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Her Amish  
Christmas  
Sweetheart  
Rebecca Kertz

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## Her Amish Christmas Sweetheart

### Аннотация

A Holiday Courtship Years ago, Peter Zook would have been thrilled to spend the Christmas season planning a surprise party with Meg Stoltzfus. But that was back when he still hoped to win her heart. Instead, he waited too long to speak up and now she's being courted by another man. Though Meg once harbored secret feelings for Peter, it seemed he would never notice her. So she's finally moving on. Yet, even as they butt heads over the party details, Meg and Peter's bond deepens beyond camaraderie and friendship. Will they continue to deny their true feelings, or will Peter and Meg give each other the ultimate gift this Christmas—their hearts? Women of Lancaster County: Hope and love abound in a small Amish town

## A Holiday Courtship

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“Ready to get started?”

Peter pulled out the chair next to Meg.

“Ja.” She tried to act casual with him so near.

“What's that?” He shifted closer and gestured toward the paper before her.

Meg felt her neck tingle. He smelled like soap, outdoors and something uniquely Peter. She'd never been so aware of him as a man. “I thought I'd make note of our ideas.”

“Gut idea.” He glanced up, and there was a jolt as she felt the impact of his gray gaze. “What shall we discuss first? The location? I have an idea that you may like.”

“I bet I have a better place,” she challenged.

“And where is this better place?” he asked with a little smirk. “You haven't heard mine yet.”

“Bishop John Fisher’s haus.”

Peter laughed.

“What’s so funny?” she asked, offended.

He sobered instantly. “We came up with the same idea.”

Meg blinked. “Honestly?”

“Ja!” They looked at each other and grinned.

“Looks like we’ve found something we both actually agree on!” Meg was pleased. Maybe this meeting would go smoother than the first one.

REBECCA KERTZ was first introduced to the Amish when her husband took a job with an Amish construction crew. She enjoyed watching the Amish foreman’s children at play and swapping recipes with his wife. Rebecca resides in Delaware with her husband and dog. She has a strong faith in God and feels blessed to have family nearby. Besides writing, she enjoys reading, doing crafts and visiting Lancaster County.

Her Amish Christmas Sweetheart

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Be completely humble and gentle;  
be patient, bearing with one another in love.

—Ephesians 4:2

For Linda C., a wonderful friend  
who is generous in spirit and love.

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[Chapter One](#)

November, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania

The Adam Troyer barn was filled to capacity with Amish youth. Young people stood near or sat on benches on both sides of three long tables. Plates with leftovers, snacks and plastic cups with the remnants of iced tea or lemonade littered the tabletops. Meg Stoltzfus and her sister Ellie attended tonight's singing with their friends, including one man from another church district, Reuben Miller, whom Meg had set her eye on from the first moment she met him, over two years ago.

"Ellie," Meg whispered, "Reuben asked to take me home."

"Again?" Ellie teased with a grin.

"Ja." Meg glanced longingly at Reuben. She'd first met him when he and his sister attended a singing at her cousin Eli's invitation, and she hadn't seen him again until three weeks prior, when he'd sought her attention after an unexpected encounter in Whittier's Store.

“Go,” Ellie urged, startling her from her thoughts. “You don’t want to keep him waiting.”

Meg nodded. “I’ll be home soon.” She turned with a smile, but her good humor vanished as she encountered Peter Zook. She had fallen for him when she was sixteen, and she’d thought they were friends. But she’d been wrong, and she’d found out the hard way after accidentally eavesdropping on Peter and his brother. Peter had told Josiah that she was spoiled and in need of discipline. She’d been devastated. Every time she saw him now, she felt her hackles rise.

Determined not to allow him to get to her, Meg smiled politely. “Beautiful night, ja, Peter?”

“It’s supposed to rain,” he said.

She stiffened and turned. “Rain? Honestly, Peter? That’s all you have to say?” She fought irritation and won. Her smile became genuine. “Rain or not, I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening.” Then she walked to where Reuben waited for her near the door, settling her gaze on him.

“Ready?” Reuben’s appreciative smile was a huge boost to her morale as she reached his side. The complete opposite of Peter Zook in looks, Reuben had blond hair and pale blue eyes. Peter, on the other hand, had dark hair and a gaze that was currently a stormy gray.

She froze, then berated herself. Why was she comparing the two men? Why think of Peter at all?

The night was balmy and pleasant as she and Reuben stepped

outside. The stars were glistening points of light in a clear, dark sky. Rain, Meg thought. Huh!

Reuben helped her into his buggy, then climbed onto the seat next to her. She studied him as he picked up the leathers and steered the horse down the dirt lane and onto the main road.

She frowned. What was the matter with her? Reuben was handsome, kind and good-humored. Yet her joyful mood had dimmed.

Because of Peter Zook. Peter had stolen the fun from her evening.

Meg released a calming breath as she studied the hands that held the reins. She'd felt the calluses on Reuben's fingers when he'd helped her onto the seat. He'd told her recently that he'd been working with a construction company. Strong, hardworking hands. Hands that could belong to a working husband.

Silence surrounded them as Reuben drove the buggy down the dark, deserted road. The only sounds were the clip-clop of horse hooves and the sound of carriage wheels on pavement.

Should she start a conversation? Meg wondered, uneasy with the silence.

"You're quiet," Reuben said softly.

"So are you," she replied with a light laugh.

He turned to regard her with curious eyes. "Did you enjoy the singing?"

"Ja. Did you?" She met his light blue eyes, then looked away from the intensity of the gaze.

“I did because you were there.”

“That’s kind of you to say.”

“Tis the truth.” He smiled. She met his eyes again and managed to smile back. “Meg?”

“Ja, Reuben?”

“I hope one day soon you’ll allow me to court you.”

She caught her breath. “You want to court me?” It was what she’d longed for, wasn’t it?

“Ja.” His lips curved. “I know it’s been only a few weeks since we started seeing each other, but I care about you. I can see us having a family together.”

She kept silent, unsure what to say. This is what I wanted. Yet despite his willingness to wait, she felt as if he was rushing her into a serious relationship. The image of Peter Zook entered her mind, and she fought to banish it.

“What do you think, Meg? Can you see me in your future? Can you see us marrying and having children together?” He steered his horse into a right turn off the main road.

“This isn’t the way to my haus,” she said, feeling vaguely uneasy.

“Ja, I know. I thought I’d take you home the long way.” He regarded her warmly as he touched her cheek. “I’m not ready for tonight to end. I want to spend more time with you.”

Meg struggled to breathe. “Reuben—”

“Don’t worry. I won’t pressure you.”

She relaxed. “Why me? Why now?”

“I’ve been working to save money, Meg. I wasn’t ready before for a wife and family.” He flashed her a tender smile. “I am now. And when I saw you again, I remembered the one evening we spent together, and I just knew. I want you as my wife.”

Meg hid her shock. She didn’t know how to respond to him. He seemed determined to marry her. And hadn’t she always wanted to marry and have children? To prove to her parents that she was strong and would make someone a good wife? And she’d been fixated on Reuben for a long time.

“I’m a patient man,” he said softly. “I can wait until you’re ready.”

As if their wedding were a foregone conclusion. Meg looked out the window, watching the passing scenery. Reuben’s confidence bothered her when she should be flattered. She liked him. He was a nice man. But he wasn’t what she’d expected.

This is all Peter’s fault, she thought bitterly. She’d been trying to recover from her unrequited love for Peter. She’d been foolish enough to be convinced that Reuben was the one, despite the fact that she barely knew him. She’d been obsessed with finding him again. Now that he was in her life, she shouldn’t be surprised that her feelings for him weren’t exactly what she had expected—or hoped for. She should tell him. It wouldn’t be right to allow him to hope in vain.

But how would she know that he wasn’t the right man for her if she didn’t give him a chance?

Clouds in the distance blanketed the sky, covering the stars. It

started to drizzle. She scowled. Peter was right. But how could he have possibly known? Within minutes, the drizzle became a mist that coated the roadway and covered the buggy's windshield.

"Is something wrong?" Reuben asked.

She bit her lip. Should she explain how she was feeling? Give him a chance. "Nay, but I—" A car came around a corner too fast and sideswiped the buggy, forcing the horse off the road. "Reuben!" she screamed.

Meg anticipated her death as the animal reared up on its hind legs and then bolted, dragging the vehicle down an embankment. Pain reverberated in her head as it slammed against the carriage's sidewall. She felt a jerk, then the buggy tilted and rolled. Her body lurched painfully as it continued to tumble down the hill.

The pitching stopped suddenly with a splash. Searing agony and cold wetness enveloped her just before she blacked out.

\* \* \*

Peter watched Meg leave with a sick heart. Even after all these years, he couldn't forget what she'd said to him after she'd overheard him talking with his brother about her. He'd been mortified to realize that she'd heard him speak of his feelings for her—and she'd been upset by it. He'd thought they were friends, and he'd hoped for more. Even if she hadn't returned his love, she could have let him down gently, he thought bitterly. Instead, she'd been angry and spoken scathingly to him.

"I overheard what you told your bruder, Peter Zook!" she'd snapped. "You have some nerve. I thought I knew you, but I was

wrong. From now on, stay away from me! Just leave me alone!”

Yet despite her hurtful words, he'd been foolish enough to hope things between them would eventually change, so he'd been prepared to wait. After all, she'd been only sixteen. He'd hoped that with maturity they would come to an understanding, and he'd have a chance at winning her heart. But it would never happen now. Meg finally had the man she wanted—and it wasn't and would never be him. What was it about her that wouldn't let him move on and forget her?

Peter scowled. He knew she'd obsessed over Reuben, but he'd figured it was only a matter of time before Meg realized that she'd been infatuated with a memory. But now everything had changed, with Reuben's return to Meg's life. The man obviously reciprocated her affection.

His stomach clenched painfully. He couldn't stand seeing her with Reuben. He should have tried harder to become friends with her again, but he'd hoped that if he stood back, watched and waited, she'd eventually soften toward him.

I've been too patient. I've waited too long. Years before that awful day she'd spurned his love, he should have tried to woo her.

She wants nothing to do with me. He needed to forget about her and move on. He needed to wed soon. His father was getting too old to farm, and with Josiah married and living elsewhere, it was up to Peter to take over the family farmhouse. Once he married, his parents would move into the dawdi haus on the property where Grandfather and Grandmother Hershberger had

lived before they'd passed on. His father had mentioned several times in the last month wanting to move. An accident years ago had left his dat with a severely broken leg, which still pained him on occasion.

Peter wanted his parents to be happy. He knew they were upset because his sister Barbara hadn't been home in over a year. Knowing his father would be delighted by the plan, Peter firmed his resolve to find a woman to marry before November of next year, the time for Amish weddings.

There were other girls within his community. Nice girls. Young women who seemed to like him. He would find a new love to marry. Someone like his good friend Agnes Beiler. Lately he'd glimpsed something in her gaze that hinted she was open to more than friendship with him.

Unfortunately, he would be working with Meg Stoltzfus in the coming weeks till Christmas, whether he wanted to or not. This morning his father had approached him and asked that he help with a surprise party for his mother. His mam's birthday was on Christmas Day—and so was Meg's father's. His dat and Meg's mam wanted the two of them to plan a joint surprise birthday party. He once would have looked forward to spending time with her, when he'd still had hopes of winning her heart. But not now. Planning a party with her was the last thing he wanted—or needed.

Perhaps he worried needlessly. Meg might refuse to work with him, and he'd be off the hook.

Yet how could he deny his mother a birthday party? His mam's father—his grossdaddi—had died several months ago, and Grossmammi had followed him to the grave less than a week later. It had been a terrible time for his mam and family. While his mother had a strong belief that her parents were with the Lord, Mam still felt the pain of her loss.

So he would work with Meg if it meant bringing a glimmer of happiness into his mother's life. Mam was a wonderful wife and mother, and Peter would not fail in the task his father had assigned him. Whether or not Meg wanted it, they would plan a party together that neither parent would forget.

Forcing Meg from his thoughts, he approached his friend. Agnes Beiler was a kind girl with an inherent sweetness. With the singing over, he decided to offer her a ride home. Although Agnes lived in the next church district, he figured he could manage the distance from the Troyer farm to the Beiler residence in a reasonable amount of time before heading home. Peter studied her, enjoying the view, anticipating taking their friendship to the next level. It just made solid sense to fall for a good friend. Friendship was a good basis for marriage.

He leaned close and softly asked, "Agnes, may I take you and your sister home?"

She beamed at him. "Ja. That would be wunderbor, Peter. Just let me tell Alice."

He watched her approach her sister, who briefly glanced in his direction and then nodded. He saw Agnes move to her younger

brother, who had brought the girls. The sisters then headed in his direction, clearly delighted for him to take them home. A mental image of Meg intruded, but he banished it. Agnes was just the person to get her out of his thoughts—and his heart.

The young women reached him. He grinned. “All set?”

“Ja. Are you sure you don’t mind?” Agnes had likely suspected his feelings for Meg, and her eyes were sympathetic as she gazed at him.

“Nay, I’m more than happy to take you.” He regarded her with warmth, and was pleased to see Agnes’s eyes light up and her lips curve with pleasure. He assisted the sisters into the open buggy and then steered the horse toward the Joshua Beiler farm. The ride went quickly. It started to drizzle as he helped the sisters from the vehicle.

“I’ll see you again soon.” Agnes hurried toward the house after her sister, then waved from the front stoop.

As he headed for home, Peter brightened at the possibility of a new, meaningful relationship with Agnes. There were no streetlights and the road was dark. Rain, which began as a mist, fell in earnest, and he had to watch carefully. The family buggy would have offered him some protection from the rain, but his parents had taken it to his sister Annie’s for a light supper. Unfortunately, he’d forgotten to put back the umbrella usually stored under the wagon seat after Annie had returned it last week.

Water pooled on the brim of his Sunday best black felt hat and ran in rivulets down his back. A light wind gust tossed the rain

into his face, and he used his sleeve to wipe his eyes. He would be soaked before he got home, but there was no getting around it. He caught sight of an Amish buggy's running lights directly ahead on his side of the road. The headlights of an oncoming car blinded him for a second and then veered. Peter watched with growing horror as the car took the turn too fast and struck the vehicle ahead of him. The horse reared up and ran off the road. His eyes widened as the carriage rolled, out of control, and the car raced past him.

Stunned, Peter spurred his horse into a canter. His heartbeat thundered in his chest when he spied the buggy upended on the far side of the creek. After braking, reining in and finally securing his horse to a tree, he tossed his hat on the ground and ran to the water's edge. Only to find Reuben Miller lying near the edge of the stream.

Peter ran to him. "Reuben! Are you oll recht?" He gently shook him. "Reuben!"

"Meg." His gaze unfocused, Reuben attempted to sit up, grimaced, then fell back and closed his eyes. The man had been thrown from the vehicle.

"Meg is with you?" Peter asked, overcome with sudden stark terror. This wasn't the road to the Arlin Stoltzfus farm!

Reuben groaned. "Meg."

"Meg!" The rain fell in earnest as Peter waded into the water toward the overturned buggy. By some miracle, the horse had broken free when the vehicle had overturned, and now stood

several yards away, a piece of the damaged harness still attached to it. “Meg!”

The water was deeper than he'd thought. He held his breath and dived under. He panicked when he didn't see her. Gasping, he shot up for air, then, frantic to find her, went under again. Adrenaline rushed through him, allowing him to stay underwater longer. His lungs hurt, in need of oxygen, and he lunged up to the surface once more. And then he saw Meg, several feet away. Face up, but submerged in water, her dark hair floating about her eerily, her legs wedged under the damaged vehicle. His throat tightened as he battled fear.

Meg! He drew a deep breath and swam underwater until he was by her side. He reached out a hand, grabbed her arm and gently tugged. His heart thundered with gratitude as he was able to pull her legs from under the buggy. Please, Lord, let her be well. He continued to silently pray for her.

Finally, he had her close, and he raised her head above the water as he swam with her to the shallows, where he could stand. Then he swung her up into his arms and cradled her against his chest as he carried her to land.

Emotion lurched within his chest as he tenderly brushed back wet strands of dark hair from her unusually pale face. He set her gently on the ground close to Reuben. Please, Father, help me help her. I'll leave her alone. I'll move on with my life. Please just let her live!

He knelt beside Meg. When he saw that she wasn't breathing,

his blood ran cold. Peter turned her onto her belly, then pressed down on her back several times in a steady rhythm. When she didn't respond, he turned her over again, tilted her head back and bent to give her mouth-to-mouth. Her lips were soft but cold. As he drew breath, then blew air into her lungs, he felt his fear escalate, but he remained focused as he worked to save her life. He stopped the breaths to press his hands below her sternum a few times, then continued mouth-to-mouth. He prayed he was doing correctly what he'd learned from a first-aid course.

Meg sputtered and gagged. Dizzy with relief, Peter quickly turned her over yet again, and with his arm beneath her shoulders, held her up as she vomited water. Tears filled his eyes as she coughed, then took several rough, gasping breaths. He waited until she quieted, then eased her onto her back. When he saw that she was breathing normally again, he offered up a silent prayer of thanks. Then he moved to check on Reuben.

"Reuben, I'm going to get help. Meg is right here next to you."  
The man groaned.

"Reuben, do you understand? Meg is oll recht." He hoped and prayed it was true.

When Reuben didn't answer, Peter raced up to the road. As a vehicle approached, he waved his arms and shouted, but the driver zipped by. This section of road was dark and lonely, and he feared he'd be unable to get Meg and Reuben the medical attention they needed. He caught sight of another car. This time he ran into the road to flag it down, and prayed the driver would

stop in time to avoid hitting him.

The car slowed. Peter moved off the road as the vehicle pulled next to him, and someone rolled down the passenger window. It was a middle-aged couple, the man in the driver's seat.

“Do you need help?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Do you have a phone?” When she said she did, he asked, “Would you call for medical assistance? There's been an accident. My friends—they're down by the creek.”

The man parked his car while the woman dialed emergency services. Peter paced, anxious to get Meg and Reuben the help they needed.

Meg's near drowning had flattened him. He'd managed to save her, but what if she'd been underwater too long? He wanted her to be all right. He loved her. He closed his eyes and sent up another prayer.

The woman stepped out of the car, drawing his attention. “An ambulance is on its way.”

“Thank you,” Peter said.

Within minutes, the ambulance arrived, and he watched helplessly as the paramedics rushed toward the creek. He saw them examine Reuben and Meg before carefully lifting Meg onto a stretcher. The EMTs carried her up the incline to the road. A second ambulance arrived on the scene, and the medics hurried toward Reuben.

Peter approached Meg's stretcher. “Is she all right?”

“We'll know more after the doctor examines her in the

hospital.” The EMT gazed at Peter through narrowed eyes. “You know her?”

“Ja, we belong to the same church,” he said. After a brief hesitation, he added, “My sister is married to her cousin.”

Peter stared with concern as they carried the stretcher toward the ambulance. To his shock, Meg’s eyelids flickered without opening. “Reuben?” she said.

The technician met his gaze. Peter gestured toward the stretcher currently being carried up from the water’s edge. The man nodded with understanding.

“He’s getting medical attention,” the technician told her.

Meg didn’t open her eyes. “Oll recht?”

Peter’s heart thumped hard as he studied her. “She asked if he is all right,” he told the EMT.

“He’s awake and responding,” the man said. “He’ll be taken to the hospital for a complete checkup.” He and his coworker hefted Meg’s stretcher into the ambulance.

The other workers carried Reuben toward the second emergency vehicle. Peter approached it. “I’ll get word to his family.” The EMT nodded.

“Meg?” Reuben muttered.

“She’s on her way to the hospital,” he said. “She asked about you.” He felt a pang when Reuben sighed and closed his eyes.

Peter stepped back and watched while the EMTs entered their vehicles and started their engines. He felt chilled as he stood in the heavy downpour as the ambulances left. Lord, please help

her. He stared at the vehicles' bright, multicolored flashing lights as they dimmed with distance, then disappeared from sight. He retrieved Reuben's horse, tied it to the back of his buggy and headed toward the Miller farm to return the animal.

## Chapter Two

Meg woke up in pain. Even with her eyes closed, she could tell by the familiar antiseptic smell that she was in the hospital. Her head hurt, but the heavy weight bearing down on her leg felt worse. She shifted and moaned as pain permeated every inch of her body. She opened her eyes and tried to sit up, then gasped at the searing agony in her left leg. She lay whimpering as she prayed for relief. Make it stop. Please, Lord, make it stop! Tears spilled down her cheeks as she continued to suffer.

"Meg?" a familiar voice said.

A face loomed in her line of vision as she opened her eyes. "Nell?"

"Ja, schweschter. How are you feeling?"

"Awful. I hurt everywhere, especially my leg." She turned her head to meet her sister's gaze and groaned. The simple movement had hurt.

"Hold on, Meg. I'll get help." Then Nell disappeared.

"Nell!" She felt alone and scared. How badly was she injured? Her sister wasn't gone long. "Meg, I've brought a nurse. She'll give you something for the pain."

"What happened?"

Nell, who'd been watching the nurse insert a needle into Meg's

IV, glanced at her with concern. “You don’t remember?”

“Nay.”

“You were in an accident last night. You and Reuben. He was driving you home when a car struck his buggy and forced it from the road.”

It had been raining. She recalled the terror she’d felt as she saw the car’s headlights, felt the horse rear and the buggy pick up speed as it upended and rolled. She’d felt a searing pain, heard the splash of cold water before it enveloped her—and then nothing. “I remember now.” She felt drowsy all of a sudden, and her pain eased. “Is he oll recht?”

“Reuben?” Nell asked.

“Ja.” She had a vague impression of hearing someone’s voice after the accident. “How did I get here?”

“By ambulance. Reuben did, too. You have a concussion and some bruising.” She hesitated. “Your left leg is broken.”

Meg shifted and suddenly realized that the heavy weight on her leg was a cast. Her breath hitched. “How bad is Reuben hurt?”

“He fared better than you. He has some bumps and bruises, as well as a concussion, but no broken limbs.”

“Is he here?” Meg asked drowsily.

“Ja, in a room down the hall. The nurse told me he’ll be released today.” Nell grew quiet. “You nearly drowned. Reuben pulled you out of the water. He saved your life.”

A man she could rely on, she thought. Meg shivered. “The

water was so cold.” She got chilled just thinking about it. “I’m so tired.” She fought to keep her eyes open.

“Tis the pain medication. Rest.” Her sister covered her with another blanket.

The warmth and the weight made her sigh. “Where’s Dat and Mam?”

“Downstairs eating breakfast. I sent our sisters home. Everyone has been here all night. They didn’t want to leave, but I insisted.”

“Gut,” she murmured sleepily. “Danki, Nell.” She managed to open one eye. “You’re newly married. You shouldn’t be here.”

“Don’t you worry. James isn’t far. Sleep, Meg. We’ll be here when you wake up.”

Almost immediately, Meg drifted into sleep. When she next opened her eyes, she saw that she had slept for some time, for the light came through the window from a different angle. She tried to rise and cried out. Her leg throbbed as she fell back again.

Her father bolted up out of a chair near her bedside, drawing her attention. “Meg, dochter, you want to sit up?”

“Dat.” She blinked back tears. “I want to, but it hurts too much when I try.”

He reached toward the side of her bed. “I’m going to raise your head some. Tell me if it hurts.”

Her bed rose slowly, and while Meg felt the movement, the shift didn’t cause terrible pain. “That’s gut.” She managed a smile. “Danki.”

He nodded and stepped back to examine her carefully. "I'm glad you're awake. We've been worried."

"I'm sorry, Dat." She could only imagine what her family must have felt after receiving news of the accident.

"Not your fault," her father said with a slight smile. "All that matters is that you're alive and will recover."

"Ja, I'll be fine." She studied his tired features with concern. It looked as if he had aged several years in one night. The knowledge that it was her fault upset her. "You should go home and rest. Nell said you were here all night."

"You were in an accident. Where else would I be but by your side?"

"And now it's time for you to go home."

He waved her suggestion aside. "Not yet."

She worried that the accident would cause him to be more protective of her than he already was. Ever since her last hospital stay, he'd tried to shelter her from every little thing. Fortunately, during the past two years, she'd been able to stand up to him a bit, and he'd finally learned to relax. Now her new injuries would take away that freedom she'd fought so hard for.

"Nell said that Reuben is oll recht."

Dat nodded. "He'll be discharged today. He wants to stop in to see you before he leaves."

Her mother came into the room. "Meg!" She hurried toward the bed. "You're awake."

Meg managed to grin. "Ja, Mam."

Nell entered next, and then James, her husband of just over a week.

“Meg, it’s good to see you awake and smiling,” her brother-in-law said.

“I told you we wouldn’t be far.” Nell eyed her closely, her gaze sharp. “How are you feeling? Still in pain?”

“A little, but not it’s not as bad as before,” Meg assured her. “How long did I sleep?”

“Four hours,” her father said.

Meg was alarmed. “Four hours!”

“You needed the rest,” her mother murmured soothingly.

Her injuries had kept her family from their beds, and she felt guilty. “Please go home. I’ll be fine. You all need to sleep.” She captured her father’s gaze. “Please, Dat?”

“We’ll go, but we’ll be back to visit this evening,” her father said.

“Tomorrow is soon enough,” Meg insisted. “You can’t be traveling back and forth. ’Tis too much.” She bit her lip then winced. “Is every part of me bruised?”

“Nay,” Mam said too quickly.

Meg offered a lopsided smile. “I bet I have a black eye.” She saw the truth in her father’s gaze. Things could have been much worse, she realized. She recalled her last time in the hospital, when a ruptured appendix had nearly caused her death. Some bruises and a broken bone would heal.

“You don’t look bad,” Nell said.

Meg snorted. “It doesn’t matter how awful I look when there is nothing I can do about it.” She studied her family, recognizing the exhaustion caused by their night of worry and fear. “I love you all, but go home. I’ll be fine.” She held up the nurse-call button. “I have everything I need.”

Reuben came into the room, but stopped abruptly when he saw her family.

Dat glanced at the young man. “We should leave.”

“Please don’t leave on my account,” he said.

“They’re leaving because of me,” Meg explained, her lips curving. “I told them to go.” She looked at her father. “They haven’t slept.”

Reuben approached the end of her bed. He froze when her father placed a hand on his shoulder. “Danki for saving her,” Dat said.

To her amazement, Reuben blushed and looked slightly uncomfortable. “I...I’m sorry about the accident.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Her father met her gaze. “We’ll see you again soon, dochter.” He moved to leave, and her family followed.

“Be careful going home,” she called out.

Each member of her family murmured quietly to Reuben as they passed him.

“Won’t you sit a minute?” she asked softly, as she wondered what they’d said.

Reuben moved quickly then, as if eager to please, and took

the seat her father had vacated. “You oll recht?”

“I’m fine. No serious injuries.” She saw relief settle on his features. She studied him and immediately noted huge bruises on his left cheek and forehead. “Your face... Doesn’t it hurt?”

His mouth curved crookedly. “A little. And yours?”

She shrugged, and winced with the simple movement. “I’m achy but I’ll survive.” She grinned to reassure him.

He studied her with concern. “Meg, I’m sorry—”

She saw regret flicker in his blue eyes. “Nay! Dat’s right. It wasn’t your fault. The car hit us.”

He sighed. “I’m afraid I’m a little foggy about what happened.”

Meg was concerned. “You don’t remember anything?”

“I recall a blinding light.”

“The car’s headlights.”

He nodded. “The car hit my buggy.”

Meg regarded him with amusement. “Ja, it was traveling too fast around a curve and struck us. Your horse reared up and bolted off the road and then...”

“The buggy rolled,” Reuben said hoarsely. “I remember that, but what happened afterward?”

“You must have whacked your head hard.”

“Ja.” He stood and gently took hold of her hand. “You must have, too.” He studied her with troubled blue eyes. “Meg, I’d never do anything to hurt you intentionally.”

The man was sweet, and she was grateful that he’d saved her life. She felt a wave of warm gratitude toward him. “I know.”

He didn't move. He simply held her hand and gazed at her with affection that made her feel increasingly uncomfortable. He smiled and toyed with her fingers until Meg closed her eyes and silently prayed that he'd leave.

\* \* \*

Peter couldn't get Meg out of his mind. Which was why he drove the two hours to the hospital to make sure she was all right. He parked his buggy near a hitching post, tied up his horse, then hurried inside to the information desk. "Can you tell me where to find Meg Stoltzfus? She's a patient."

The woman behind the counter searched the computer on her desk. "Room 202," she said. "The stairs are to the right. The elevator is farther down the hall."

"Thank you." Peter ran up the stairs to the second floor and followed the signs that led him to Meg's room. His heart started to beat rapidly as he heard voices. He hesitated at the door, then peeked inside—and froze when he saw Reuben Miller at Meg's bedside. The man's face was bruised, but he was smiling affectionately at Meg as he held her hand.

Peter quietly backed away from the room and headed downstairs, his heart aching at the sight of them together. His first instinct was to go home, but then he thought better of it. He had come all this way to make sure Meg was all right. He refused to leave without talking with her. She wouldn't be glad to see him, but he couldn't care less. He needed to know if he'd caused her serious injury when he'd pulled her from the water.

It was well past noon, and he was hungry. He hadn't eaten since an early breakfast. He'd grab something from the hospital cafeteria before he returned to Meg's. If Reuben was still there, he'd go ahead and visit her, anyway. But he preferred to see Meg alone.

After lunch, he took the elevator back to her room. He paused before entering. Meg lay in bed, staring out the window as if lost in thought. She was alone. He stepped inside, and as if sensing him, she turned.

“Peter.”

“Hallo, Meg.” He approached, noting a myriad of expressions crossing her face. He sucked in his breath as he studied her. There were bruises on her forehead and left cheek, and around her left eye. Had he done that to her? “How are you feeling?”

Her lips twisted in a lopsided smile. “I've been better.”

He nodded, taking in every inch of her features. Even battered and bruised, she was still the prettiest girl he'd ever known. “I... How bad are your injuries?”

“Is your family here?”

“Nay, I came alone.”

“What are you doing here?” she asked abruptly, and he tried not to flinch. Would it always be this way between them?

She released a sharp breath. “I'm sorry. I'm feeling out of sorts, but there is no need for me to be rude.”

Peter cocked an eyebrow but didn't say anything. Meg flushed, and he softened his expression. “You're in pain. Do you want the

nurse?”

Relief settled on her features. “Nay, I’m oll recht. My leg aches, but I’ll live.”

His gaze fell on the bedcovers, identifying the lump beneath them. “You broke your leg.” Did she break it when he’d pulled her from under the buggy? His belly burned at the thought.

“Ja. That’s what hurts the most.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

She looked stunned by his concern. “I... Peter, I appreciate your concern but—”

“You don’t want it.”

To his shock, she shook her head. “I don’t deserve it.” She looked away. “I haven’t exactly been nice to you.”

He shrugged. “As I recall, you were very polite the night of the singing, before you left.” He paused. “I was rude.”

“You warned me about the rain.” She shifted in bed, and he saw her wince at the slight movement. “I don’t know how you knew.”

“Ja, well, I have a confession to make,” he said. Curiosity entered her blue eyes as she waited for him to finish. His lips twisted. “I didn’t know it was going to rain when I said it. I was just...” He couldn’t continue. The knowledge that he’d said it simply to ruin her night made him feel small and ashamed.

To his surprise, Meg laughed.

He stared at her, then found himself grinning. “I’m glad you think it’s funny.”

“I didn’t then, but I do now. I guess the accident put things into perspective for me.”

Peter stared at her, mesmerized by her bright azure eyes, one sporting a black bruise. Something kicked in his gut as he studied her. If only things could be different between them. But he reminded himself that she was in love with Reuben, and he had Agnes now. “I’m sorry you went through that.”

Her eyelashes flickered. “You sound sincere.”

“Have I been so terrible to you?” he asked quietly. When she opened her mouth and then promptly closed it, he said, “I see.”

“Peter.”

“’Tis fine, Meg. I understand.” He shifted on his feet. “I’m sorry if what I said hurt you.” He was referring to when she was sixteen and hadn’t lived long in Happiness. “I’d hoped that after all this time, we could be friends.” He couldn’t read her demeanor. When she didn’t respond, he sighed. “You need your rest. I should leave.” He started toward the door, then stopped. “How is Reuben? Is he oll recht?” he asked, not wanting to give away that he’d seen the two of them together.

Meg’s expression warmed. “He’s well. He’s been discharged.” She studied her hands as if her fingers were fascinating. “Did you know that he rescued me? He pulled me out of the water.” She rubbed the side of her face where another bruise had formed.

“I hadn’t heard.” Something jolted in Peter’s chest, but he didn’t refute her statement. It didn’t matter that it was he and not Reuben who had rescued her. The only thing that mattered was

that Meg was alive and well, and on the road to recovery. “He must be glad he was able to help you,” he said carefully.

“I suppose.” She frowned. “When I thanked him, he seemed uncomfortable, as if he didn’t feel like a hero.” She looked thoughtful. “He told me he doesn’t remember what happened after the accident.”

Peter nodded in understanding. Reuben obviously felt uncomfortable because he couldn’t recall pulling Meg from the creek. “He hit his head?”

“Ja, he has a concussion.” She closed her eyes for a moment before opening them again.

“Yet they are sending him home and keeping you here,” he murmured.

“Just until tomorrow. Then I’ll be released.” She gestured toward her IV. “They’re pumping me with antibiotics to prevent infection in my lungs.”

“That makes sense.” He saw her eyes drift shut and he stepped back. “I’ll be heading home. Is there anything I can do for you before I go?”

Eyes closed, she shook her head.

“Get well, Meg,” he said softly.

Her eyelashes flickered before she looked at him. “Danki, Peter,” she murmured. “It was nice of you to come.”

“Take care of yourself,” Peter said, before he turned and left—and fought the urge to glance back. Seeing her again made it difficult to forget her...and how much he’d loved her.

As he climbed into his buggy minutes later, he had a sudden longing to see Agnes. He'd drive over to her family's farm before heading home. Because it was suddenly imperative that he see her today.

### Chapter Three

"Are you ready to go?" Meg's dat asked as he entered her room.

Rick Martin, their English neighbor, was there to take them home. Grabbing her crutches, Meg rose on her one good foot. "I'm ready," she said softly. She glanced toward the door behind her father. "Where's Mam?"

"She's giving the nurses the apple pies she baked for them."

"How many?" Meg asked.

Her father shrugged. "Four."

She laughed, feeling warmth for her thoughtful mother. "I wish I could have seen the looks on their faces when she gave them the pies."

As she and her father left her room, Meg caught sight of her mother chatting with the women in the nurses' station.

"Mam," she said as she approached.

"Gut," Mam said. "We can finally get you home."

Nurse Nancy went for a wheelchair. When she returned, she helped Meg get seated and then gave her final instructions on the antibiotic medicine that she'd be taking for the next ten days at home, along with a slip of paper with appointment details for a follow-up with the doctor. Nancy rolled the wheelchair toward

the elevator, which opened as they drew near. Meg was surprised to see her sister emerge.

“Look who I found downstairs!” Ellie exclaimed.

“It’s the young man who came to see if you were all right yesterday,” Nancy said.

Meg immediately thought of Peter, until Reuben stepped out of the elevator behind Ellie. Looking handsome despite the bruises on his cheek and forehead, he approached.

“I heard you were going home today.” His blue eyes warmed as he studied her. “I wanted to see you before you left. I hope you don’t mind.”

“We’re glad you came,” Mam assured him, and Meg could hear warmth in her mother’s voice.

Reuben chatted as he accompanied them to the ground floor and then to the car. Meg vaguely heard what he said. For some reason, all she could think about was Peter’s visit to her hospital room yesterday. Had he really come because he was concerned? What had he heard that made him travel all this way just to see her?

Whatever his reason, she was surprised and a little pleased that he’d taken the time to visit her. Ellie had urged her to figure out a way for them to get along. From what he’d said, Peter wanted the same thing. If not for Reuben, she would have died from the accident. Life is too short to hold a grudge. Surely she could put the past where it belonged, and forgive and forget what he’d said.

After he walked them to Rick’s car, Reuben left, after

promising to visit her later in the week. Once home, her father thanked Rick for driving them, then helped Meg into a chair in their great room and then grabbed a cushioned stool to rest her leg on.

“Danki.” She sat back and closed her eyes...and soon drifted to sleep.

Meg woke sometime later. She didn’t think she’d slept long, judging by the sunlight shining through the great room windows. Her leg hurt, and she shifted in the chair to find a better position just as her youngest sister, Charlie, entered the room.

“Meg!” she exclaimed. “You’re awake. I’ve been wanting to talk with you. I’m sorry I didn’t get back to the hospital before you came home.”

Her sister’s boundless energy was evident in her sparkling green eyes. Charlie pulled a chair close and studied Meg.

“Charlotte May,” her mother said as she entered the room. “Did you wake up your sister?”

“Nay, Mam. She was already awake.”

“She needs her rest. Run along and finish your chores.” As Charlie left, Mam turned to her. “Do you think you’ll feel well enough to come on visiting Sunday? We’ll be going to Aunt Katie’s.”

Meg hesitated. Would she be able to manage a day’s outing? Learning to use the crutches had exhausted her. She could find a chair and stay seated, she supposed. And she certainly wouldn’t mind seeing her Lapp cousins and church community friends.

“Your vadder is borrowing a wheelchair for you to use while you recover,” Mam said. “You might find it easier to move about.”

Meg nodded. “That’s thoughtful of him.”

Her mother looked relieved. Meg realized her family would stay home if she wasn’t up to visiting, and she became more determined than ever to show them that she was strong despite her recent hospital stay.

“There is something I need to discuss with you.” Mam glanced briefly toward the kitchen once they were alone.

Meg eyed her with concern. “Are you oll recht?”

Her mother gazed at her with warmth. “I’m fine.” She grabbed a wooden chair and set it to face her daughter’s.

“Mam?”

“There is something I need you to do for me, Meg. You know that your dat’s birthday will be here soon.”

“Ja, on Christmas.”

“Ja.” She shifted her chair closer, indicating she wanted to speak in private. “I’d like to surprise him with a birthday party,” she said quietly. “I’ve had a conversation with Horseshoe Joe. Did you know that Miriam’s birthday is the same day as Dat’s?”

“Nay, I didn’t.” Meg got a funny feeling inside.

“Joe wants to give Miriam a party, too. We’ve decided that we’d like you and Peter to plan one together.”

Meg found it difficult to breathe. “You want me...and Peter to work together?”

“Ja, and before you say a word, Meg, I’d like to remind you that you have a broken leg and can’t do chores. This celebration is important to me and to Horseshoe Joe. The best people for this task are you and Peter. You’ll work with him, ja?”

Meg, in fact, had been ready to object to the arrangement, but she wisely kept silent. Her mother was right. She couldn’t do chores while her leg was healing. Working with Peter so her father and his mother could have a surprise birthday celebration was something she could do to be useful. “I’ll be happy to work with Peter to plan the party.”

“Wunderbor!” Mam rose and put her chair back where it belonged. “You mustn’t tell a soul. Not even your sisters. Do you understand?”

Meg nodded.

“Gut.” Her mother looked pleased. “Lunch will be ready in a minute. Do you need help getting to the kitchen?”

Meg shook her head. “Nay. I’ll be there in a minute.” Her mother left her alone with her thoughts. She sat a moment and contemplated working secretly with Peter Zook. How would she manage? How would he react to the news?

Yesterday she’d told Peter that the accident caused her to put things in perspective in her life. She sighed. She had to find a way to work with him without her painful past interfering with their working relationship.

She stood, grabbed her crutches and hobbled toward the kitchen. Did Peter already know of their parents’ arrangement?

Her stomach burned with anxiety. She'd see him tomorrow at her aunt and uncle's. Would he mention the party? Refuse to work with her?

\* \* \*

Sunday morning, after a decent night's sleep provided by her pain medication, Meg rose from the bed in the first-floor sewing room. Her sisters, Leah, Ellie and Charlie, were working in the kitchen. Leah was at the stove, cooking eggs. Ellie was setting the table, and Charlie was putting out jars of jams and jellies. Meg had usually been up by six at the latest before the accident, and was shocked that she'd slept until eight thirty. "I'm sorry I slept so late."

"You needed the rest," Leah said with a smile. "Come and eat." She pulled out a chair and helped Meg get situated at the table. "Eggs and toast? Or muffins with jam?"

"A muffin will be fine. Without jam," Meg said, as she reached for a chocolate chip muffin. "Where's Mam and Dat?"

"Dat's outside getting the buggy ready. Mam's upstairs."

Meg broke open the muffin and took a bite. "Did Dat borrow a wheelchair?"

Ellie set down two cups of tea, one in front of Meg, before she sat across the table from her. "He did. He's already put it in our buggy."

Leah took the chair next to Meg and proceeded to fix her own cup of tea. "Does it bother you? The idea of being in a wheelchair again?"

Meg shook her head. "Nay. 'Tis not the same as before." She'd spent several weeks in a wheelchair after she'd been discharged from the hospital, when a ruptured appendix had nearly killed her. A broken leg and a few bruises would heal much faster than severe complications from appendicitis.

After breakfast, her family headed to the Samuel Lapp farm, where Meg saw people she knew gathered around as her father steered their horse into the barnyard. Dat parked next to the carriage belonging to her cousin Eli and his wife, Martha. She smiled and waved at them before she saw Horseshoe Joe and Miriam Zook, along with Peter, pull in on their other side. Meg locked gazes with Peter before he climbed out of the vehicle. Then she turned her attention to her father, who reached in to lift her from the back seat.

Meg stood on her good leg as her dat went for her wheelchair. She reached to grab the buggy as she teetered there, then struggled for a better handhold. An arm immediately slipped about her waist in support, and she sighed with relief, glad for her sister's help. But the clean, fresh scent of soap and man made her realize that the arm was masculine, strong, and most definitely belonged to Peter Zook. Her heart started to pound as she met his gaze.

"I'm steady now," she assured him, eager for him to move away. Her world tilted, but then righted itself as he released her and stepped back. He turned to leave.

"Peter." He halted and faced her. "Danki," she said softly. Her

throat constricted, and she felt her face heat.

Peter eyed her intently and nodded. Then he caught up with his mother and father as they approached the house. Meg watched him go with emotion akin to regret that he hadn't stayed to chat—because she'd chased him away.

Her father moved the wheelchair close to where she stood. "Hold on, and I'll help you."

She felt drained and weak, and was glad to sit. As Dat pushed her toward the farmhouse, she started to believe that coming today had been a mistake. She felt tired, shaky...and unsettled by the memory of the warmth and strength of Peter's arm as he'd steadied her.

\* \* \*

Peter entered the Lapp house, his thoughts filled with Meg. He'd been fighting the emotion overwhelming him ever since he'd held her in his arms as he'd pulled her from the water.

He spied Agnes across the great room and immediately headed in her direction. His feelings about Meg would surely settle down if he spent time with his friend. "Hallo, you," he said, greeting her with a smile.

"Hallo back," she quipped with a crooked grin.

"I didn't expect to see you here." But he was glad she was, if only to take his mind off the sweet scent of Meg's hair and the warmth of her beneath his arm as he'd kept her from falling.

Agnes shrugged. "Katie invited us. She saw my mudder at the store."

The Joshua Beilers lived in another church district. Occasionally, they came to church service in the Zooks' community, but not often. Peter had met Agnes after a service last year and they'd become instant friends. Agnes was easy to talk with, and her obvious delight in the world was refreshing. She was the complete opposite of Meg, in looks as well as temperament.

Familiar voices in Katie Lapp's kitchen told him that the Stoltzfus family had entered through the back door of the house.

"Is that Meg?" Agnes asked. "I heard about the accident. How is she?"

He shrugged, pretending indifference. "Fine."

"Let's go see."

"Maybe we should let her get settled in first."

Agnes met his gaze. "I heard she broke her leg."

Peter inclined his head. "Ja. She's on crutches." He couldn't forget how she'd looked lying in her hospital bed, bruised, pale and vulnerable.

His brother came into the room, and Peter stared. "Josiah, you came! I haven't seen you in months."

Josiah grinned. He had married Nancy King of the Amos Kings, who lived across the road from Samuel and Katie Lapp. The couple had moved after their marriage, and Peter rarely got to see the two of them. "We came in last night. We're staying with my in-laws. I wanted to surprise Mam and Dat."

"Have they seen you?"

His brother nodded. "Ja." He grinned, as if delighted by their parents' reaction. Josiah's gaze went to Agnes, who stood silently beside him.

"Sorry," Peter said to both of them. "Agnes, this is my older brother, Josiah. Josiah, meet Agnes Beiler."

The two greeted each other warmly. As Agnes turned to have a word with her twin sister, Josiah shot a pointed glance toward her before raising his eyebrows at Peter.

"We're friends," Peter said, before he could ask.

Josiah nodded. "I saw Meg Stoltzfus." He glanced toward the kitchen with concern. "She was in an accident."

"Ja, Reuben Miller was taking her home from last week's singing when a car hit his buggy and forced it from the road."

"Anything serious?" his brother inquired. "I didn't want to ask."

"Worst of it is a broken leg."

"You two getting along yet?"

"We're...polite." Peter had told his brother about Meg overhearing their conversation. His brother had understood and been sympathetic. "She's with Reuben Miller now."

"And you have Agnes?"

Peter shrugged. "If all goes well."

"There you are," a warm female voice said. His brother smiled as his wife, Nancy, approached. "Hallo, Peter."

"Hallo, Nancy," he replied with a grin.

"You knew I wouldn't be far." Josiah regarded his wife with

affection. “Weather’s too chilly to be outside today.”

His brother was lucky to have found a woman to spend his life with, Peter thought.

Elijah, Jedidiah and Jacob Lapp entered the room. “How about a game of baseball?” Elijah suggested. “Tis cold out, but we’ll be warm soon enough.”

Martha overheard her husband. “You’re going to play baseball outside?” Beside her, his sister Annie pushed Meg’s wheelchair.

“They’d better not play inside,” Annie retorted.

“Why not?” Jed said. “Tis not raining.”

Elijah’s expression softened as he eyed his pregnant wife. “You’ll stay inside, ja?”

“Why?”

Elijah opened his mouth as if to say something, but quickly shut it again.

“Why should any of us stay inside? We’ll watch from the porch.” Martha addressed Meg. “What do you say? Are you feeling up to watching your cousins smack a baseball around?”

It was clear that Eli didn’t like his wife’s decision. Martha was far along with child, and he was clearly concerned about her.

“Martha...”

“I’ll be fine, husband,” she assured him. “Meg?”

“Tis not like I can stand and watch them,” she said with good humor.

Peter studied her with concern. Meg had only recently been released from the hospital. The doctor was treating her with

antibiotics to help her lungs stay clear. Would the cold air be bad for her? Wouldn't it be better if she remained inside?

His brother-in-law, Jacob, frowned as he studied his cousin. "Meg, I'll get a blanket for you." He glanced at the other women. "I think you all should have blankets."

"Gut thinking." Annie beamed at her husband. "And I'll make us some hot tea."

"Peter?" Jedidiah smiled. "You playing?"

Peter glanced at Agnes, who returned his gaze. "I'll play for a while."

"I can't play long," Noah Lapp, another brother, said as he entered the room. "Food's almost ready."

The men avoided the kitchen entrance and left via the front door of the farmhouse. As they stepped outside, Peter caught sight of the younger Lapp brothers, Isaac, Daniel and Joseph, on the front lawn. Joseph held a ball and bat. Joshua and John King, neighboring boys from across the road, grinned as they all gathered on the dormant grass.

"Who wants to be a team captain?" Peter asked.

There was a good-natured debate as it was decided that Jedidiah and Noah would be captains with the privilege of choosing their teammates. Jedidiah chose Jacob, Peter, Daniel and Joshua. Noah's team was Elijah; Jacob's fraternal twin, Isaac; Joseph and John.

Playing in the outfield first, Peter saw the women emerge from the house and make themselves comfortable on the Lapps'

covered front porch. Annie pushed Meg close to the rail, then took the chair next to her. Noah's wife, Rachel, along with Martha and Agnes, joined them, each settling in a rocking chair. Meg remained in her wheelchair with a blanket across her lap.

Peter noted that Agnes sat on the opposite side of the porch from them. She smiled and waved, and he nodded before he returned his attention to the game in time to catch a fly ball hit by Isaac. Jedidiah and his teammates cheered, as did Agnes and Annie.

The game continued. Jedidiah's team exchanged places with Peter, who went up to bat. As he waited for his turn at the plate, Peter glanced toward the porch and captured Meg's gaze. She stared at him without once looking away. His heart beat wildly as he refocused his attention on the game.

"Peter!" Jedidiah called from first base, where he'd landed safely. "You're up!"

He nodded, picked up the bat and slammed the ball across the yard, sending Jedidiah to second base and Jacob to third, before they both continued all the way home.

Katie Lapp stepped outside with her granddaughter Susanna on her hip and her grandson EJ standing next to her. "Food is ready!"

The game ended with a difference of opinion on which team had won, since the score was even, but Jedidiah's team didn't get to finish the inning. The men climbed the porch steps as the women turned to head inside. Martha and Elijah went in

together. Agnes chatted with her sister Alice, who stood in the entryway and held the door open until Jedidiah grabbed hold of it. Everyone had entered the house except for Jacob, Annie, Meg and Peter.

“Peter,” Annie said. “Will you push Meg’s chair inside?”

“Ja.” He and Meg gazed at each other. Her eyes widened slightly and her skin flushed red as he turned her chair toward the door.

“You don’t have to help me,” she said. “I can stand.”

“Like you did when you arrived earlier?” he asked as he tipped up the front wheels of the chair and lifted it over the threshold. “Does it bother you to have me help you? You just got out of the hospital, Meg,” he said, his voice gruff. “You shouldn’t take chances.”

\* \* \*

Meg stiffened. It felt as if he was poking fun at her near fall earlier. “I don’t need your help or a scolding, Peter Zook.”

“Meg, I didn’t mean—”

When they were inside the entryway, he came around the wheelchair to face her. She was offended by what he’d said. And she thought they could start over and work together on the party?

“Danki, Peter. I can manage from here,” she said in a tight, dismissive voice. She grabbed hold of her chair’s wheels and rolled forward, nearly hitting Peter, who instinctively jumped out of the way. He stared at her, and she flushed with guilt.

“Meg.”

She stopped and waited for him to reach her.

Peter sighed. “Are you this difficult with everyone?” he asked. “Or just me?”

Meg refused to answer him. She alternately fumed and fought embarrassment as she wheeled herself into her aunt Katie’s kitchen. She was aware that Peter Zook followed closely behind her. She bit her lip to keep herself from telling him to leave her alone. Perhaps she was overreacting. In fact, she probably was, but she was tired, in pain, and wanted nothing more than to go home.

As she rolled her chair into the bright kitchen, where food filled the table and countertops, she felt confused and ill. She shouldn’t have come. She should have insisted that her family attend without her. It was too soon after her hospital stay for her to be out and about. She could have been napping or gazing silently out the window at home. Instead, she was aware of Peter behind her, a man who didn’t like her. But he’d been thoughtful despite how he felt about her, she realized. Sometimes it seemed as if he could read her mind and gauge exactly how she was feeling.

She sighed. And she’d been rude to him. Again. She’d promised to be a better person. Please, Lord, help me to be thoughtful and kind to everyone, especially to Peter Zook.

“Meg.” Her mother approached. “I’ll fix you a plate.”

“Danki, but nay. I can manage.” She was determined to prove that she was fine. As soon as everyone left the room and couldn’t

watch her, she'd stand up and get some food. Her head and bruises hurt, and her leg throbbed. She looked around but saw no sign of her father or any of the older men. "Where's Dat?"

"In the barn," Mae King said. "Most everyone has moved out there."

Meg glanced at the older woman, who was a close friend and neighbor of her aunt's. "They've set up tables?"

"Ja," Mam said. "Samuel brought in a heater to take away the chill." She settled her gaze on someone behind Meg and smiled. "Peter, here's a plate."

"Danki, Missy," he said as he accepted it.

Meg rolled her chair into the corner, out of the way. Refusing to watch Peter while he selected food, she stared at her lap. The quilt that her cousin had gotten for her was done in pretty shades of green and yellow. She was glad it hid her heavy cast. Every time she saw it, she felt helpless and a little afraid.

"Peter." Agnes entered the room and swept past her. Meg watched as the young woman took his plate, then proceeded to fill it for him, with selections from every available cold meat platter, salad and dessert. "Do you want iced tea?"

Meg stared as Peter bent and murmured something in Agnes's ear. She heard her chuckle before Agnes turned toward Meg's aunt with an amused expression.

"Katie," she heard Agnes say, "got any Pepsi?"

"In the back room. Help yourself."

Meg watched as Agnes left. She couldn't keep her gaze from

Peter, who had moved into her focus. He stared back, his dark gray eyes unreadable, and she quickly glanced away.

Agnes returned with the glass of cola. "Here you go."

"Missy," Mae King called, "come see what Katie has done to the quilt we've been making."

Her mother slipped from the room. Meg watched Peter and Agnes. The two were smiling, sometimes laughing, clearly enjoying each other's company. Meg blinked back tears. She didn't know why she had the sudden urge to cry. She realized that it had been a long time since she'd felt that free and joyful.

"Meg?"

Startled, she glanced up into Agnes's face. "Hallo, Agnes."

"How are you feeling?"

"Sore, but I'll live."

"I'm sorry you were hurt."

Agnes's sharp perusal made her squirm. She didn't want or need the girl's pity. "I'm fine." Meg glanced at Peter, who waited patiently next to Agnes. He eyed Meg intensely, as if he was debating whether or not to say something to her. She looked away.

"Do you need anything?" Agnes asked.

Meg managed a smile. "Danki, but nay. I appreciate the offer, though."

Her cousin Isaac opened the door and peeked into the room. "Peter, Agnes, are you coming out to the barn?"

"We'll be there soon," Agnes said airily. "Have everything you

need, Peter?”

“Ja, danki,” he told her warmly.

Agnes gave Meg a sympathetic look. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will.” Meg watched the couple leave the house. For a moment, she was alone, which was a relief. She should get up and fill a plate, but she wasn’t really hungry. She leaned back and closed her eyes.

“Meg.”

She gasped and opened her eyes to see a plate of food being thrust in her direction. Peter. He was eyeing her with concern. Something warmed inside her. She grew flustered as she realized he’d picked all her favorite foods. “Danki,” she whispered. Heart thundering in her chest, she wheeled herself closer to the table.

“Did you want to join us in the barn?”

“I... Nay. I think it will be better if I just stay here.” She saw him nod, then watched the dark-haired, gray-eyed man depart to rejoin the others. Peter had been thoughtful enough to fill her a plate. The thought made her experience a strange myriad of emotions she couldn’t understand. Her face felt warm as she stared at her food. She picked up a fried chicken drumstick and took a bite. It tasted delicious, and suddenly her appetite was back.

She thought of Peter’s kindness as she ate every bite of her meal. The man confused and fascinated her. But did he still think as badly of her as he had years before? And if he did, why was he being so nice to her now?

## Chapter Four

Peter sat with Agnes on a bench behind a table that Samuel Lapp had constructed using plywood on sawhorses. The girl beside him was chatting with her sister Alice and Meg's sisters Ellie and Charlie. He listened with half an ear, and only fully tuned in when picking up Meg's name during the conversation.

"She's oll recht?" Agnes asked, her expression filled with concern.

"Meg's tough," Ellie said. "She'll be fine in a week or so."

"She looks bad, though, doesn't she?" Meg's youngest sister, Charlie, added.

"Ja, poor dear."

Peter frowned, disturbed that Meg was the topic of conversation. Why weren't her sisters inside keeping her company? He felt a sharp kick to his innards. Why hadn't he stayed awhile to talk with her?

But he knew the answer—because he needed to get over her. Which had been harder for him to do since the day he'd found her floating in the water after the accident.

The girls switched to another subject, and the pain in his stomach eased. He turned his attention elsewhere. Directly across the table from him sat Eli and Jacob Lapp, with their wives, Martha and Annie. Annie held EJ in her lap, while Jacob had his arms filled with their daughter, Susanna. He studied them, glad his sister was happy with a man she loved and two beautiful children. He shifted his gaze from his little niece and

found Annie eyeing him closely.

He arched his eyebrows. "What?"

His sister shrugged. "I guess you know what you're doing."

Peter stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"Not a gut time, bruder. Best if we talk later." Her impish look reminded him of all of the times during their childhood when she'd teased him.

"Annie..." Peter warned.

Jacob narrowed his gaze on Peter, then looked for an explanation from his wife. "Are you taunting Peter again?"

"With love, Jacob. Only with love," she murmured, her eyes soft as she regarded her husband, who tenderly shifted their young daughter on his lap, bringing her up to rest her sleepy head on his shoulder.

Peter felt restless. He turned to Agnes and touched her arm. "Want to go for a ride?"

Agnes faced him, her expression brightening. "We can if you'd like." She stood and pushed back her chair.

Peter hurried to help her. They were outside before she said, "I have an idea."

She headed toward the house, and he grinned with the thought of the desserts she'd pack for their buggy ride. But Agnes didn't head toward where the pies, cake and other goodies had been laid out. She went to Meg instead, seated in her wheelchair, finishing the last bite of her meal.

"Meg," Agnes said in greeting as he stood silently behind her.

“We’re going for a ride. Would you like to come?”

Meg appeared stunned by the invitation. Peter studied her, recognizing her surprise and confusion. She looked tired, as if the day had already been too much for her. The bruises on her face were more pronounced than they’d been when she was in the hospital. He should offer to drive her home, but he didn’t think she’d appreciate it any more than she did Agnes’s invitation. He’d known her long enough to read the subtle changes in her gaze that told him when she was overwhelmed and uncomfortable.

“Danki, Agnes,” she said quietly. “It’s kind of you to ask, but I’m not feeling my best, so it would be better if I just stayed here.” Meg managed a smile. Peter couldn’t help but feel relieved.

Agnes frowned. “I don’t like seeing you sitting here alone.”

Meg’s expression made Peter ache. The last thing she wanted, he was sure, was for Agnes to try to change her mind while he watched. He touched Agnes’s arm. “She’s not feeling well, Agnes.”

Agnes shot him a look. “I know.” She turned a sympathetic gaze on Meg. “Rest now. I’m sorry I can’t do anything to help.”

“Danki.” Meg sounded suspiciously close to tears. Peter couldn’t tear his eyes away from her. Despite her bruises, she looked beautiful. The royal blue dress she wore intensified the bright azure of her eyes. Her white prayer kapp was slightly askew, revealing shiny dark hair pulled back in the Amish way. Her gaze fell on him, and he had to glance away before he did something ridiculous like reach over, pick her up and carry her

to his buggy to take her home.

Instead he followed Agnes from the room. Once outside, she faced him. "Let's not go for a ride. Why don't we go for a walk instead? I'll ask Alice to join us."

"The weather is nice enough," he agreed, as he followed her back toward the barn. Agnes went to talk with her sister. Unable to forget how tired Meg looked, Peter headed toward his sister Annie.

\* \* \*

Meg was chatting with her mother and aunt when Jacob and Annie entered the kitchen from outside.

"Meg, we thought you might like to go home." Jacob smiled as he approached, carrying his daughter. "'Tis been a long day for you."

"We can take her," Mam immediately said.

"No need," Annie assured her. "Our little ones are ready to be home."

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Meg asked, delighted by Jacob's offer. She wanted nothing more than to rest.

"I don't think you should be alone," her mother murmured with concern.

"Mam, I'll be fine. I'll take a nap. Please stay here and enjoy yourself."

"We can stay with her for a while." Annie picked up EJ, who had been holding on to her hand.

Meg gazed at her cousin-in-law gratefully. "Mam, I'll be fine.

I'm not seriously injured. I have a broken leg."

"I should check with your vadder."

"Nay!" Meg exclaimed. "You know how Dat is. He'll want to bring me home. He's enjoying himself, Mam. I'll be fine for a couple of hours. Honestly. I'll just close my eyes and sleep."

"Endie Missy, Meg will be fine," Jacob assured her. "I'll make certain of it."

Her mother stood and retrieved Meg's coat. "Oll recht. I'll see you at home a little later."

Feeling sore and highly emotional, Meg rolled her chair closer to her mother. "I love you," she whispered with tears of gratitude.

Soon, she was riding in Jacob and Annie's buggy, with EJ seated next to her and Susanna on her mother's lap up front. Jacob had stowed her wheelchair behind Meg's seat.

She was never so glad to see her home as when Jacob pulled into the barnyard and parked close to the house. She watched him take out her wheelchair first. She expected him to open it for her, but he placed it near the porch instead, then came back to carry her up the steps and on inside. "Danki."

"You're willkomm," her cousin said with a grin. His good humor faded quickly, though. "I wish I'd thought to bring you home earlier. I should have suspected you weren't ready to be visiting."

Meg shook her head. "I didn't want Dat and Mam to stay home because of me. They would have refused to go if I'd admitted I wasn't feeling well."

“Poor Meg,” Annie murmured with sympathy as she followed them into the great room.

Jacob placed Meg into a chair and went outside for her wheelchair.

“You look exhausted,” Annie said as she sat on the sofa not far from where Meg was seated. “Would you be more comfortable here?”

“Nay, I like it here,” Meg assured her. “I can look out the window.”

Jacob entered the room and set the wheelchair near the far wall. Meg smiled her thanks, then studied the children, who played on the floor near their mother. “I’ll be oll recht by myself.” She shifted her leg onto the stool her father recently had handmade for her. “I appreciate your help.”

Annie smiled. “You gave us a gut excuse to get these little ones settled at home.” She watched fondly as the two chatted quietly.

“EJ is a wonderful big bruder.”

The boy’s mother laughed. “Most of the time, but not always.”

Her husband agreed. “He’s a gut boy, though.”

“He looks like Elijah,” Meg said without thinking.

Jacob’s short bark of laughter startled her. “That’s what Eli says. Blond hair and blue eyes. But my bruder is not the only one with those features.” He fondly eyed his wife.

Meg couldn’t help the small smile that came to her lips. “Ja, he does look like his mam, but he looks like his dat, too.”

Her cousin beamed at her.

“Now, go home!” Meg ordered.

Jacob blinked at her vehemence. “I told your mam we’d stay for a while.”

“And you did. Now, take your little ones home.”

“Can we get you anything before we go?” Annie asked, her gaze sharp.

“I’ve had too much to eat and more than enough to drink today. I’ll be fine.”

Jacob picked up his son while Annie reached for their daughter.

“Thanks for noticing how tired I am,” Meg said.

Her cousin shook his head. “Don’t thank us. The credit goes to Peter. He’s the one who suggested you might like to go home.”

The young family left, leaving Meg with a lot to think about. It was as if Peter had read her mind again. The realization unsettled her.

Her parents and sisters came home an hour and a half later. Her father didn’t look happy as he entered the great room.

“I’m well, Dat,” she said, before he could speak. “Jacob and Annie made sure I was settled before they left.”

“You should have told us you wanted to go.” He looked upset. “I should have known it was too soon for you.”

“I’m fine. Please don’t worry about me.”

Dat regarded her with what looked suspiciously like tears in his eyes.

“I could eat, though,” she said teasingly, and she saw the worry

leave his expression.

“Supper will be ready soon.” He turned to leave.

“Dat.” He faced her. “Danki for caring,” she said.

His expression grew soft. “I’m your vadder.”

The evening passed quietly after a simple meal of cold cuts and fresh bread, followed by apple pie. Meg hadn’t actually slept after Jacob had brought her home, but she had rested. It didn’t take long for her to fall asleep once she’d retired for the night.

She woke up to the sounds of birds outside her window the next morning. She relished the pleasant sensation of lying in bed, listening to birdsong, until it hit her. Peter. Alarmed, she sat up. She was going to be working with Peter for weeks, planning their parents’ party.

She closed her eyes, recalling the way he had studied her when she’d last seen him. He’d been kind to her recently, and he’d convinced Jacob to take her home. She didn’t know what to make of his thoughtfulness.

She stood, grabbed her crutches and tried not to think of him. But his face remained ever present in her thoughts.

## Chapter Five

Monday afternoon Peter paused at the base of the stairs and stared up at the Stoltzfus farmhouse. The last thing he’d expected to be working on was planning a birthday party for his mother and Arlin Stoltzfus. He had learned about Missy Stoltzfus’s and his father’s arrangement to have him and Meg work together to plan the celebration the evening of the last singing, the night

that Reuben Miller and Meg had had the accident. Peter had figured that because of the accident, their parents would have forgotten all about the arrangement. But apparently not. So here he stood, in front of Meg's house, after being told by his father this morning that Missy and Meg would be expecting him today.

He thought about Meg. How on earth was he going to work with her? Meg Stoltzfus could be difficult on a good day. Planning an event with her wasn't going to be easy.

He grinned as he realized that he was up for the challenge.

He thought of Agnes and the wonderful afternoon they'd shared on their walk with Alice. The three of them had chatted, laughed and had a nice time. It had been a stress-free afternoon. Still, he had thought of Meg during it. It felt as though something was missing when he spent time with Agnes.

Peter climbed the steps and knocked.

Meg's mother opened the door. "Peter!" She smiled as she stepped back to allow him entry. "Come in. Meg is in the great room."

"Is she feeling oll recht?" he asked, as he followed her through the kitchen.

"She's coming along," Missy said.

As he entered the room, he caught sight of Meg immediately, seated in a chair facing the window. She looked pensive as she gazed out into the yard.

"Meg, Peter's here."

She jerked as if burned, and met his gaze. "Hallo, Peter." She

lifted her cast off a stool and tried to turn her chair.

He rushed forward to help, gently grabbing the back of her chair and swiveling it to face the room. He then retrieved the large stool she'd been resting her leg on and placed it directly in front of her.

Meg gave him an irritated look as she lifted both legs onto the stool. Clearly, she wasn't happy to accept his help. If this was the way their planning time would go, then it was going to be much more challenging than he'd envisioned.

He grabbed a wooden chair from the other side of the room and sat, facing her. She seemed much improved since yesterday. "You look better. You must have slept well."

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