

# To Nourish One Small Seed

by Tanaqui

The heat hit Trish as she pushed in through the door of the coffee shop. She hastily unwound the scarf that had protected her face from the wind outside and scanned the tables, wondering if Major Beck—Lieutenant Colonel Beck, she corrected herself—was already there. She'd been the first to arrive the last two weeks, but she'd been late leaving the office today.

Yes, there he was, his hand up to attract her attention. She hurried toward him, noting absently that he wasn't the only customer in uniform. Columbus was full of Army and Navy and Air Force personnel these days.

*Definitely the most handsome, though.* The thought surfaced unexpectedly as he got to his feet to greet her and politely help her out of her coat. She was glad the heat of the place gave an excuse for her flushed face.

"Sorry I'm late," she said hurriedly. "Got stuck on a call and then I had to go to a couple of different buildings...."

He smiled at her as he draped her coat carefully over one chair and pulled out another for her to sit down on. One of those shy smiles that mostly warmed his eyes. "It's quite all right. My meeting finished rather early." He gestured toward the almost empty coffee cup on the table.

Settling herself into the chair, she tucked her gloves away in her purse and brought out the thickly wadded envelope whose contents she'd been eager to share with him ever since it had arrived two days ago. Before she could begin to tell him about it, they were interrupted by the waitress.

"What can I get you folks? Another espresso?" She gestured toward the cup on the table.

"Please. And," Beck looked across at Trish, one eyebrow slightly raised, "a cappuccino, cinnamon not chocolate?"

Trish nodded, surprised he'd remembered. Clearing her throat, she managed to add, "Yes, please."

"Sure thing. Be right back." The waitress tucked her order pad into her apron pocket and headed away.

Turning back to Beck, Trish saw he was looking now at the envelope she held in her hands. "You're not planning to serve a compensation notice on *me*, are you?" He lifted his gaze to her face, the corners of his eyes crinkling to show her it was a joke.

She shook her head, smiling back at him. "No. Mimi wrote me." She pulled out the letter, a half dozen sheets covered in Mimi's neat, rounded handwriting. "So I've got all the news from—." She hesitated, the words *back home* on the tip of her tongue. The two of them had spent so much of their past three meetings reminiscing about the place they'd met and the year they'd spent there together that it felt a little like it was where they both came from.

"Jericho?" Beck finished for her, leaning forward, his hands clasped on the table in front of him.

She nodded, delighted to see his face had lit up as much she'd hoped it would. "It's a couple of weeks out of date—you know what the postal service is like these days—but there's so much to tell you." She unfolded the pages as she spoke, smoothing them out on the table. "Of course, Mimi's big news is that she's finally had the baby. It's a girl and they're calling her Pamela Bonnie after Mimi's mother and—."

She looked up at Beck and he nodded at her to show he understood. Understood, too, that she still felt partly responsible for Bonnie's death. Just like he did.

With a small shrug, she looked back down at the letter. Turning over the first page, she set it to one side. "I'll spare you all the details."

"Thank you." Beck sounded dryly amused.

Her own lips twitched in response; seemed like she'd judged his level of interest correctly. And there was plenty of other news to share. She scanned down the second page, skipping over Mimi's complaints about the labor and her praise for how good Stanley was with diapers and colic, half aware of Beck dealing with the waitress returning with their drinks.

"Oh!" She tapped the letter with her finger. "Mimi says Dale's opening up a third store. Or, rather, taking over an existing one that shut down after the attacks. In Goodland."

"That's quite an empire he's building." Beck sounded impressed, if no more surprised than Trish had been herself that Dale was making a success of the business. He'd always been a pretty resourceful kid and older than his years. "Just as long as he's not still using some of the more... interesting business practices he picked up."

Trish chuckled "You mean like hijacking trucks and smuggling? I'm sure Sheriff Green is keeping an eye on him."

"Eric's still sheriff?" A quick glance up showed her Beck had settled back in his chair, one hand toying with his coffee cup while he watched her.

"Uh-huh. Mimi's last letter said they had elections in November and voted him in properly. So now they're stuck with him for the next four years. Gray's still mayor, of course. She said, oh where was it," Trish riffled through the pages to find the right part of the letter, until the words jumped out at her, "something I thought you'd be interested in. Oh yes, here it is: Gray's trying to get money from one of the federal reconstruction funds to sort out the fire damage at the library and restock it. And Heather's gotten herself elected to the district school board, although goodness knows where she finds the time now she and Jake are starting up their own bus—."

She stopped, mid-word, aware of the sudden tension in the man across the table from her. Looking up, she saw Beck's jaw was set and his hand resting on the table had curled into a fist.

"I'm sorry." The apology died on her lips as he cut her off with an abrupt shake of the head. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath and then another.

Trish put down the letter and picked up her coffee cup, silently cursing herself as she sipped at the frothy liquid. She'd known as soon as she'd read the letter that there were parts she'd need to censor when she shared it. And there she'd been, carelessly babbling on....

She put her cup down again with a slight clatter that made her realize her own hands were shaking a little. Beck opened his eyes at the sound and gave her a tight smile.

"I'm sorry. I didn't expect it would...." His gaze slid away from hers, embarrassed. He cleared his throat.

"No, I'm sorry." Without thinking, she reached out and put her hand over his and squeezed it. He jumped at her touch and turned to look down at her hand covering his. His face tensed again, but he didn't draw his hand away and she took courage from that and went on, "I meant to not tell you. About that part, I mean." She waited for him to say something, but he didn't answer, his brow slightly furrowed as he carried on looking down at her hand, as if he found some meaning in the gesture she didn't understand. "Colonel?"

He slowly raised his gaze to meet hers, still with a distant expression in his eyes. She took her hand away, suddenly unsure of herself. Unsure of him. He gave her another forced smile. "Edward," he said softly. "You really must call me Edward. I'm sorry. I should have asked you before." He looked back down at his own hands and slowly and deliberately uncurled them, laying them flat on the table. "I remember asking Heather that."

Trish drew in a sharp breath, feeling an unexpected stab of hurt at the words. Heather. Always Heather. She had a sudden urge to reach across the table to give him a shake and cry out, "I'm here. Look at *me!* I'm here."

Then the impulse was gone, to be replaced by an ache in her chest. She sat up a little straighter and folded her own hands in her lap. "Edward," she repeated, his name tasting bittersweet on her tongue. Now that she recognized it wasn't just the pleasure of reminiscing with an old friend that had made her call out to him when she'd run into him on the street or which made these weekly meetings the brightest spot in her schedule, something to look forward to almost as soon as the previous one was over.

She'd always liked him more than she'd dared admit, hadn't she? Always tried to fool herself into not noticing that her heart raced a little faster whenever she saw him, convincing herself that she didn't feel a touch of giddiness when she managed to coax a rare smile out of him.

Because it had been only natural, hadn't it, to admire him for the way he'd been handling his peacekeeping duties firmly but sympathetically when she'd arrived in Jericho? Who wouldn't have enjoyed working alongside someone who was intelligent and courteous and respected her and her work? And was it so surprising, after he'd taken a wrong turn and realized it, and she'd seen the way he'd faced up to what he'd done and tried his best to make amends, that her respect and liking for him would have deepened?

And of course she'd always known he wasn't in the least bit interested in *her*. Not with the way his face lit up whenever Heather entered the room....

Now, at the sound of his name, he looked up at her, giving her one of those swift, shy smiles. Her stomach fluttered, and the ache in her chest got worse, because a smile and his name were only the beginning of what she wanted from him, and maybe all he'd ever offer her. But she smiled back at him, doing her best to hide from him how everything had changed for her. Likely succeeding, too, because she guessed his own feelings were so far from hers that it wouldn't even cross his mind how much *she* was hurting now.

He nodded at the letter. "So they're starting a business together?"

"Uh-huh." He seemed to expect her to go on, so she added, "They've bought a plane. They're going to do cropdusting and flying lessons and some other things."

He nodded his head again, his expression turned inward, taking in the news. "And they're happy?" It was only half a question, seeking confirmation rather than a denial.

"From what Mimi says, they seem to be, yes." She noticed how they were both avoiding saying their names.

"That's good." His tone was almost mechanical, like he was giving the expected response but didn't really believe what he was saying. He went on staring silently ahead, his eyes focused somewhere in the middle distance, clearly not seeing anything. She went on sitting there with her hands in her lap, looking at him, getting used to the ache in her heart.

At last, she realized her coffee was going cold. Picking up her cup, she took another sip. The movement seem to shake him out of his thoughts as well.

Giving her an apologetic grimace, he also reached for his cup. "So what else does Mimi say?" She could hear the forced cheerfulness in his voice as he gestured slightly in the direction of the letter with his cup.

"Oh. Well...." Trish put her cup back down and turned over another sheet, trying to remind herself just what it was she'd been so excited to be able to share with him. It seemed like half a life time ago since she'd pulled the letter out of her purse, rather than just a few minutes. "Let's see. Seems Stanley's been persuaded to start coaching Pee Wee football and Sam Hawkins is one of his star players. Allison's been accepted into the University of Nebraska and wants to join the FBI when she graduates. Darcy...."

Slowly, as she relayed the latest news, and he asked questions, and between them they called up past events, building one memory on another, both of them began to relax. His expression softened and she felt her own tension ebb away a little, though she was careful to guard her behavior so she didn't say something stupid. Still, she was surprised, after the coffee cups had been refilled and nearly an hour had passed, to realize she'd been babbling on about her own work, at his prompting, for the past few minutes.

She stopped, mid sentence, a flush rising to her cheeks. "I'm sorry. Here I am, going on about work, boring you."

He gave her a half smile, shaking his head. "Not boring at all. But," he checked his watch, "I do need to get back to the office, I'm afraid. So, next week?"

She busied herself with folding Mimi's letter and putting it back in its envelope and then putting the envelope back in her purse. Reason told her she probably should try to put him off, to stop them continuing down a path that would only make one or both of them unhappy or uncomfortable. But when she glanced up and saw the hopeful expression on his face as he waited for her answer, she didn't have the heart to. Even if his feelings weren't the same as hers, their meetings clearly were important to him. She suspected that, although he was no longer isolated by his rank and responsibilities, his strange history and private nature meant he probably hadn't made many friends here in Columbus.

"Of course." She nodded at him, not really looking at him, but sensing how pleased he was by the energy with which he got to his feet and reached for her coat, holding it out for her. She murmured her thanks as she slipped her arms into the sleeves and brought them forward again, preparing to shrug the coat into place—only to find he still had hold of it and was settling it onto her shoulders, his hands lingering a little before he let go.

She closed her eyes, acutely aware of his physical presence behind her, so close and yet with an unbridgeable gulf between them. Pulling in a deep breath, she opened her eyes and swung round to face him.

He was finishing pulling on his own coat and picking up his cap and gloves. He looked up, catching her eye. Then, much to her surprise, he took a step closer and reached out and grasped her arm. For a second, she thought he was going to lean forward and kiss her on the cheek. Then he froze. They stood like that for a moment, before he cleared his throat, his gaze sliding away from hers. "Have a good week, Trish," he murmured. Still not looking at her, he gave her arm a quick squeeze and turned and hurried away.

Trish stood staring after him, her heart thumping, trying to make sense of what had just happened. If she didn't know better—

She snorted quietly to herself. An hour ago, she hadn't known her own feelings. Maybe, just maybe, he didn't know his, either.

Feeling slightly giddy at the thought, she picked up her purse and followed him out. Peering in the direction she thought he would have taken, she saw him already half a block away, marching along at double quick time.

"You too, Edward," she answered him quietly, smiling at his retreating back, before she turned and headed the other way. "You too."

**Disclaimer:** This story is based on the Junction Entertainment/Fixed Mark Productions/CBS Paramount Television series *Jericho*. It was written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from it nor was any infringement of copyright intended.