

Chapter 1

1880

Nine-year-old Hannah McConnell stepped one hesitant foot across the threshold of the Faithful mine. “Father?” she called again.

She strained her ears. Not a sound. She took another step, taking her out of the sunshine and into the cold shadows. Father strictly forbade her to set one foot inside the mine. And here she had two. Her stomach knotted. Father would punish her for sure.

*The mine is too dangerous a place for a little girl.* He had told her over and over to never ever play in this mine or any other.

She should go back but moved forward instead. “Father?” Mother would be upset if she didn’t accomplish this simple task. Supper would be cold. She had to find Father. He didn’t like cold supper.

*The mine is too dangerous a place.*

Was *Father* safe? He must be. The mine wasn’t too dangerous for him. Father would come out. He was simply too deep in to hear her. She hollered as loud as she could. “Father! Supper!”

*“Father. Supper.”* Her words called back at her.

With each tentative step the darkness grew, squeezing out the light from the opening. She reached her hand out and moved along the wall from cold, rough rock past a course, raw support beam on deeper. The dust in the air tickled her nose.

*The mine is too dangerous.*

She believed it now. She should go back out to her waiting rock at the entrance.

“Father?” What if he had left before she got here and was at home? Surrounded in blackness, fear crawled up her back. She turned to leave and tripped, crunching down on the rocky ground. Her knees cried out in pain, but she did not. Father always told her to be brave. Tears stung her eyes as she stood and brushed dirt from her skirt. She found the wall again and moved along it as quickly as she could. She had to get out. The mine really was dangerous.

“Father!” Father would know the way out. He would save her. Was that a dim light ahead? “Father!” she yelled, but no reply came. And no light. Where had it gone? Had it ever been there? Her feet twisted on the rocks on the ground beneath her as she hurried. She tripped again but held herself up by pressing into the cold rock wall.

“Father! Help me, Father!” She moved faster along the wall and stumbled into a pile of rocks. The tunnel’s end. Father wasn’t here. The mine had swallowed her up. She didn’t know which way to go.

*The mine is dangerous.*

She wrapped her arms around her throbbing knees and cried. *Jesus, help Father find me.*

She shivered in the cold, dusty air. Father would come. He would find her. Between whimpers she heard something and raised her head.

“Hannah!”

“Father, I’m here!” A light glow appeared around a gentle bend in the tunnel and grew stronger. But it wasn’t Father who brought the light.

Duncan Finnley, Father’s best friend, knelt beside her. “Are you all right?”

Hannah nodded. “Father’s going to be really mad at me.”

Duncan held the lantern higher, looking at the rock pile she’d fallen into, then he turned back to her. “Let’s get you out of here.” He handed her the lantern and scooped her up into his arms. No one was stronger than Duncan...except Father.

The air cleared some as they reached the opening.

Mother rushed up to her. “Thank the Lord!”

Duncan set her on her waiting rock. The one Father had moved near the entrance for her to sit on and wait for him. But where was Father?

Mother put a warm hand on each of Hannah’s cold cheeks and looked her over. “Are you all right?”

She nodded.

You know you are never to go in the mine.” Mother’s eyes filled with tears.

She nodded again. “I tried to find Father. He wasn’t there.”

Mother’s expression changed and lengthened. She looked up at Duncan.

His eyes looked sad. “The mine doesn’t go back as far as it should.”

## Chapter 2

1892 – 12 years later

Hannah fastened the hooks up the back of the blue taffeta gown on the dress stand in the front window of her shop. A nice lavender would have looked better for this dress but she couldn't make every dress for her window display out of various shades of her favorite color. This blue was quite striking and would catch the eye of people walking by.

Movement outside drew her attention. The very handsome new bookstore owner helped the great Mrs. Coughlin into her carriage. Mrs. Coughlin's striking blue eyes and porcelain skin made her look far younger than nearly fifty by at least ten years.

But consorting with the Coughlins would never do. They had ruined lives and driven people to their graves. The poor man was new in town and didn't know the people of Faithful. He deserved a warning at least. She stepped outside as the carriage pulled away. The sun felt good on her back after the recent cold spell that had brought a spring snow. "You could get a bad reputation that way."

The man turned around, and Hannah looked into the face of a younger Duncan Finnley. Her heart skipped. She hadn't expected such a striking resemblance in his nephew. Duncan had been her friend, confidant, and benefactor. Her father's best friend. She missed him dearly and staved off the tears that came with remembering his absence.

The younger Finnley smiled at her, Duncan's smile. "Pardon me?"

Her breath caught, and she smiled back. "Mr. Finnley, I just don't want you to get off on the wrong foot here in Faithful. Or do you go by Finn as Duncan some times did?"

"Actually I prefer Gerrit. I don't ascribe to the formality of the norm of the day. You have me at a disadvantage."

"I do?"

"You know my name but I'm at a loss to yours."

"Forgive me." She held out her hand. "Hannah McConnell. I own the dressmaker shop next to your new bookstore."

He took her hand and graciously bowed over it. "I'm charmed."

Her cheeks warmed.

He released her hand and took the required step back. "I believe my uncle mentioned you in his letters, favorably so." His gray suit was well cut to fit his trim frame.

"Duncan spoke highly of you. When I was told you inherited his shop, I was happy it wouldn't be going to a stranger." It was a small consolation after Duncan's death.

He raised an eyebrow then after a moment said, "You mentioned my reputation being sullied."

"The Coughlins. I feel some responsible in the matter with you being Duncan's nephew. One cannot be too careful where that family is concerned. They may be courteous on the outside, but they are cunning and ruthless. You would be wise not to get too friendly with them." She looked toward Mrs. Coughlin's carriage as it retreated up McConnell Avenue. "Mrs. Coughlin certainly never came down here when Duncan was proprietor."

His mouth quirked up on one side as though he were amused. “She was trying to talk me into staying.”

Her gaze swung back to him. “You’re not going to leave Faithful? You just got here.” She inwardly flinched at her boldness but didn’t regret her words. She needed him to stay.

“I was planning to sell the shop and go back home to Massachusetts, but right at the moment,” he smiled fully now, “I think I’m undecided.”

“The Coughlins can be very persuasive. Be careful or they’ll have you doing things you never thought you would.”

“Oh, I can assure you that my reconsideration has nothing to do with *Mrs. Coughlin*. She may be persuasive but when my mind is set it will take more than her to change it.”

“It’s nice to hear that there may be someone else in town who won’t cow to the self-coronated royalty.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Royalty?”

“The Coughlins sit up there in their palace,” she waved a hand in the general direction of the Majestic Resort, “and look down on all us common folks. But don’t let them make you feel small. They have tried for years to take over this town.”

“Thank you for the warning.” He gave his head a slight bow.

“Miss Hannah! Miss Hannah! I got it!” Eight-year-old Sophie Wilson ran up to her with a parcel clutched to her chest.

“Mind your manners.” Iona Wilson took Sophie by the arm and pulled her back a couple of steps. “You wait your turn.” Iona looked up briefly at Hannah and Mr. Finnley but averted her gaze back down to the boardwalk. “We’re real sorry for interrupting. We’ll wait right here.”

“But, Mama, I cain’t.”

Iona gave Sophie's arm a gentle tug. "Hush now or I'll take you straight home."

Hannah's heart went out to Sophie and her mother. They were the poor among the poor in Faithful. Iona Wilson was widowed three years now with five mouths to feed, all boys except Sophie. Iona took in people's washing; her hands were cracked and red from the work.

Hannah turned and introduced Iona and Sophie to Mr. Finnley. He asked them to call him Gerrit as well. She didn't know how it was back east where he'd come from, but here in Faithful, he wasn't likely to find many people to comply with his request and certainly not on a first meeting--and certainly not the ladies in town.

Mr. Finnley waved a hand toward Sophie and Iona. "Let's not keep this lovely young lady waiting. I for one cannot wait to see what mystery she has hidden in her parcel." He smiled broadly at Sophie.

Sophie smiled up at him.

Not many people took notice of little Sophie let alone talked to the sweet, shy girl. But at that moment, she thought Sophie might have fallen in love with Mr. Finnley.

Sophie turned into her mother's blue calico skirt and said nothing.

Mr. Finnley's smile faded. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare her."

Iona kept her head down. "She's just a little shy." Iona wasn't shy like her daughter but was embarrassed by her reduced circumstances.

Hannah bent at the knees to get down to eye level with Sophie and touched her blue sleeve. The child's dress was so thin it looked like it would rip. "What do you have? I would like to see."

Sophie turned to her with her head down but cocked her gaze toward Mr. Finnley for a moment, then whispered, "I got my dolly. Jesus gave it to me for my birthday."

Hannah had prayed at church with the little girl months ago for this doll. Sophie knew prayer was the only way she would get so lovely a gift. And Hannah knew who her gift-angel was.

“Mama said you were sad, and we had to wait but I just cain’t wait anymore. They forgot to send her body!” Sophie’s voice trilled to a high pitch.

“May I see her?”

Sophie held it out to her. Hannah set it on her knees and unwrapped it. In the brown paper were two calf-length legs with shiny black boots, two elbow-length white arms and hands, and lastly she unwrapped the shiny white china head with glistening black hair. The face was delicately painted with red lips, rosy cheeks, and blue up-cast eyes.

“She doesn’t have no dress either. I don’t know why anybody would send a dolly missing so many parts. Don’t they know?” Sophie had evidently forgotten about Mr. Finnley’s presence and was talking freely now.

“I think I may have something to correct this over sight.” The girl had no way of knowing this was the way these dolls came. “If you will trust me with her, I’ll have her looking like she ought to in no time.”

“Oh, would you? And a dress too?” Sophie cooed.

“Sophie! Mind your manners. We can do that ourselves. It’s time you learned to sew.” Iona didn’t like charity but would extend her hand for help when it was for one of her children, and Iona’s sewing skills were minimal if she had time to sew at all.

Hannah gave Sophie a nod. “A dress too.”

Sophie lunged forward and threw her arms around Hannah’s neck. The china pieces clinked. Hannah spread one hand across the doll parts on her lap to protect them and thrust her

other hand out behind her to keep herself from spilling onto the boardwalk. But a pair of strong hands on her upper back stopped her backward motion. Her cheeks warmed at so intimate a touch, but she was grateful for the support.

Iona pulled Sophie away. "You'll knock her down, Sophie."

Sophie frowned. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I'm fine." She regained her balance and as soon as she did the silent support at her back disappeared. "But you must be careful around your doll, Sophie, because she is very fragile and can break easily."

Sophie nodded and picked up the china doll head, stroking it. "Doesn't she have beautiful hair? I wish my hair was black and shiny. Just like hers." She looked up. "And just like yours." Sophie reached one dirty hand up and patted the top of Hannah's head. Sophie's dull, blonde hair hung stringy. Iona did the best she could, focusing on keeping enough food on the table for her hungry family and clothes on their backs.

Hannah wrapped the china pieces back up.

"I'll come back tomorrow but not too early so you have time to get her dress made too," Sophie said eagerly.

"Sophie, you will not come back tomorrow and bother Miss McConnell," Iona said.

Hannah smiled and stood. Her legs hurt from the position she had been in. "I need more than one day if I'm going to make her a suitable body and proper dress. I'll let you know on Sunday at church how she is coming along."

Sophie drooped her head in disappointment but made no further protests.

Hannah turned to Sophie's mother. "Iona, behind my shop needs some cleaning up. Would you send your boys around to take care of it for me?"

“I’ll send Seth and Foster right over.” Iona took Sophie’s hand. “We’ll be off then. No hurry on that doll. We understand you have your business to run. Don’t make any fuss over this doll. We’ll appreciate anything.” She turned. “It was nice to meet you, Mr. Finnley.”

Sophie broke free of her mother’s hand and motioned Hannah closer. Hannah bent down, and Sophie whispered in her ear. “Is he your husband?”

Hannah smiled. “No.” She could feel her cheeks warm at the thought and was grateful the girl had not asked her question aloud.

Sophie’s face broke into a wide smile. “Good.” She skipped off ahead of her mother, her tangled locks bouncing on her back. Sophie was cute, but when she smiled, she was beautiful like an angel.

Mr. Finnley stepped forward. “Whatever her question, she liked your answer. I thought it best to stay quiet after scaring her.”

She hoped he would respect the girl’s whispered question and not ask what it was. “You didn’t scare her. She likes you.”

He gave her a nod of acceptance then said, “Mrs. Wilson is in a hard way. Maybe I could find some work for her boys as well.”

“That would be nice.” She breathed easier that the moment of Sophie’s question had passed. “They can use all the help they can get. It’s not easy being a widow with five children.”

After a brief silence, he cleared his throat. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to turn the conversation back to our original topic.”

Oh no, not Sophie’s question. It wasn’t so bad. She just knew it might create awkwardness between them, and they were getting on so well.

“The Coughlin’s. I take it you do not get on well with the family.”

She gave a quick nod. “You take it correctly.”

“I would be interested to hear more of your . . . *views* on the subject. Would it be too presumptuous of me to ask you to have dinner with me?”

Her insides fluttered at the request. “Tonight?”

“A nice place. What’s your favorite?”

His intent gaze made her forget what she meant to say. “The hotel on Hannah Street is the best in my opinion.”

“Is that because it is on a street that bares your name?”

She averted her gaze. “No. Bert and Naomi happen to be the best cooks around. Some people prefer the resort’s dining room though.”

He shook his head. “Let’s not go there. The hotel sounds fine.” He turned to face her fully. “It just makes me wonder how one gets a street named after one’s self.”

“My father founded Faithful. He named all the streets.”

“Sam McConnell.”

“Yes! You’ve heard of him?” She loved talking about her father.

“Of course. May I call for you at six?”

She wanted to say yes. “I’m sorry, Mr. Finnley, I have a previous engagement.”

“Please call me Gerrit. And I should have guessed with a lady as pretty as you.” His eyes twinkled. They were a warm brown unlike Duncan’s mysterious gray-blue eyes.

“Oh, it’s not that. I’m going over to Tiny’s for dinner.”

“Yes, *Tiny*. The deceptive name for a man the size of a grizzly bear.”

She smiled. “Tiny is a sweet old lady who comes no higher than my chin.” There was a miner who came to town who went by Tiny for a while but only one of them could keep the name

and Mrs. Staples was the more tenacious of the two. Most people in town call the miner Bear now.

“I see. Maybe another time.” He opened her shop door to let her back inside.

She had a warm feeling inside after visiting with Mr. Finnley. The loneliness she felt after Duncan’s death was soothed a little.

She would have to convince Mr. Gerrit Finnley to remain in Faithful, if for no other reason than to have family close. Not that he was exactly family. Duncan had only been a close friend of both of her parents and was a substitute father to her. Gerrit Finnley was the closest thing she had to family. She smiled to herself. And quite handsome too.