

Christmas in Evergreen: Bells are Ringing

by
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Hannah arrived at the museum a little after noon. She walked up to the entrance, loving the way the giant candy canes and lollipops were lined along the exterior of the building as if they were somehow guarding the place. The cheerful snowman by the door, with the huge poinsettia sprig on his top hat, said Christmas and cheer were in the air...even if surly Jeb Cooper was standing right beside it.

Hannah stopped the moment she saw Mr. Cooper turn around and almost bump into someone walking toward the tents and tables that had been set up for the Christmas Festival. He hurriedly moved out of that person's way, but then turned abruptly and almost bumped into another person. This too befuddled the man and Hannah noted his mood was the same as ever. With that in mind, she held the box with the strudel between her hands and closed her eyes to get in one last prayer before she had to meet with him.

"Mr. Cooper," she said seconds later, as she walked up behind him. "It's nice to see you."

He grumbled something when he turned to see her,

then huffed. "So. All this is for the Christmas Festival, is it?"

"Yes, sir," Hannah replied brightly. "You sure you won't stay for it?"

"Ms. Turner, you have my undivided attention. For the next..." He lifted his wrist to look at his watch. "One hour, exactly. Then I must catch my train."

"Well, I will personally drive you to the train station if you decide that you don't like what you see here." Where that confidence had come from, she had no idea, but she decided to roll with it.

Mr. Cooper continued to frown.

"But either way," she said and extended the box of strudel to him. "Merry Christmas."

He hadn't taken the box from her, but when they got inside the museum, she'd set the box down next to the entrance so she'd remember to give it to him again on his way out.

She walked them directly to the gift shop after they entered.

"We thought we'd fill the gift shop with the ornaments made by the Tinker Shop art classes." As she talked, he walked around looking at the many shelves stuffed with every conceivable ornament ever made in the town.

There were red trucks, bells, advent calendars, keys galore, snow globe replicas and snowmen hats.

"Only way to turn a profit," Mr. Cooper said gruffly.

Hannah wanted to clap with his almost imperceptible nod of approval. "Now, if you'll follow me this

way, I have a surprise.”

He granted her another grimace. “I’ve never been a fan of surprises.”

“Well, I think I’ve found a way to honor Evergreen’s history,” Hannah said, while walking ahead of him.

They moved through another hallway filled with displays, including the one with a life-size replica of the front of the Kringle Kitchen. She noticed him checking out each item in the displays. She slowed her stride to allow time for his perusal, and then happily continued on to the back room.

When she stopped in front of a closed door, she looked up at the sign and waited for Mr. Cooper to do the same.

It read, *The Jeb Cooper Room*, but he didn’t say that out loud.

He did, however, take off his hat, holding it in front of him with both hands. “What’ve you done?”

She stepped in front of him and opened the double doors to the newly decorated room. Excitement bubbled in the pit of her stomach as she waited for his reaction. Of course there was a Christmas tree in one corner, decorated in red, silver and white bulbs and ornaments, white lights twinkling brightly. That same color scheme stretched along garlands that hung around the room as a border near the ceiling and wrapped around the legs of tables throughout the space. On the back wall, dozens of hats hung around the picture of Hiram Cooper and a larger frame that explained the history of the Evergreen Hat Factory.

“It’s a tribute to the Evergreen Hat Factory,” she said, moving inside. “Our first industry. This building is where it all started.”

Mr. Cooper followed her inside. “You’ve created a display,” he said, and extended a hand toward the wall of hats, being careful not to touch anything. “About me, my family. And you’ve humiliated me in the process. Is that what you’ve decided to do, shame me?”

“No, no.” Hannah scrambled to figure out what was happening here. “It’s to honor you and the work that your family has done.”

“Hiram Cooper built this company with his hard work. And when he passed it down to good people who put their hearts and souls into it, it ended with me,” he said vehemently. “This just calls that out.”

“No,” Hannah insisted. “It’s not your fault. Businesses come and go.”

“I could’ve saved it,” he told her. “I let everyone down. My family and my sisters.” He stopped and huffed, shaking his head. “All right, we’re done here. I’m shutting this all down.”

He started walking toward the door but Hannah jumped in front of him. “What? No, Mr. Cooper, you can’t. It’s Christmas Eve; people are counting on us. The Christmas Festival starts in a few hours.”

“And I still own this building,” he said, putting up a hand to stop her from talking. “And if I want to take it back from the town, I certainly can. I’ve read the contract. While I may be—”

“Stubborn!” That was enough from him. Hannah

couldn't take it another second. "Look, if the story of this town tells me anything, it's that sometimes people remember things differently than how they actually happened, and that can make it difficult to see the truth and move forward." She only paused briefly, refusing to let him jump in with another argument. "Mr. Cooper, you've been holding on to a past that, frankly, you don't need to anymore. No one in this town holds anything against you."

For a few seconds Jeb Cooper only stared at her, and Hannah thought maybe, just maybe she'd finally gotten through to him. She was woefully wrong.

He stepped closer to her. "The only thing I'm holding on to is my decision not to open the museum."

Hannah was stunned and disappointed. "You wanted to leave your mark on Evergreen. That's all I've ever wanted too. We both can win if we just take a deep breath—"

"Ms. Turner," he said. "We've both failed. So it goes."

With that he walked out the door, leaving Hannah to stare after him in disbelief and fight back the tears that stung her eyes. She only stood there for a few seconds, refusing to let Jeb Cooper take up more of her time or emotions. She'd done all she could do; unfortunately, it wasn't enough. And now, she was afraid he was right: She'd failed.