely have to give up Hannah at all. Once she finds out the truth, she will give me up. Lord, soften her heart toward me and my parents. Show her the truth so she can understand and forgive the wrong that was never done to her.*

He knelt beside the boulder above the mine and continued to pray. He went to his parents to avoid running into Hannah until he had answers and was prepared to face her with the truth.

## Chapter 18

Hannah lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. What a night! She thanked God that no one was more seriously hurt and that Gerrit was able to rescue all the children unharmed. But as incredible as the fire was, she could only think of what happened before it. Or almost happened. She had been as nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rockers when Gerrit said he was going to kiss her.

*Lord, I'm so confused. How could I be scared and excited about the same thing? A kiss. Is it a sin for me to want a man to kiss me? No, I don't believe it is. Not if he is very special and you are in l-*

She stopped and took several small breaths. Could it be? Could she be in love with Gerrit Finnley?

*Lord, is this what love feels like? Am I in Love with him?*

She'd had strong feelings for Duncan but it never felt like this. With Duncan it was amiable and she would have been content to spend the rest of her life with him but Duncan hadn't returned her affections in the same way. But this feeling she had for Gerrit touched every part of her. And she thought about him all the time, no matter what she was doing.

She felt her mouth pull up hard on both sides. She was in love!

Did Gerrit feel the same way? Could he love her too? He had to feel something for her or he wouldn't have asked to kiss her. Would he try again? She hoped so.

*Thank You, Lord. Thank You for this feeling. Thank You for Gerrit. And thank You for love.*