

# Hoarfrost to Roses

## Chapter 1 Grai

Grai Madison clicked open his pocket watch—a keepsake his grandfather had entrusted to him—twenty-four carats, with a ruby on the latch and his grandfather’s initials etched on the cover. He groaned as the thin metal minute hand clicked another notch. Half-past eleven. Close to midnight! He’d been working way too long, completely oblivious to the world outside. No wonder he had a mild headache, and his eyes burned. He brushed back the curl that hung over his forehead and gathered the papers on his desk, filing them neatly in his leather case, which he snapped shut, satisfied. He had everything he needed for the lawyer in the briefcase except for the Will. The tattered parchment written in his grandfather’s hand was too personal to file away. Not only was Grai listed as the heir in the legal documents, but Grandfather had included a personal note which was not for anyone’s eyes but his own, at least not until everything was docketed and settled.

*Grai, My Dear Grandson.*

*Of all the relatives in my family, you are the one that has remained the most faithful. I love you like a son. You know how I despise the man your mother married. Were it not for him, she would be my beneficiary. However, because this territory has denied women the right to own land, I am leaving all my assets to you. All of it! Don’t let that scallywag of a brute lay one finger on that property. You have the talent and the wherewithal to foster that estate to what it once was.*

*Let the little tribe of Kallam families remain in the valley. They aren’t bothering anyone. Protect them if you must. This Territory was their land before we came here.*

*Make room for the vagabond, maybe one or two of those freed slaves that need a home. They can help you keep the place integral. Find a pretty miss to marry. One who will be good to you and then you be good to her. Don’t emulate the man your mother married. Your sweetheart can sew fancy curtains for the windows and tat lace for the tables. Wish I could live long enough to see your children, my dear boy.*

*Above all, don’t forget about the roses. We worked so hard, you and I, to tend them. Their roots survived the fire. They will bloom again, and you’ll have your own park, this haven will be an oasis for your soul, as it was mine.*

*I left you a gift in the root cellar. No one knows about the gold except for Professor Reinhardt, and he already has his share. He’s a good person and may even want to help you rebuild. There’s enough gold coin in*

*those bags to erect three times the manor that burnt down. You can do it. You've got the talent.*

*I love you, Grandson. Take care of your mother when you can.*

*Grandpa Cyrus.*

Grai folded the letter carefully and sealed it in the inside pocket of his waistcoat. He took his frock coat from the coat rack and put it on, retrieved his derby, patting his hat firmly on his head, and tucked his case under his arm. Before he snuffed the lantern, he peeked into the adjacent room where the banker's secretary thumbed through papers on her desk by candlelight.

"I'm leaving, Mary," he said.

Mary pulled her spectacles off. An attractive middle-aged woman—her lace collar tight around her neck, her mutton sleeves stylish for women older than her—she hung onto fashions that were quickly becoming obsolete. Grai attributed her modesty to being a widow.

"Did you find all that you were looking for?"

"Finally! It took long enough to locate the deed and the Will, I have everything here!" He held up his briefcase. "I honestly thought he had lost these papers in the fire. That the Will was preserved is awe-inspiring! A chance of Providence, have you!"

"Your grandfather kept a close account of his paperwork. I'm not surprised he had all that information in a strongbox."

"Well, now that I have what I need, probate proceedings will cease, and I can claim my inheritance."

"Nine hundred acres, is it?"

Grai used the snuffer to extinguish the lantern and stepped out of the den into Mary's office, shutting the door behind him. He grabbed a stool and sat across from her, resting the briefcase on his lap. The hours he spent searching through paperwork this last week isolated him from the outside world, bottling up his excitement. He had to share!

"I loved that place, Mary. I spent my childhood there. The land is forested with elk and bear, but there's a fertile valley where grandfather farmed and a creek with the biggest brook trout you'd ever seen. This estate will be the perfect place to settle and raise a family—and to share those memories with my children, or grandchildren. Grandfather's property is everything a man could want."

"I thought it all burnt to the ground during the earthquake?"

"The manor did, and a few of the outbuildings. But I can build it again. Maybe better."

Mary raised her brow and tapped the papers she'd been working on into a neat pile.

"Construction is costly, Grai. You do realize property around here is coveted, especially with the railroad stretching its tracks to Port Summerhill. People do strange things when candy is flashed in front of their eyes. Your land will be a prime target."

"Even more reason to protect it."

"You don't understand. Nine hundred acres is a lot of land, land which might be stolen from you."

"How? What are you saying?"

"I'm saying the land might be better protected if you let probate run its course. The estate by law would go to your stepfather. He has influence, people who can help keep the estate intact."

"Except Grandfather once told me he'd sooner someone push him off a bridge than leave Richard

Bonneville a single copper coin.”

Mary shook her head and clicked her tongue, laughing gently. “You shouldn’t continue your grandfather’s vendetta. What good is it to take such a hostile attitude? If I remember correctly, your grandfather’s anger did nothing beneficial for him. Look how it alienated him from his daughter?”

Grai closed his mouth. There was no sense arguing with Mary Sellers. She was a pleasant person, but sometimes she pried into his life too much. Richard Bonneville abused Grai’s mother, and his grandfather knew how his stepdad treated her. Mary Sellers didn’t need to know. Family matters stayed within the household. That Bonneville had fathered an illegitimate child should have been revealed before their wedding for they fought every day thereafter.

“I’m sorry, Miss Sellers. If Bonneville had a legal deed to the property, the fiend would level the land, clear-cut the forest, and sell everything. I would feel as if I had betrayed my grandfather’s love and let his hard labor go to waste.”

“So, what’s left of all that labor and love?” Mary asked.

“A few stone walls, rock, and mortar fragments. And me!” He grinned.

She snickered. “Even sentimental holdings will be pushed aside in the name of progress.”

“The gardens alone are priceless. Some roses are shoots from our family’s garden in England. Some a hundred years old.” Grai’s voice tapered. He needed to champion the estate but didn’t need to convince the banker’s secretary.

There were other features worthy of salvaging; A fountain that had been shipped from England, a well Grai helped his grandfather dig, and stone sculptures too many to describe. These things may not have a monetary value, but they had a spiritual value and were personal to Grai. Bonneville didn’t know about the dugout, and Grai wasn’t about to tell him.

“I loved my grandfather, Mary. Watching him fade away with consumption hadn’t been easy. He was the father I didn’t have. He took me under his wing for a reason, to continue his legacy. I wouldn’t have pursued structural design without him. No one else thought I had the talent.”

“Those are foolish words, Grai. We’ve all recognized your abilities. Another Renwick Jr, your mother used to boast. She was good to you. She deserves a piece of that property.”

“She was good to me until Bonneville moved in. After that, she’s been... I don’t know, incongruous.”

Mary shrugged and shook her head.

“I will build a room for my mother, but she’d have to leave him.”

When Miss Sellers didn’t respond, Grai set the briefcase upright on her desk and leaned over it, giving her a warm smile.

“You are a kind woman, Mary Sellers, and I appreciate your concern for my mother. I know you two are close. But I intend to honor my grandfather’s wishes. If Mother could own land, and if it were just the two of us, things would be different. But they aren’t.”

Mary sighed heavily and frowned. “Times change. You need to be careful.”

“Careful?”

“So much ill fortune befell your grandfather because of that estate. The earthquake, the fire, his consumption. What if the same demons he faced suddenly attached themselves to you?” Her frown reminded him of his mother’s, eerie and ominous. He listened too often to his mother’s soothsaying.

“The property is not haunted. I promise you.” Grai smiled. His mother tried to convince his grandfather he was cursed—a conviction his grandfather passed off as superstition.

“Not haunted. Plagued just like so many other dwellings in this town. Something evil exists here, Grai. The dead come back and when they do, they mean ill well for the living.”

“Yes, that’s what many people in Port Summerhill say.”

“You best heed those warnings, Grai Madison.”

“I’ll do my best to tread softly on their graves.”

“Not their graves, their spirits.”

“I’m sure the Good Lord gathered their spirits already, Miss Summers.”

“Nothing is for sure, young man.” She looked up from her work with a stern expression, and Grai lost his smile out of respect. “Do not scoff them lest you lose *your* spirit!”

“And where would my spirit go if I should lose it?” he asked.

She stared at him; the candlelight casting a wicked shadow across her otherwise gentle face. “You know I’m not the one to answer that question.”

“Miss Sellers, I will be as careful as I can.”

“You’re going to do what you will, and I’m no one to stop you. I’m just offering advice.”

Grai tipped his hat and walked out the door.

The downpour had stopped, leaving in its place a coat of ice on the road and walkway. Glad he had sanded his leather soles that morning, he took a confident step into the street and began his walk home. He wouldn’t tell Bonneville about finding the Will until he spoke with the lawyer.

Gas lamps reflected light in storefront windows and cast shadows that stretched across the narrow street. A wind had picked up, causing an occasional shutter to slam, a sign to creak, and mist to spray from trees dampened by the rain. The ocean rumbled in the distance; the sound captured by a thick cloud cover. He hurried over the cobblestone until the road turned to dirt and the light of downtown faded in the distance. Passing yard after yard of stately homes, wrought-iron fences, and wild roses, their fragrance long since muted in the fall weather, he turned down a remote forested pathway that led to his mother’s house. He had no idea someone had been following him until he heard raspy breathing, as if they were running to catch up.

“Grai!” a voice called.

Grai stopped and turned.

With a sudden crack, his head burst. The world went black, and he collapsed as someone tore his briefcase from his hand. Grai gained consciousness, flattened against the ground with a man straddling him, wringing his neck. He couldn’t breathe. He gasped, kicked, fought against the attacker.

“Finish it and let’s get out of here,” someone ordered.

The dagger flashed in the moonlight and the sharp blade dug into his side.

He retched and doubled over in pain.

The man jumped off of him and yanked the knife out. Grai cried in agony. A warm trickle of wet leaked from his gut, his hands darkened when he held them over the wound. Someone heaved him off the pathway and dragged his body into the brush, rummaged through his coat pockets, ripped his pocket watch out of his vest, and the last Grai heard was the sound of his murderers racing away.

The rain woke him. Or was it him? He saw his body lying in the dirt, blood pooled under him and clotted

over a wound on his head, his curls buried in leaves, his clothes muddy, his flesh pale, his neck marred with hand marks. Remorse flooded his spirit. He didn't want to die. He was too young to die.

"Grai," he said and shook the lifeless body on the ground. "Get up. Get up to safety before they come back. Move," he urged, though no sound came from his lips. He slipped inside the body and tried to move him from within, massaged his heart to get a beat. Pulled open his air passage, massaged his lungs, held tight the muscles ripped apart from the knife.

"Don't die, Grai," he whispered.

The body moaned, coming to life.

Grai's spirit pulled and prodded and finally got the body to move, to connect, but not to meld. He couldn't fully become one. Something kept them apart, but this would work for now. They staggered at first; the spirit lifting the body's weight. The body's mind was not functioning, and the spirit—fearful—could not think. They crawled through the brush. The spirit led him away from downtown on the only safe road he was familiar with—the road to his grandfather's estate. They would be unscathed in its hiding places until they could unite again—until this near-death state of existence could be reconciled.