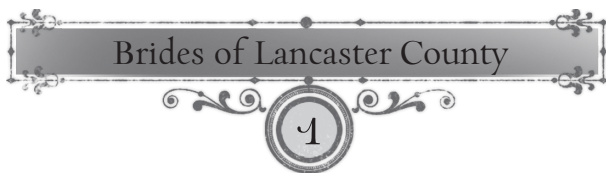


A  
*Merry Heart*



Wanda E.  
Brunstetter



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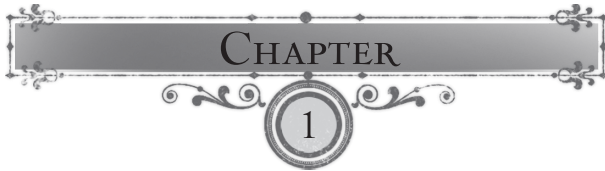
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CHAPTER

1

I wish our teacher wasn't so cross all the time.”  
“*Jah*, my brother Sam says she's just *en alt maedel* who never smiles. I think she must have a heart of stone.”

Miriam Stoltzfus halted as she stepped out of the one-room schoolhouse. She recognized the voices of Sarah Jane Beachy and Andrew Sepler and noticed that they were playing on the swings nearby.

Perhaps some of the children's words were true. At the age of twenty-six, Miriam was still unmarried, and as far as she was concerned, that made her an old maid among the Old Order Amish group to which she belonged.

Miriam pursed her lips. “I'm not cross all the time, and I don't have a heart of stone.” But even as she spoke the words, she wondered if they were true. She did tend to be a little snappish, but that was only when the children in her class didn't behave or whenever she suffered with one of her sick headaches.

Miriam glanced at the swings again and was glad to see that Sarah Jane and Andrew had left the school yard. She didn't want them to know she had heard their conversation,

and she wasn't in the mood to hear any more talk against herself. She would be glad to leave the school day behind and get home to whatever chores awaited.

She hurried around back to the small corral where her horse was kept during school hours and soon had the mare hitched to the box-shaped buggy she had parked under a tree that morning. She wearily climbed inside, reached for the reins, and, for the first time all day, experienced a moment of solace. Speaking a few words of Pennsylvania Dutch to the mare, she guided it out of the school yard and onto the road.

A short time later, Miriam directed her horse and buggy up the long driveway leading to the plain, white farmhouse where she lived with her parents and Lewis, her only unmarried brother. She spotted her mother right away, sitting in a wicker chair on the front porch with a large bowl wedged between her knees. "Look, daughter, the first spring picking of peas from our garden," Mom called as Miriam stepped down from the buggy.

Miriam waved in response, then began the ritual of unhitching the horse. When she was finished, she led the willing mare to the barn and rubbed her down before putting her into one of the empty stalls.

"How was your day?" Mom asked when Miriam stepped onto the porch some time later.

Miriam took a seat in the chair next to her mother, her fingers kneading the folds in her dark green cotton dress. "It went well enough, I suppose, but it's good to be home."

Mom set the bowl of peas on the small table nearby and pushed a wisp of graying hair away from her face where it had fallen loose from the tight bun she wore under her stiff,

white head-covering. “Problems at school?”

Miriam released a quiet moan. Her mother always seemed to know when she’d had a rough day or wasn’t feeling well, and she knew if she didn’t offer some word of explanation, Mom would keep prying. “It’s probably not worth mentioning,” she said with a sigh, “but after school let out, I overheard two of my students talking about me. They seem to think I’m cross and have a heart of stone.” She clasped her hands tightly around her knees and grimaced. “Oh, Mom, do you think it’s true? Am I cross all the time? Do I have a heart of stone?”

Mom’s forehead wrinkled as she shook her head. “I don’t believe any Christian’s heart is made of stone. However, I have noticed how unhappy you are, and your tone of voice is a bit harsh sometimes. Does it have anything to do with William Graber? Are you still pining for him?”

Miriam’s face heated up. “Of course not. What happened between William and me is in the past. It’s been almost two years, and I’m certainly over him now.”

“I hope you are, because it would do no good for you to keep fretting or dwelling on what can’t be changed.”

An uncomfortable yet all-too-familiar lump formed in Miriam’s throat, and she found that she couldn’t bring herself to look directly into her mother’s brown eyes. She was afraid the hidden pain in her own eyes would betray her words.

“If your troubled spirit isn’t because of your old beau, then what is the problem?” Mom asked.

Miriam shrugged. “I suppose everyone feels sad and out of sorts from time to time.”

“Remember what the Bible tells us in Proverbs: ‘A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones.’ Happiness and laughter are good medicine for a troubled spirit, Miriam.”

“I know that, Mom. You’ve quoted Proverbs 17:22 to me many times. But it’s not always easy to have a merry heart, especially when things aren’t going so well.” Miriam stood. “I’d best go to my room and change. Then I’ll help you get supper started.”

“Jah, okay.”

Miriam hurried inside, anxious to be alone.



When the door clicked shut behind Miriam, Anna bowed her head. *Heavenly Father, I know my daughter says she is over William, but her actions say otherwise. I believe she’s still pining for him and hasn’t found forgiveness in her heart for what he did. Please take away Miriam’s pain, and help her to find joy in life again. Show me if there’s anything I can do to help her be at peace with You. And if it’s within Your will, please send Miriam someone who will love her in a way that will make her forget she ever knew a man named William Graber.*

Anna felt something soft and furry rub against her leg, and she opened her eyes. One of the calico barn cats sat at her feet, staring up at her with eyes half closed, peacefully purring. She leaned over and stroked the animal behind its ears. “I think Miriam could learn a lesson from you, Callie. She needs to take the time to relax more, enjoy each precious moment, and carefully search for the right man to love.”

The cat meowed as if in agreement and promptly fell asleep. Anna reached for the bowl beside her and resumed shelling peas.



Miriam's upstairs bedroom looked even more inviting than usual. The freshly aired quilt on the bed was neat and crisp, giving the room a pleasantly clean, outdoor smell. The bare wooden floor was shiny and smooth as glass. Even the blue washing bowl sitting on the dresser across the room reassured her of the cleanliness and orderliness of her plain yet cozy room. On days like today, she wished she could hide away inside the four walls of this familiar room and shut out the world with all of its ugliness and pain.

Miriam took a seat on the comfortable bed and pulled her shoes off with a yawn. *How odd that some of the young people among my faith desire to leave this secure and peaceful life for the troublesome, hectic, modern world. I don't believe I could ever betray the Amish faith in such a way. Modern things may have their appeal, but simplicity and humility, though they separate us from the rest of the world, are a part of our culture that I treasure.*

She fluffed up her pillow and stretched out for a few moments of rest before changing her clothes. Staring at the cracks in the plaster ceiling, she reflected on the voices of the two children she had heard talking about her earlier. "How little they really know about their teacher," she whispered. "They don't understand my pain. They truly believe I have a heart of stone."

Her vision blurred as tears burned her eyes. "My heart's

not stone—it's broken and shattered, and I'm afraid it always will be so."

A tear slid down Miriam's face and landed on the pillow beneath her head. She squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to allow more tears to follow, for she knew if she let her emotions take over, she might lose control and never be able to stop crying. Miriam longed to be loved and feel cherished, and she knew in her heart that she was capable—or at least had been capable—of returning that same kind of love to a man who was willing to give his whole heart to her. She thought she had found such a man in William, but after his betrayal, she was certain that no man could ever be trusted. So she would guard her heart and her emotions and never let anyone cause her that kind of pain again.

Unwillingly, Miriam allowed her mind to wander back to when she was a twelve-year-old girl attending the one-room schoolhouse where she was now the teacher. . . .



Miriam sat upright at her desk, listening attentively to the lesson being taught until a slight tug on the back of her small, white head-covering caused her to turn around.

William Graber grinned, and the look in his deep, green eyes seemed to bore into her soul as his gaze held her captive. Even at her young age, Miriam knew she wanted to marry him someday.

William handed her a crumpled note he'd taken from his shirt pocket.

Miriam took the piece of paper, turned back around, and opened it slowly, not wanting the teacher to hear any

rumpling. She smiled as she silently read William's words:

*Dear Miriam:*

*I want to walk you home after school lets out. Meet me by the apple tree out behind the schoolhouse.*

*Your friend,  
William Graber*

Miriam turned and gave William a quick nod; then she folded the note and placed it inside her desk. Impatiently, she waited for the minutes on the battery-operated wall clock to tick away. . . .



Miriam's thoughts returned to the present. Releasing a sigh, she crawled off the bed and shuffled across the room to stand in front of the open window, where she reflected on the first day she had walked home from school with William. It was the beginning of many walks home together, and over the next few years, their friendship had grown as he continued to gain her favor.

Miriam and William's eighth year in school was their final one, and they both spent the next year in vocational training at home. William was instructed in the best of Amish farming methods, and Miriam learned the more arduous homemaking skills. She was sure they would eventually marry and settle down on a farm of their own, and she wanted to be sure she could run an efficient, well-organized home.

William was given a horse and courting buggy at the age of sixteen, and a few days later, he asked if he could give

Miriam a ride home after a young people's singing. That had been the beginning of their courting days and the night Miriam had known she had fallen in love.

The months melted into years, and by the time the young couple had turned twenty, they still hadn't made definite wedding plans. Though they often talked of it secretly, William said he didn't feel quite ready for the responsibilities of running a farm of his own. After working full-time for his father since the age of fifteen, he wasn't even certain that he wanted to farm. He knew it was expected of him, but he thought he might be more suited to another trade.

The opportunity William had been waiting for arrived a short time later when he was invited to learn the painting trade from his uncle Abe, who lived in Ohio.

Miriam cried for days after William left, but he promised to write often and visit on holidays and extended weekends. It wasn't much consolation, as she had hoped that by now the two of them would be married, perhaps even starting a family.

Impatiently, she waited for the mail each day, moping around in a melancholy mood when there was no letter, and lighthearted and happy whenever she heard from William. His letters were full of enthusiastic descriptions of his new job, as he explained how he had learned the correct way to hold a paintbrush and apply paint quickly yet neatly to any surface. He told her about some of the modern buildings in town they had been contracted to paint, and he promised he would be home soon for a visit.

William's visits were frequent at first, but after he'd been gone a year, his visits came less often, as did his letters. On

Miriam's twenty-fourth birthday, a letter arrived with the familiar Ohio postmark. Her heart pounded with excitement, and her hands trembled as she tore open the envelope. It was the first letter she'd had from him in several months, but William's words had shaken her to the core.

Miriam groaned at the memory as she pressed her forehead against the cold window. When the pain became unbearable, she moved away from the window. Slowly, as though she were in a daze, she made her way across the room to her dresser. She knelt on the floor and pulled open the bottom drawer with such force that it nearly fell out. As she removed the stack of letters she had received from William during his time in Ohio, a sob caught in her throat. Her hands shook as she fumbled through the envelopes until she found his final letter. In a shaky voice, she read it out loud:

*Dear Miriam,*

*I've always thought of you as a special friend, so I wanted you to be the first to hear my good news. I've fallen in love with a wonderful Amish woman—Lydia Stutzman. I love her so much, and we plan to be married in a few months. We'll live here in Ohio, and I'll keep painting for my uncle, as I'm sure you know that I could never be happy working as a farmer.*

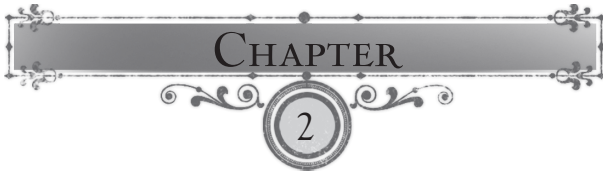
*I hope you will fall in love with someone, too—someone who will make you as happy as Lydia has made me. I'll always remember the friendship we had as children, and I wish you the best.*

*Your friend,  
William*

Even though William's final letter had come nearly two years ago, to Miriam it felt like only yesterday. Her heart ached whenever she thought of him or read one of his letters. Did he really believe she would fall in love with someone else the way he had done? She had been crushed when he'd referred to their relationship as only a friendship. Had their years together meant nothing at all?

Miriam shuddered and leaned heavily against her dresser. The bitterness she still carried created a feeling of fatigue that never allowed her to feel fully rested. Suddenly, the room felt stifling, and she wanted to race out the door and never look back. But that wouldn't solve a thing.

With a determined grunt, Miriam grabbed the stack of envelopes, marched across the room, and flopped onto her bed. As tears streamed down her cheeks, she ripped each one of William's letters to shreds and dropped the pieces into the wastepaper basket near her bed. William had left her with a heart so broken she was certain it would never mend. But at least his letters could no longer remind her of that horrible pain.



CHAPTER

2

In the kitchen, Miriam found her mother standing at the counter, rolling out the dough for chicken potpie.

“Are you feeling better now?” Mom asked with a cheery smile.

Miriam reached for a clean apron hanging on a nearby wall peg. “I’m fine.”

“That’s good to hear, because we have guests coming for supper, and it wouldn’t be good if you were gloomy all evening.”

“Guests? Who’s coming over?”

Mom poured the chicken broth into the kettle before answering. “Amos Hilty and his daughter, Mary Ellen.”

Miriam lifted her gaze toward the ceiling. “Oh, Mom, you know I’m not interested in Amos. Why must you go and scheme behind my back?”

“Scheme? Did I hear that someone in my house is scheming?” Papa asked as he entered the kitchen.

Miriam slipped her hand through the crook of her father’s arm. “Mom’s trying to match me up with Amos Hilty. She’s invited him and Mary Ellen to supper again, and they