

## Chapter 15

Three nights later, Gerrit didn't mind sitting in a not so comfortable chair because he was across the small table from Hannah. When the supper dishes were cleared off the table, Hannah once again took out *Looking Backward* and began to read, as she had done the previous two nights. He would be late again getting over to see his parents, but he suspected his mother expected it by now.

He watched the movement of Hannah's lips and the glow of lamplight flickering on her creamy skin. Her voice caressed the air with words as they did his heart. He longed to touch her cheek or feel the silken curls that laid about the perimeter of her face. He no longer knew what was happening in the story and had actually lost track last night.

She glanced up as she read. Her sentence trailed off as she looked at him more fully. "You're staring."

He'd been caught but didn't mind. She probably already knew that he had great affection for her. "Pardon me. Your beauty captivated me."

She smiled and looked back to the book. "Let me just find my place."

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Hannah struggled to keep her concentration on the words in the story as she read to the bottom of the page. The look in Gerrit's eyes when she glanced up from her reading, plagued her mind. "I think that's a good place to stop." This chapter would have to be reread as did last night's reading. She closed the book and set it aside. She didn't want Gerrit to leave but it was best if he did. She knew where feelings like this would lead and didn't want to get hurt again. He had said enough times he would be returning East. She walked him to the back kitchen door. "Thank you for your company. I always enjoy it."

He ran his index finger down her cheek and along her jaw. "Would I earn a slap if I kissed you?"

Her face warmed. "We haven't known each other very long."

"Twelve days. I've seen you at least twice a day, usually three times for the last twelve days. If I were courting you in the usual fashion--"

*Courting?* Her breath caught. Was he saying he wasn't courting her but *if* he was? Or that he *was* courting her only in an unusual way?

"-I'd come visiting once or twice during the week, have supper, and sit in your parlor." He scooped up her hand in his and pressed his lips to the back of it.

A tingle rushed up her arm and clouded her brain.

"And of course on Sunday I would escort you to Church." He took her other hand and placed a kiss upon it as well. "So in a sense, it's like we have known each other for at least three months. Would that be so improper?"

Her stomach knotted in confusion. "The custom would be to ask my father or close relative about such matters as courting."

A sadness clouded his expression before he spoke again. “Unfortunately, you have no close relative to request permission from.” Then a smile turned up his lips. “Of course, if you thought of Uncle Duncan as a relation, then one could conceive that I am your closest relation. So if you will not give me permission, I could give it to myself.”

Her stomach squeezed tighter. She needed more time. “I wish you wouldn’t.”

He placed another kiss on one of her hands before releasing them then dipped his head in a graceful parting and left.

She closed the door after him and drew in an overdue breath, staring at the door. If she knew that everything would work out with Gerrit and that he would forego returning East, she would have let him kiss her. But with the future so uncertain, it was best to be cautious. Wasn’t it?

*What do I do now, Lord? Do I let my feelings loose? I’m afraid he may have already set them free. Please don’t let me be hurt again.*

## Chapter 16

Hannah was pleased to see Gerrit waiting for her in the same place he had run into her last week when she'd left Tiny's home. After escorting her to Iona's and staying for a short visit, he walked her home.

At her back door, Hannah turned to him with a smile. "Good night, Mr. Finnley. Thank you for the escort." She really didn't want the evening with him to end just yet.

He shook his head. "Gerrit. Why are you so stubborn about calling me by my Christian name?"

This was so much more fun. But it really seemed to be bothering him so she would surprise him. Soon.

His mouth turned up in a mischievous smile. "If you call me Mr. Finnley once more, I'll have to do something drastic."

"Like what, *Mr. Finnley*?" She liked teasing him, and it would draw out the evening a little longer.

He thought only a moment before he answered with raised his eyebrows. "I'll kiss you until your curls straighten. So no more Mr. Finnley."

He wouldn't. It was only an idle threat. She sensed he was more determined to get her to call him Gerrit than to *straighten her curls*. "Whatever you say . . . Mr. Finnley." She gasped at her boldness. She hadn't meant to say Mr. Finnley and turned to retreat inside.

"Not so fast." He pulled her into his arms. "You asked for this."

Her heart thundered like stampeding cattle. She had never been kissed before. "Gerrit," she managed to whisper.

"Too late," he whispered back and lowered his head to hers.

BOOM! Some explosion reverberated through the streets.

Gerrit jerked away, spinning around. "It came from that way." He took off on foot, running.

What was that?

She felt an emptiness at Gerrit abandoning her at the moment their relationship was about to move in a new direction. But she also knew that the noise they heard could only be an explosion. She hoped no one was hurt and hiked up her skirt to walk faster in the direction Gerrit had gone.