

Chapter 7

The bell over the bookstore door jingled. Hannah stepped across the threshold. “Hello? Mr. Finnley?” Was he not here? The store was unlocked. He hadn’t stayed long after dinner and had forgotten the three slices of pie he’d promised to take.

The smell of Duncan’s pipe still clung to the air, even after these weeks. Or did the young Mr. Finnley take to the pipe as well? “Mr. Finnley?” She hadn’t realized until now she missed the aroma. She closed her eyes and savored the scent that was Duncan. Such a comfort.

This was the first time she had been in Duncan’s store since it had been locked up in the weeks following his death. Her feet took her to the corner where Duncan’s reading chair sat. She ran her hand along the back of the brown leather chair. A floor lamp stood beside the chair with a small table and settee. On the table sat Duncan’s tray with his pipe in it.

She set the plate with the pie wedges on it onto the table and brought the pipe to her nose. “Why did you leave me?” A tear rolled down her cheek.

Putting the pipe down, she picked up the book they had been sharing. *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* by Edward Bellamy, a highly popular Utopian fantasy. She sat on the settee. How many hours had she sat there listening to Duncan read or she reading to him? She opened the book to the spot they had left off, found their place, and began reading aloud. The words blurred,

and she clutched the book to her chest. What good was a story without someone to share it with? The ache inside her increased until tears began to fall.

Jesus, my ache is so deep. Will it ever be soothed? In one way, I just want this terrible pain to be gone. But yet, I want to hold onto it and always remember Duncan.

When Papa died, I had Mama to comfort me. When Mama died, I had Duncan. I have no one to comfort me now except You, but I cannot feel Your arms of comfort or hear Your soothing words.

She let the tears come and come they did in a steady stream. This was the most she'd cried since Duncan died. She'd held it all in, afraid to let him go. The crying felt good, cleansing in a way.

As the tears slowed, she took several deep breaths. She should go but was reluctant to leave just yet.

She laid her head upon the arm of the settee and pulled up her feet as she'd done many time and conjured up Duncan's voice from the past and listened to his soothing voice as he read.

Chapter 8

Gerrit stepped across the threshold of the back door of the bookstore into the kitchen. He hadn't gotten the answers he wanted. He locked the door and headed up the stairs to his uncle's bedroom. He stopped halfway up. Had he locked the front door before he left earlier? He shook his head. Better check it. Turning around, he thumped back down the stairs and looked around the bookstore as he passed through to the front door.

What was he doing staying here? He wasn't a book lover. He enjoyed reading all right but this was a bit much. Before he'd come, he couldn't wait to unload all these books, the whole business. Now he was uncertain. He loved being a fireman. Maybe Faithful needed another fireman.

Why was he here?

He looked at the wall the bookstore shared with the dressmaker shop next door. He couldn't be confused because of Hannah. She was charming but he had never changed his whole life because of a woman. He had met beautiful women before, some even more lovely than Miss Hannah McConnell. What made her so different? Why was she so unforgettable? Was it her dark hair and mystical violet eyes? Her porcelain skin? Or her smile that lit her heart shaped face and caught him off guard? Her smile was definitely part of it, and he would see to it he saw it as often as possible until he left. But there was more to Hannah than simply her endearing smile.

This was all nonsense! He would leave in a few days or a week, and Hannah would remain here. He would steer clear of Hannah McConnell. Then he could be sure of his plans. He turned the lock and headed for the low burning lamp in the corner.

There curled up on the settee was the object of the disquiet in his soul.

He gazed at her. *No, Miss McConnell, though your beauty is appealing, it is your honesty and faithfulness that draws this moth to your flame.* Faithful – that is what she was. Faithful to her father, his dream, and this town, to everything she held dear, including –it appeared– his uncle’s things.

Her thoughts, emotions, she held everything right out in front of her. But he sensed there was more, things she didn’t tell as easily as her dislike for the “local royalty”. Though Hannah readily spoke her mind, what did she leave unsaid? Anything?

She appeared so serene but he knew her heart warred with her mind. He could see dried tears on her cheeks. He should wake her but it would dispel her peacefulness.

He could leave her here to wake on her own. But it could sully her reputation to leave his shop in the middle of the night or heaven forbid in the morning. Even this time of night was not appropriate.

He took a deep breath preparing himself for her shock and being appalled at herself for having fallen asleep here. It was time to break her spell. “Hannah. Wake up, Hannah.”

She moved a little but showed no signs of actually waking up. A frown pulled at her brow, putting a crack in her tranquility.

He put a hand on her shoulder and pushed on it gently. “Hannah, wake up.”

“Duncan?” Her eyes fluttered open, and she reached out to him, holding on to his forearm.

He covered her hand with his. “No, it’s Gerrit.”

Her eyes came fully open as she struggled to focus on what probably appeared to be a shadowy figure looming over her. He squatted down next to the settee so the dim light would shine on his face.

“Mr. Finnley, you’re here after all.”

“Actually, I’m back. You fell asleep.”

She sat up and released his arm. “You forgot your pie. I guess I let nostalgia get the better of me.”

That was it? No gasp. No flustered excuses. “It’s late.”

“I didn’t mean to intrude.” She closed the book and handed it to him.

Looking Backward 2000-1887. “I haven’t read this one but heard it was good.”

“It is good. Duncan and I were reading it together.”

He handed it back to her. “You keep it.”

She clutched it to her chest. “Thank you.” Her voice caught. “You don’t know how much this means to me.”

Not tears. They came suddenly and fell down her cheeks. “Don’t cry.”

“I miss him so much.”

He swung up onto the settee next to her and put his hand on her shoulder. His father had done that when his mother was upset. “It will be all right.”

She leaned into him and let her tears fall unchecked.

What was he to do now? He awkwardly wrapped his arm around her and patted her other shoulder. How was he supposed to comfort her into stopping her crying? “You can have any books in the store you want.” Was she crying harder now? He felt useless, so he sat, doing and saying nothing.

Her tears ceased as quickly as they had started. She brushed her cheeks dry. "I'm sorry for imposing on you."

He helped her to her feet. "It's no imposition." *Just without the flood.*

She held out the book to him. "You should read this."

He held up a hand. "No. Uncle Duncan would've wanted you to have it." He walked her to the door. "And I meant what I said about you having any books you want."

"There are a few I wouldn't mind having. I have a stack of books at my place that belong here."

"Keep them."

She looked up at him with a twitch in her lips. "You aren't a very good businessman, are you?"

He cocked his head. "I guess not."

Her mouth stretched into a full smile.

That was more like it. A beautiful smile on a lovely face. She had been crying but didn't try to hide it or excuse it. She had missed a tear, so he reached up and caressed it away. He let his hand linger on her smooth skin and lost himself in her violet eyes. They almost swirled with a myriad of passions, drawing him into their depths, pulling him closer.

A drunkard, ambling down the street singing loudly off key, broke his concentration. He had been staring, but then so had she. He reached for the door handle but it wouldn't turn. That's right, he'd locked it. He turned the lock and held the door open for her.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For being there."

Is that all it took, sitting next to her with a reassuring arm? That was too easy. He hadn't done or said anything helpful. "I'm glad to have been able to help. I'll expect you to stop by tomorrow to pick out all the books you want." He walked her the few steps to her door and made sure she got in safely.

So much for steering clear of Hannah McConnell.