

THE BELOVED  
*Christmas*  
QUILT



*Three Stories of Family, Romance, and Amish Faith*

THE BELOVED  
*Christmas*  
QUILT

WANDA E.  
BRUNSTETTER  
JEAN BRUNSTETTER  
& RICHELLE BRUNSTETTER

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*Roseanna's Groom* ©2017 by Richelle Brunstetter

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*Luella's Promise*

BY WANDA E.  
BRUNSTETTER







# CHAPTER I

## *Bird-in-Hand, Pennsylvania*

Luella Ebersol had never been lazy, but this morning it was all she could do to push the covers aside and pull herself out of bed. She'd put in long hours yesterday, taking care of Atlee Zook's wife, Dena, and their son, Daryl. When Dena's health declined a few months ago, Luella had been hired as her caregiver while Atlee was at work in his shop or had to be away from home for other reasons. Atlee usually stayed home from their biweekly church services on Sundays, so Luella could go with her family, but sometimes she sat with Dena, allowing Atlee to attend the service.

It was not easy leaving the warm confines of her blankets this morning, and Luella cringed when her bare feet touched the cold wooden floor. The late November weather had turned cold, and snow was in the forecast. The dull light coming into her room was an indication of how dreary it was outdoors. The Indian-summer days of autumn were gone, and she already missed having the windows open at night. "I'll never complain about hot summer days again," Luella mumbled as she slipped into her robe and fuzzy slippers.

Quickly making the bed, she shivered, guiding her hands over the sheets and covers to smooth them out. Mama was probably downstairs scurrying around the kitchen; which prompted Luella to close her eyes

and inhale deeply. Tantalizing aromas drifting up from the kitchen made her stomach gurgle in protest.

Walking over to the window, Luella ran her fingers down the moisture on the glass. Looking toward the barn, she saw the door was open. Dad had most likely been there awhile, getting his morning chores done.

Forcing herself away from the view, Luella needed to hurry and dress so she could help get breakfast on the table. Surely, her full-of-energy, twelve-year-old sister, Sara, would already be there. Luella and Sara were ten years apart, so with the exception of their easygoing personalities, they had little in common. Sara liked to be outdoors with the animals whereas Luella enjoyed indoor things like embroidery work, reading, and cooking. One of her favorite things to make this time of year was apple butter bars. She'd baked a batch of them last night to take over to the Zooks' this morning.

"And I'd better get dressed or I'll never get there." Luella washed her face and hands with water from the basin on her dresser then chose a plain, dark blue dress to wear. Once she'd gotten dressed and put on her shoes, she secured her hair in a bun and put her heart-shaped white head covering on.

Downstairs in the kitchen, the first thing she did was slip her black apron on. "What's for *friehschtick*, and what can I do to help you?" she asked her mother.

Mom turned from where she stood at the stove. "Thought we'd have *pannekuche* for our breakfast this morning."

Luella grinned. "Pancakes sound good to me. Shall I mix up the batter?"

"Already done." Mom stepped aside and pointed to the griddle on the stove, where bubbles formed on the surface of four nice-sized

pancakes. "Sara set the table, and now she's outside helping your *daed* in the barn."

Luella's brows furrowed. "How come Samuel's not helping Dad feed the animals? Did my little *bruder* sleep in this morning?"

"Your brother came down with the flu during the night. He's resting in bed."

"I'm sorry to hear it. Sure hope he feels better soon and no one else gets it." Luella especially didn't want to get sick. It would mean not being able to take care of Dena, and Luella certainly didn't want her dear friend to get the flu. It was bad enough Dena's heart was failing. Atlee's wife was pure sweetness, and although her heart had weakened, she never complained. According to what the doctor had told Atlee, Dena would not live to see their young son become a man.

"Daughter, did you hear what I said?" Mom tapped Luella's shoulder, halting her contemplations.

Luella turned around. "*Ach*. Sorry, Mom. I was deep in thought."

Mom gave a nod. "It looked as if you were."

"What did you say to me?"

"I asked what time you need to be at the Zooks'."

Luella glanced at the battery-operated clock. "I should leave within the hour."

"Then we'd best eat soon. Why don't you run out to the barn and tell your daed and *schweschder* to stop what they're doing and come in for breakfast? If they're not done, they can finish up when the meal is over."

"Okay, Mom." Luella pulled her woolen shawl from the wall peg and slipped out the back door.

Pulling the shawl tighter around her shoulders as she approached the barn, Luella heard Dad whistling. He always made music when

he fed the livestock. Luella felt blessed to have such a cheerful father. For that matter, both of her parents had positive attitudes, even when faced with trials. Luella hoped someday, when she was married and had children, that she could set a good example for them as well.

Upon entering the barn, Luella spotted her sister down on her knees, petting one of the barn cats.

Luella cleared her throat real loud and, with a jerk of her head, Sara looked up. "You shouldn't sneak up on a person like that. Almost gave me a *hatzschlack*."

Hearing her sister say "heart attack" caused Luella to think about poor Dena again. Ever since she had began working for Atlee, she thought about him and his wife's situation. How sad it would be to marry someone and then a few years later learn they were gravely ill.

In an effort to redirect her thoughts, Luella knelt beside Sara and reached out to stroke the cat. "I thought you were supposed to be helping Dad feed the animals." She wagged her finger.

Sara's pale brows lowered, and she pushed a lock of silky blond hair back under the head scarf she wore to do chores. "For your information, I've already fed the *katze* and the *hund*, so now I'm just takin' a little time to pet Cloud."

Luella snickered. Her sister loved animals and had named every one of their cats. This one she called Cloud because of its fluffy white fur. "Okay, Sara, I understand, but Mom sent me out here to fetch you and Dad so we could eat breakfast."

Sara rose to her feet. "Oh, good 'cause I'm *hungerich*."

Luella smiled. "You go ahead to the house, and I'll get Dad."

"All right. See you up at the house." Her sister scampered out the door with Cloud following close behind.

First, Luella paused to check on Buttercup, the Nubian goat her parents got for her sixteenth birthday. The floppy-eared goat came to the front of the stall and bleated, most likely hoping Luella would follow through with the normal ear scratching. "Don't worry, I didn't forget you, Buttercup." Luella had to giggle when the goat leaned into her hand as she scratched behind its ears. "Why, I believe you are actually smiling."

After fussing with Buttercup, Luella followed Dad's whistles to the back of the barn. She found him inside the stall of Mom's buggy horse.

Seemingly engrossed in his chore of spreading fresh straw, Dad didn't notice her at first. It wasn't easy running a farm, but somehow he put enjoyment behind the hardest of work. Even now, as her father followed his normal routine of freshening the stall, one would never know he'd been up before daybreak, putting in a few hours before breakfast.

She stood watching him a few seconds longer, until he paused to wipe his forehead. "Ach, Luella! I didn't hear you come in. How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long at all. I've enjoyed the tune you've been whistling, while watching you work." She looked at her dad tenderly. "You know what I always say, Dad. 'Keep your happiness in circulation.'"

He grinned, giving his full dark beard a tug. "You know me. . . always singin' or whistlin' when I have chores to do."

She nodded. "The reason I came out is to tell you breakfast is about ready. Since I have to leave for the Zooks' house soon, Mom said I should call you in to eat."

He gestured to the pile of straw yet to be spread. "I still have a little more work here."

“I know, but Mom thought you could finish up after breakfast.”

He reached under his straw hat and scratched his head. “*Jah*, I suppose I could do that all right. Who knows, I might be able to work a lot harder once my belly is full.” Dad winked at Luella. “Agreed?”

She grinned up at him. “*Jah*, Dad, I agree. But ya better not eat too much, or it’ll make you sleepy.”

“I’ve never looked at it that way,” her father said with a chuckle, as he put his arm around Luella’s shoulder and they walked out of the barn together.



“How is Dena doing today?” Luella asked when Atlee let her into his house.

“Not well.” Atlee slowly shook his head, glancing toward their bedroom, which was on the first floor. “She didn’t sleep well last night, so I insisted she stay in bed this morning and rest.” He reached up to rub his neck. The poor man’s somber expression said it all; he was worried about his wife.

Luella wanted to offer him comfort but wasn’t sure how. She certainly couldn’t give Atlee a hug, like she did whenever Dad was troubled about something. That would be inappropriate. “I’m sorry, Atlee. I’ll keep Daryl entertained today and make sure Dena’s needs are met.”

His shoulders drooped, and he rubbed the heel of his palm against his chest. Luella saw only sadness in Atlee’s brown eyes. His thick, dark brows, matching the color of his hair and beard, pulled downward. He looked so defeated. “According to the doctor, short of a miracle, my *fraa* doesn’t have long to live.”

Luella’s heart went out to him. Although Atlee tried to stay strong for his wife and son, she could see the stress was wearing on him. Dark

circles under his eyes suggested he'd gotten very little sleep last night. She'd been praying and praying for Dena, but the dear woman seemed to be getting weaker every day. How would Atlee cope when she was gone? How would their son manage without a mother? At times such as now, Luella couldn't help but question God. Why did He call some people home in the prime of their life, while others got to live to a ripe old age? It didn't seem fair, but it wasn't her place to question God. As their bishop had said in a sermon lately, "God's ways are not our ways, and He has a plan for every one of His people, even if we can't see or understand it."

Luella tilted her head toward the stairs but heard no noise coming from up there. The Zooks' house was a large two-story, with one bedroom down, and the other four bedrooms on the second floor. "Is Daryl still in bed?" she asked, feeling the need to talk about something else—something that didn't speak of death.

"Jah." Atlee ambled over to the woodstove and picked up the coffee pot. "Would you like a cup of *kaffi*, Luella?"

"No, thank you. I'll fix you some friehschtick, though."

He shook his head. "I've already had breakfast."

Luella glanced at the table, where only Atlee's empty cup set. No sign of any plates having been out, nor was there a frying pan or kettle on the stove. "What did you have?"

"I ate a piece of that tasty shoofly pie you made yesterday, to go with my coffee."

"I see." She glanced at the kitchen sink, but it was empty.

As if he could read her thoughts, Atlee quickly said, "I didn't use a *deller*. I put the pie on a napkin and ate it with my fingers." He held up his hand and wiggled his fingers. "It got kind of sticky, but that's what soap and *wasser* are for."

She resisted the urge to laugh, certain that he didn't mean it to be funny. Truthfully, the only time Luella saw Atlee laugh, or even smile, was when he took time out from his job to play with his son. Atlee had a woodworking shop in a separate building on his property, where he made doghouses, birdhouses, picnic tables, lawn chairs, and some small storage sheds. He did most of the work himself, but one of the young Amish men in the area came to help when Atlee had too many orders to fill. At noontime and at least once more during the day, Atlee came into the house to check on Dena and spend a little time with Daryl. If Luella had learned one thing about Atlee since she'd been working for him, it was that he was a devoted husband and father. She hoped to find a man someday who would be equally devoted to her. For now, though, her only goal in life was to be a good caregiver for Dena and see that Daryl had everything he needed. That's what Atlee had hired her for, and she wouldn't let him down.



## CHAPTER 2

Luella took a seat in the chair beside Dena's bed, while Daryl played with his wooden horse on the floor nearby. Luella had brought the boy into the bedroom with her, partly so she could keep an eye on him and also to give Dena a chance to be with her son.

"You don't have to sit here with me." Dena's brown eyes closed then fluttered open. It was an obvious struggle for her to stay awake. "I'm sure you have other things to do."

Luella shook her head. "The lunch dishes are done, and the laundry is hanging on the line outside, so there isn't much I need to do till it's time to bring the clothes in and start supper." She touched Dena's pale hand. "Besides, I enjoy talking with you. But if you're too tired to visit, I can come back later to check on you and see if there's anything you need."

"What I need is to get up and do something meaningful. I don't know why Atlee insisted I stay in bed all day." Dena released a lingering sigh. "I feel so useless."

"Would you like me to bring your basket of yarn so you can sit up in bed and knit or crochet?"

"I suppose I could do that, but it's not the same as cooking for my family, cleaning house, or going for a walk with my precious little *bu*." When Dena turned her head to look at Daryl, tears gathered in the corner of her eyes. "I'm missing so much not being able to care for him

like I should, and. . ." Her voice lowered. "It breaks my heart to think that I won't be around to see him start school."

Luella gently squeezed her friend's fingers. "Please don't talk like that, Dena. You must not give up hope."

Dena lifted a shaky hand to push a wisp of auburn hair away from her colorless cheek. "My hope lies in Jesus, but I have to face reality. My heart's not getting any stronger, and it's only a matter of time until. . ." Her voice trailed off as several tears seeped out from under her lashes. "There's so much I want to tell you, Luella, but I can barely keep my eyes open. We can talk later. But for now, why don't you take Daryl outside to play while I take a nap?"

Luella nodded. "I can do that. Is there anything I can do or get for you before we head outdoors?"

"No, I'm fine. I just need to sleep for a while."

Luella patted Dena's arm then tucked the lovely quilt covering her bed up under her chin. "I'll be in to check on you after we come back inside."

*"Danki."* Dena closed her eyes.

Luella continued to sit a few more minutes, until she was sure Dena had fallen asleep. Then she left her chair, took Daryl's hand, and led him silently from the room.



"Why can't *Mammi* come outside with us?" Daryl's innocence tugged at Luella's heart.

"Your mamma is a little tired still, and she needs her rest."

With no more questions, Daryl stretched out each arm while Luella slipped his jacket on, then put her heavy woolen shawl around her shoulders.

As they stepped off the porch, Luella stopped. In certain spots, sunlight glistened on the grass, making dewdrops sparkle like tiny diamonds. But in other shaded areas, yet untouched by the warmth of the afternoon sun, frosty patterns coated the still-frozen blades of grass. Luella was glad they both wore heavier attire, as she blew air from her mouth and watched the vapor dissolve into the cold, nippy air.

“*Schnee!* Schnee!” Daryl pointed to the thin layer of sparkling ice lingering on the trees in the Zooks’ backyard.

“No, Daryl, it’s frost, not snow,” Luella said in Pennsylvania Dutch. At the age of four, he was still too young to understand most English words, but that would change when he turned six and went to school.

The boy tipped his auburn head back, looked up at her curiously, and repeated the word *schnee*.

She didn’t correct him this time. He’d learn the difference between snow and frost eventually. As chilly as it was, all too soon Daryl would be correct in yelling, “Schnee.”

Luella watched as the young lad ran through the yard, making a matted-down trail in the frost as he went. While Daryl was content amusing himself, she turned and looked back at the large, five-bedroom house. How exciting it must have been when the Zooks were first married and moved into this place.

She wiped the tears that had escaped her eyes. No doubt they’d planned for a big family with plenty of children to fill all those bedrooms—hopes and dreams that would never be fulfilled.

Continuing to study the house, Luella couldn’t help noticing all the beautiful shrubbery planted here and there. In between the bushes, and along the fence line surrounding their property, were remnants of late summer and autumn flowers, now blackened or lifeless by the brutal cold frost. Dena must have felt such joy when planting those

flowers and watching them bloom, adding color to the landscape. Tending the house, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of her husband and son—it would be hard to give it all up.

As Luella looked around the rest of the property toward the barn, and then back to Daryl, the ache inside her grew deeper, knowing what all three of these good people would be losing. It was a horrible situation, no matter from whose perspective she looked at it. Dena was losing out on all the hopes and dreams she would have shared growing old with her husband.

*I can't even think what will happen to Atlee and Daryl once Dena is gone. Will Atlee stay here, or will it be too hard to be reminded daily of the precious memories he and Dena made inside and outside this home? Will this land and house be too big for just him and his son?*

Luella knew when the time came, only Atlee could decide what would work best for him and the boy. Oh, how her heart ached for them, though.

Startling Luella out of her thoughts, Daryl ran up to her and pointed to the frosty designs in the grass. “Look what I did.” He giggled as the sun went behind a cloud.

“Now that is quite pretty, isn't it?” Luella had to chuckle at Daryl's pleasure, even with the foreboding going through her mind. Taking a deep breath, she reached for the boy's hand. “Why don't we go for a walk?”

“Daadi! Daadi!” Daryl pointed across the way to his father's woodshop.

Atlee would be busy, but to deny his son the right to say hello wouldn't be right, either. “Okay, we'll go see your daddy. But only for a little while, because he has work to do.”

Luella thought about the shoofly pie Atlee had eaten for breakfast this morning, and wondered if he'd like another piece. Or maybe he

would enjoy some of the apple butter bars she'd brought from home.

"Let's go inside for a minute and get a treat for your daed." She guided Daryl toward the house. "Would you like some dessert, Daryl?"

The boy's round face broke into a wide smile as he bobbed his head. "*Kichlin.*"

She smiled. They weren't cookies, but it was all the same to Daryl. *Maybe along with the bars, I'll take a Thermos of coffee out to Atlee.*



Atlee's stomach growled. It had only been a few hours since lunch, but for some reason he was hungry. *Guess I should have had a second sandwich when Luella offered it to me. That's what I get for bein' polite.* Atlee appreciated Luella's willingness to help out. Of course, she was being paid for her work. But he had a hunch the young woman would have done it without any pay.

It amazed him how quickly his wife and her caregiver had become friends. Even though they were more than ten years apart, Dena and Luella always seemed to have something to talk about. In addition to keeping Dena company and Daryl entertained, Luella was an excellent cook, and they were all well fed. She also did the laundry, cleaning, and other household chores, all without the slightest complaint. Luella was patient and kind, and most always had a smile on her face. Hiring Luella had been the best medicine he could have given his precious Dena.

When the door to his shop opened, Atlee's musings came to a halt. Seeing Luella and Daryl come in, he dropped what he was doing and went over to greet them.

"Daryl wanted to visit his daadi," Luella explained. She held out the plate, along with Atlee's old Thermos. "And I thought you might

enjoy these apple butter bars and some coffee.”

Grinning, he ruffled his son’s wavy hair. “You bet I would.”

Daryl stood close to Atlee. While the two of them ate their share, Luella remained off to one side, watching them.

“Aren’t you gonna join us?” Atlee gestured to a chair near his workbench. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

“I ate a bar before we came out of the house.”

“Well, there’s no reason you can’t have another. After all, you’re the one who made them.”

A light in Luella’s blue eyes shone when she smiled and nodded. “True. All right, I’ll eat another one, but then Daryl and I need to go back in the house so I can check on Dena.”

“How’s she doing this afternoon?” He poured himself some coffee and waited for her reply.

“Dena seems quite tired today. She was sleeping when I left her.”

Atlee gave his full beard a tug. “She didn’t sleep well last night, so I told her to stay in bed today.”

“Jah, that’s what Dena said.”

He set his coffee down and crossed his arms. “My wife would like to be up and around, doing all the things she used to do, but she’s not up for that anymore.” He paused, reaching around to rub a sore spot on his lower back. “I don’t know how we’ll get along without Dena. This may be our last Christmas together.” He paused, and glanced down at Daryl, glad his son couldn’t understand much English yet.

“You mustn’t think that.” Luella tipped her blond head to one side. “Your wife may be here for a good many months yet.”

Atlee groaned. “I hope so, Luella. Jah, I truly do. If only God would give us a Christmas miracle.”



Back in the house, Luella put Daryl down for a nap. He didn't want to rest, of course, but after she read him a story, he fell asleep on the sofa. Now it was time to see how Daryl's mother was doing.

Luella peeked through the small opening in Dena's door and was surprised to see her sitting up in bed. She poked her head into the room. "I see you're awake now. Would you like some dessert and hot chocolate?"

"Maybe after a while." Dena glanced toward the door. "Where's Daryl?"

"He's asleep on the living-room sofa."

"I'm glad. Some *kinner* his age don't take naps anymore, but my son does better when he's had one." Dena offered Luella a weak smile. "He will be in a good mood during supper."

"Would you like to get up for a bit, and sit in your rocking chair?" Luella asked.

"Maybe later. Right now, I need to talk to you about something."

Luella felt concern, seeing Dena's serious expression. "What is it?" Biting her lip, she pulled the rocking chair next to the bed.

Dena picked up one corner of the lovely quilt on her bed and held it close to her heart. "The pattern for this is called 'Country Patch,' but I call it my beloved Christmas quilt, because my mother, who made the covering, gave it to me and Atlee for Christmas the first year we were married."

"It is a lovely quilt. Your *mamm* was a talented quilter."

Dena got a faraway look in her eyes. "Jah, she certainly was. I miss my mamm and wish she was still alive to take care of Daryl when I'm gone."

Luella's throat felt swollen, and it was difficult to swallow. She wished Dena would stop talking about her imminent death.

"Would you do me a favor, Luella?"

"Jah. What do you need?"

"I'd like you to take this quilt home with you, as an early Christmas present."

"Ach, no, I could never accept such a gift." Luella's fingers touched her parted lips. "It should remain in your family; especially with it being a present from your mother. Besides, it's not even Christmas yet."

Dena shook her head. "I may not be here to give it to you on Christmas Day. Please, Luella, I want you to have this beloved quilt. It would mean a lot to me, knowing you will someday pass the quilt on to your eldest daughter."

"But I'm not even married, and I may never find a husband, so really, you should reconsider."

Dena shook her head. "I have no sisters, and since my parents have both passed on, I have no family to give the quilt to. Please, Luella, I insist that you take it."

"Oh, okay. Danki, Dena. I will treasure it always."

Dena breathed in and out slowly. "I have another favor to ask."

Luella was hesitant to even ask what. She hoped her dear friend didn't want to give her some other family heirloom. "What other favor?"

"I want you to promise that after I'm gone, you will take care of Atlee and Daryl."

"Well, of course, I will come over and check on them regularly, but I really wish you wouldn't talk of such things."

"It's important that I say all this now." Dena stroked the quilt lovingly. "My son will still need someone to care for him while Atlee's



working in his shop. And Atlee—well, he's not good in the kitchen, and he won't have time to clean house or do laundry. Won't you please agree to keep working for him after I'm gone, as you are now? It would give me a sense of peace to know that my family will be taken care of after I die."

Luella had to force a smile as she nodded and said, "Jah, Dena, I will take care of the household and watch your son."

"Be a friend to Atlee, too." Dena lowered her head. "Please. . . I know it won't be easy for him, but he will need someone to talk to."

Luella squeezed her friend's hand. "Jah, Dena, I will."

"My husband is trying to stay strong for me and our son, but I feel his sadness and the concern he has for me." Tears welled up in Dena's dark eyes as she released a sigh. "Danki, Luella. This means so much to me. I feel such a relief knowing you'll be here for them."

Although she kept her thoughts to herself, Luella realized the decision of whether she would continue to work here or not would be up to Dena's husband. She would only be able to keep her promise to Dena if Atlee agreed.



## CHAPTER 3

Tears stung Atlee's eyes as he stood beside his wife's simple coffin, made of poplar wood. Staring at her lifeless body, tears stung his eyes, and he swallowed several times, hoping for some sort of control. The last thing he needed was to break down in front of his son. He needed to be strong, if only for Daryl's sake, but oh, he couldn't imagine spending the rest of his days without the love of his life. Dena was only thirty-five—just three years younger than him. She was too young to die. His beautiful wife should have had many good years ahead of her. It was hard not to feel bitter, even in his state of shock.

Since Dena's passing, Atlee had felt like he was in a fog, unable to think clearly or even process his thoughts. It was almost as though he were walking through a long dark tunnel with no end.

Dena had breathed her last breath three days ago, but the truth of it hadn't fully set in until her funeral service today. It simply didn't seem possible that his precious wife was gone, and yet here he stood, viewing her body one final time. Soon, the lid on her coffin would be screwed down, and then Atlee, along with all the other mourners who'd come to pay their respects, would follow the enclosed, horse-drawn hearse to the Amish cemetery for the graveside service.

Dena's funeral service had been a somber occasion, as two ministers spoke, offering various scriptures about death and the resurrection

of the dead. The event concluded with a reading of Dena's obituary, followed by the closing prayer and benediction.

Atlee glanced back at his son, who stood with his uncles—Dena's two brothers from Ephrata. They lived thirty minutes from Bird-in-Hand, and over the years had come to visit with their wives and children for special occasions and other family gatherings. Daryl was used to his uncles and enjoyed being around them. Atlee appreciated them keeping his son by them right now, as he struggled to keep his emotions in check.

Just as his parents approached their daughter-in-law's casket, Atlee reached out to touch his wife's white cape and apron. They were the same ones she had worn the day they were married. It seemed like only yesterday, instead of eight years ago that their wedding took place. They'd been disappointed during those first few years of marriage when Dena did not get pregnant. They'd both wanted children and had purchased a house large enough for a growing family. Then, when they'd all but given up hope, God gave them a son. How happy they were when Daryl was born. But a year later, they'd learned that Dena's heart had been weakened because of having rheumatic fever as a girl. The doctor advised them not to have any more children, as childbirth would be a strain on Dena's heart. They'd known even then that she might not have long to live, but Dena kept a positive attitude and enjoyed the time she'd been given with Atlee and their son.

Atlee's mother, who'd been stricken with Parkinson's disease seven years ago, reached out a shaky hand and touched his arm. "I—I wish I could trade places with Dena. I wish God had taken me and given your fraa a new heart."

Before Atlee could form a response, his father stepped forward. "I'm sure you mean well, but you must not talk that way, Sadie. Your

purpose on earth isn't over, and we are not to question God. Everyone has an appointment with death, and this was Dena's time."

*Was it?* Atlee swallowed against the burning sensation in his throat, trying to come to grips with Dad's statement. The Bible clearly stated that everyone had an appointed time to die, but didn't God sometimes change His mind and allow a person to live when someone prayed hard enough for them? Well, maybe not. Perhaps it was futile to pray and plead with God on someone's behalf. When a person's time was up, that was it—plain and simple.

Atlee rocked back and forth on his heels, remembering his and Dena's last conversation, the day before she died. Dena had told Atlee she'd given Luella her Country Patch quilt as a Christmas present. At first, it hurt him to know she'd given it to someone outside their family, but then he reasoned that there would be no daughter to pass the heirloom on to, and the quilt was Dena's, to do with as she chose. Of course, if Dena hadn't given the quilt away, Atlee would have saved it to give to Daryl's wife when he got married someday. *Guess it's too late to worry about that. What's done is done. Besides, Luella might appreciate having the quilt more than anyone else, and it will be something she can have to help her remember Dena and the friendship they once shared.*

Atlee shuddered, reflecting on his wife's final request, as she lay gasping for air. Dena had made him promise to take another wife after she was gone. He could still hear her pleading words: "Daryl will need a *mudder*, and you'll need a *fraa*. Please don't close yourself off to the idea, Husband."

*Another wife?* Atlee shook his head. *No one could ever replace my sweet fraa. I wish she hadn't asked that of me. Don't see how I can keep such a promise. The only woman I will ever love is Dena. If I married again, it would only be for convenience's sake.*



Luella shivered against the cold as she stood beside her parents inside the cemetery enclosure, watching two of Atlee's cousins, who'd been asked to be pallbearers, shovel dirt into the grave. When they became tired, two other pallbearers took over.

As gray clouds, shot through with glimpses of blue, drifted overhead, a chilly wind blew the remaining leaves off the trees outside the cemetery. It seemed the weather was undecided what to do, but at least the rain that had been forecast for today held off. Being wet and cold would not be a good combination for the mourners at Dena's grave.

It was difficult to watch young Daryl standing beside his father as the boy's mother was laid to rest. What a brave little lad he was today, shivering and holding hands with his father. Atlee should be pleased with his son, as he stood as tall as his little frame would allow.

Luella's feet remained firmly planted, although she struggled with the desire to go to the trembling child and wrap him in her arms. But that would be inappropriate. She would comfort Daryl once they were back at Atlee's house, where a simple meal would be served.

Luella tried to concentrate on the words of the hymn their bishop had begun to read when the grave became half full of dirt. Following their usual custom, he would continue to read until the job had been finished.

At the conclusion of the graveside service, the bishop asked the congregation to pray the Lord's Prayer silently. Luella bowed her head, along with the others. *Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: for thine*

*is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

Luella had memorized these verses from Matthew 6, verses 9–13, when she was a young girl. It had brought her comfort during sad times, as it did now. She hoped the same was true for Atlee today. He would most certainly need to seek God's Word many times in the days ahead.

Looking up after the prayer was said, her gaze came to rest on Eugene Lapp, a friend of hers since childhood. Eugene had been looking at her and nodded when their gazes met. Luella acknowledged him with a slight smile but then turned her attention back to Atlee and Daryl.

Luella thought about her promise to Dena. She wanted to keep her word about caring for Daryl and continuing to work for Atlee. But what if he wanted someone else to watch his son while he was at work or away from the house? Perhaps Atlee had only hired Luella to care for Dena because he knew they were friends. Since Dena's parents were deceased, and Atlee's mother, Sadie, had some health issues of her own, no family members were available to take care of Daryl or keep house for Atlee.

He lived near two single Amish women, both close to his age. After a reasonable time, he might decide to marry one of them. That wouldn't solve his immediate problem of needing someone to manage the house and provide for his son's needs while he was unavailable. Atlee surely couldn't take Daryl to his woodshop every day and try to keep an eye on him. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for him to do all the cooking, cleaning, and other household chores while running a successful business.

Taking a calming breath, Luella put these worries out of her mind. She would speak to Atlee later today—perhaps after mourners had

eaten the meal at his house. Luella just needed to think of the best way to ask her question. She didn't want Atlee to feel obligated or keep her working for him because he thought she needed the money. While the extra income had given her the opportunity to help her parents with expenses, it was not the reason she'd agreed to work for Atlee in the first place. Hopefully when Luella broached the subject, she would make that clear to him.



That evening, after Luella got ready for bed, she picked up the lovely quilt Dena had given her, which she had draped over the back of a chair, and held it snuggly against her chest. *Oh Dena, my dear friend, I already miss you so much.*

Christmas was only a few weeks away, but this special quilt with Christmas colors would be Luella's most cherished gift. She took a seat on the end of the bed and closed her eyes, visualizing her friend singing with the angels in heaven. This thought alone gave Luella some measure of comfort. She felt certain that Dena was in a place where there was no pain or suffering. She had been a good Christian woman, and her sweet spirit was a testimony to others. Surely she was welcomed into heaven when she breathed her last breath.

When Luella opened her eyes again, a thought popped into her head. *I should place Dena's quilt on my bed and put my old covering away. Then every time I come into my room I'll be reminded of the special friendship Dena and I shared and be thankful.*

Earlier that evening, she had spoken with Atlee after most of the people had finished their meal at his home and left. Before she could ask about caring for Daryl, Atlee had approached her, saying he hoped she would continue working for him. He also said he appreciated



everything Luella had done for his wife and mentioned how well Daryl got along with her. Of course, Luella had agreed to take care of Atlee's little boy and provide their meals, in addition to doing all the household chores. So tomorrow morning, at Atlee's request, Luella would return to his house. With the exception of caring for Dena's needs, her duties would be the same. It would be bittersweet, however. She would miss seeing Dena's sweet face and their long talks. On the other hand, Daryl needed Luella now more than ever. It would be a difficult adjustment for the boy to not have a mother to tuck him in at night, read him a bedtime story, and hold him in her arms when he needed comfort and nurturing. Luella hoped to provide Daryl with all those things, although she would never try to replace his mother. She felt sure Atlee would do all he could to raise his son in a pleasant environment, but he would need to deal with his own grief before he could bring joy and laughter into their house.

Luella drew in her bottom lip. *It will be my job to find things for Daryl to laugh about. And hopefully, when the time is right, Atlee will be able to smile and laugh again.*

When she lifted the lid of her cedar chest to tuck her old bed covering away, she noticed one of her childhood storybooks. Sitting on the floor, Luella laid the covering aside and reached for the small, hard-covered book. As she ran her fingers over the front that illustrated two little fawns in the company of a Dalmatian, she noticed the cover was a bit worn.

When Luella fanned through the pages, it pleased her to see the entire book was still intact. "This was my favorite story, growing up." Luella spoke quietly, remembering all the times her mother had read about the talking animals to her. She stopped at the page where the two orphaned fawns were being scolded by the dog, who'd actually

taken on the role of their mother, when the mother deer died. It was a cute story, centered around the fawns, their antics and adventures, and how they adapted to new surroundings. *Think I'll keep it out so I can share it with Daryl. Maybe it will bring him a little joy, like the story did for me when Mom read it out loud.*

Sighing, she folded her old bed covering and placed it inside the cedar chest, where she'd put several other items in anticipation of someday getting married. Then, spreading Dena's quilt out over her bed, she noticed something on one corner of the backing she hadn't seen before. A scripture had been embroidered there, possibly by Dena, or maybe Dena's mother.

Luella's fingers trailed along the precise stitching as she read the verse out loud. " 'For thou art my rock and my fortress; therefore for thy name's sake lead me, and guide me'—Psalm 31:3."

Her eyes teared up. *What a wonderful scripture and reminder for me when doubts fill my mind and I don't know what path to take.* Luella closed her eyes once again. *Thank You, Lord, for being my rock and my fortress. May I always remember to seek Your will in all things and follow the right path, as You lead and guide me. Amen.*

## CHAPTER 4

Snow storms had been moving in and out since Luella left Atlee's house with Daryl. But after each burst of snow, which lasted fifteen minutes or so, the sun would break through, the skies would clear, and the roads remained only wet.

Looking out the front of the buggy window, Luella glanced at the sky, watching another line of clouds approaching. *Hopefully the sun will come out after this one, too*, she thought, clucking to Dixie to keep her moving. Luella never had any problems with her. Even in heavy traffic, the horse usually remained calm and under control.

Luella could hardly believe tomorrow was Christmas, but here she was, out shopping with Atlee's son on a cold snowy day. She'd been busy with all her responsibilities at Atlee's place and hadn't found the time to buy any gifts for her family. They'd gone to a few stores so far, and she had bought some gifts, but she also wanted to find something for Daryl. Luella had become quite fond of the boy and enjoyed the opportunity to spend time with him. But having Daryl along made it difficult to buy anything without him seeing it. She wished now she'd thought to invite her mother along. At least Mom could have kept the boy occupied while Luella picked something out and paid for her purchases.

"I'm hungerich." Daryl reached across the buggy seat and tugged

on Luella's shawl, as a few snowflakes started to fall.

Glancing at one of her father's old pocket watches, which she'd put in her purse this morning, Luella realized it was half-past noon. No wonder the boy was hungry. Now that Luella thought about it, she could probably eat something, too. She squeezed Daryl's cold fingers. *Maybe a pair of gloves would be a good gift to get Daryl for Christmas.* "Well then, let's go get something to eat." Luella snapped the reins and directed her horse onto the road leading to the Bird-in-Hand Family Restaurant.

When they entered the restaurant a short time later and were waiting to be shown to a table, Daryl shouted, "*Sandi Klaas!*"

Luella turned to look at the door where the boy pointed. Sure enough, there stood a large man dressed in a red suit and hat, both trimmed with white fur. He wore shiny black boots with large gold buckles, and his curly snow-white beard hung down to his chest. He was obviously one of the local English men dressed up like Santa Claus.

Before Luella had a chance to say anything to Daryl, the man marched right over to him, reached into his cloth satchel, and pulled out a candy cane. "Here ya go, little fella. Merry Christmas!"

Luella wasn't sure if Daryl understood what the pretend Santa had said, but with no hesitation, the boy took the offered candy, his eyes full of wonderment and a smile stretching wide across his face.

"Say thank you to the nice man," Luella prompted.

"Danki." The boy offered a shy toothy grin.

The would-be Santa gave a nod and hurried into the restaurant, where he proceeded to hand out candy canes to all the children who were seated at tables with their parents.

"Will Santa come to my house?" Daryl asked.

*Oh, dear.* Luella sucked in her lower lip. *Now how should I respond to that?* She was well aware that the Amish didn't teach their children about Santa Claus, Christmas trees, or colored lights. Christmas was a time to focus on the birth of Christ, and celebrations were centered around family time and reading the Bible story of how the baby Jesus was born in a stable. How much Atlee and Dena had told their son about Santa Claus, she didn't know, but Luella felt since the boy was in her charge, she should at least explain it in the way that she knew.

She leaned close to his ear and spoke to him in Pennsylvania Dutch. "Daryl, we don't celebrate Christmas because of Sandi Klaas. It's Jesus we think about, and how much God loved us when He sent His Son to earth as a baby."

Daryl tipped his head. "Does Jesus bring the presents?"

"No, but neither does Santa Claus."

The boy's lower lip jutted out. Luella wondered if he was going to cry.

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "After we eat, you can enjoy the candy cane the nice man gave you."

The hostess approached and led them to a table by the window. By this time it was snowing steadily, and Luella could hardly see across the road. Looking up at the sky, she just made out a dim, milky sun struggling to break through the swirling snow. It almost made her dizzy, watching all the tiny flakes, resembling millions of white bugs flying in every direction. She quickly looked away.

Luella felt relieved when Daryl climbed onto a chair and began playing with his spoon as though it were a train. "*Choo-choo. . . Choo-choo. . .*" Well, at least his mind was on something else. Hopefully the subject of Santa Claus would not be brought up again. When they

finished eating their lunch, Luella would stop by her parents' house and see if Mom was willing to watch Daryl for a few hours this afternoon. This would allow Luella the chance to finish her shopping without the boy seeing what she'd bought.



“Look, it’s snowing!” Luella’s sister pointed out the kitchen window. “I was hoping we’d get schnee on Christmas Day.”

Luella joined her sister at the window, gazing at the lacy flakes drifting out of the sky. Unlike yesterday’s intermittent bursts of snow, this was more like a normal snow event. “It is beautiful. If the snow keeps up, the grass and trees will soon be white.”

Flashing Luella a grin, Sara clapped her hands. “Maybe we can go outside after dinner and catch snowflakes on our tongues.”

Luella chuckled. “I’m sure Daryl will be excited to see the snow. If the wind doesn’t pick up, and it’s not too cold, we can take him outside after our meal, and we’ll all catch snowflakes and let ’em melt on our tongues.”

“I hope it snows really hard so we can build a snowman. Bet Daryl would like that.” Sara’s eyes shone with the enthusiasm of an eager twelve-year-old.

“Jah, maybe so.” Luella glanced at the battery-operated clock across the room. “I wonder what’s keeping Atlee. Sure hope he didn’t change his mind about joining us for Christmas dinner. It wouldn’t be good for him and Daryl to spend the holiday alone.”

“I wouldn’t worry, Luella. I’m sure they’ll be here soon.” Mom stepped between Luella and Sara, peering out the window. “You’re right. The snow is beautiful. If the sun comes out later, it’ll be even prettier.” She tapped Luella’s shoulder. “Would you mind checking

on the ham, while I go down to the cellar to get a few jars of green beans?"

Luella smiled. "Certainly, I can do that."

"And Sara," Mom added, "would you please finish setting the table?"

Sara's eyebrows lowered. "I did that already, Mamm."

"The plates, glasses, and silverware are on the dining-room table, but you forgot the *bauchdudicher*."

"Oops, sorry. I'll get them now." Sara grabbed several napkins and hurried from the room.

Shaking her head, Mom looked at Luella. "That girl can be so forgetful at times."

"I think she's just excited because it's Christmas Day."

"Jah. This is a day when we should all be excited." Mom pointed up. "As we celebrate the birth of Christ, it's a reminder of how much God loves us."

Luella nodded. She hoped Atlee would be able to experience the joy of today, too.



As Luella watched Atlee from across the table, where he sat between Daryl and her brother Samuel, she could almost read the man's thoughts. Atlee had come here for his son's sake, but his heart wasn't in it. Even though she'd hoped it would be different, Atlee's placid expression let her know he felt no joy in celebrating Christmas this year. How could he, when his wife had died a few short weeks ago? It would be some time before Atlee could smile or laugh again. But Luella would keep praying for him and do everything she could to keep his household running smoothly so he'd have less to worry about.

Several family members, including Luella's father and older brother, Matthew, had tried to engage Atlee in conversation, but he'd only responded with a few words. Luella noticed that he hadn't eaten much, either.

When the meal was over and the table had been cleared, Atlee entered the kitchen, where Luella and her mother had begun doing the dishes. "Think I'm gonna head for home now, before the snow gets any worse."

Luella glanced out the window. Seeing the thick layers of white accumulating on the barn roof and all over the yard, she nodded. "Before you leave, though, I have a gift for Daryl."

Looking steadily at Luella, Atlee placed one hand against his heart. "Danki for thinking of my boy. This is a difficult time for me, and the only gift I have for Daryl is a little wooden carriage I made for him a few months ago. Since Dena's death, I haven't felt like shopping for gifts."

"It's understandable." Mom set her dish towel aside and placed her hands on Atlee's arm. "We will keep you in our prayers, and if there's anything we can do for you or Daryl, please let us know. You are always welcome here."

Ducking his head slightly, Atlee murmured, "I appreciate that."

Luella dried her hands. "I'll go get Daryl's gift now."

"And while my *dochter* is doing that, I'll cut a few pieces of pie for you to take home."

"That would be nice. And danki for inviting Daryl and me to share your Christmas dinner, Esther. Everything I ate was good. Sorry I didn't feel up to eating more."

As Luella slipped out of the room, she heard Mom say, "I'll give you some slices of ham, too, Atlee. You can eat them later this evening



or maybe tomorrow for breakfast. It'll make good sandwiches for your lunch, as well."

Luella smiled. She felt thankful to have a mother who was so thoughtful of others. When Luella went to Atlee's house in the morning, she would fix him and Daryl ham and eggs for breakfast.



Boldness was not in Eugene Lapp's nature, but dropping hints and stopping by the Ebersols' on occasion wasn't getting him anywhere with Luella. So today, he'd decided to come right out and ask if he could court her. He knew when he pulled his horse and buggy into their yard that they had company, but hopefully he could speak to Luella alone for a few minutes. He certainly couldn't ask her in front of everyone. It would be embarrassing for him, as well as to her.

As Eugene guided his horse up to the hitching rail, he saw Atlee Zook taking his horse out of the barn, while Daryl waited close by near the fence. *I'll bet the Ebersols invited the Zooks to join them for Christmas dinner. Guess that makes sense, since Luella works for Atlee and they live just a mile from each other.* Eugene reached under his hat and scratched his head. *It seems strange, though, that Atlee wouldn't be at his folks' house today.*

Eugene got out of his rig and secured his horse, Chip, at the rail. Since he wouldn't be here that long, even though it was snowing pretty hard, he saw no point in putting Chip in Owen Ebersol's barn.

"*En hallicher Grischrdaag!*" Eugene gave Atlee a friendly wave.

"A Merry Christmas to you, too." Atlee began hitching his horse. "Did you come for a slice of *pei*?"

Eugene shook his head. "Came by to bring Luella a Christmas gift, but if I'm offered some pie, I sure won't turn it down. How about you, Atlee? Did you have dessert?"

“No. We’ll have it later this evening.” Atlee held up and pointed to the paper sack Luella’s mother had packed for them. Then he helped Daryl into the carriage. “My son and I were here for supper, but we’ll be heading for home now.”

“I see. I’m surprised you’re not at your folks’ house today.”

“Mom and Dad went to my brother Dewayne’s place today. Since it’s fifteen miles from here, they hired a driver to take them there. My boy and I were invited, but I decided it’d be best to stick close to home. I’m glad we did, since it’s snowing like this.”

“Guess that makes sense.” Eugene shuffled his boots in the snow. “How ya gettin’ along these days?”

“Doing the best I can.” Atlee stood by his rig. “I’ve been trying to remember that where God leads, He will light the way.” He dropped his gaze. “I just never expected He’d be leading me down a path without a helpmate.”

Since Eugene had never been married, he wasn’t sure what to say. “Sorry for your loss,” he mumbled.

“Danki.” Atlee took off his hat, shook the snow off it, then stepped into his buggy. “See you around, Eugene.”

Eugene lifted his hand in a wave then reached into his buggy and retrieved Luella’s gift. He glanced back, watching Atlee guide his horse toward the road and disappear into the veil of snow. Sprinting through the powdery snow, Eugene felt giddy in the pit of his stomach. Was it the snow giving him so much delight, or the fact he’d be seeing Luella as he knocked on the Ebersols’ back door? A few seconds later, the door opened. Luella stood in front of him. His mouth became dry, and his cold hands felt clammy.

“Oh, Eugene, it’s you. I thought maybe Atlee had forgotten something.”

"Nope, it's me all right. Came by to give you this." He handed Luella the gift. "Merry Christmas."

"Ach, I didn't expect you to give me a present." Luella's face turned a light shade of pink as she took the package. "Sorry, but I don't have anything for you."

"Aw, that's okay." Eugene brushed some snow off his sleeve. "Your friendship is gift enough for me."

The color in her cheeks deepened. "I . . . I appreciate your friendship, too."

Eugene cleared his throat while shuffling his feet. "Enough to let me court you?" There, it was out, and he'd said it without any of Luella's family hearing. Of course, he had to stand out here in the cold in order to do it. He was sure if she'd invited him inside there would have been someone within earshot.

*But then, why hasn't Luella asked me to come in?* he wondered. *A good friend wouldn't let someone remain in the cold.*

As if she could tell what he was thinking, Luella opened the door wider. "Why don't you come inside out of the cold? Maybe you'd like to join us for some dessert."

"Okay, I will, but you haven't answered my question. Are you willing to let me court you, Luella?"

"Well, I—uh. . ." The flush on Luella's cheeks had crept down to her neck. "I'm flattered that you'd want to court me, Eugene, but the truth is, I don't have time for courting right now."

"You mean because of your job working for Atlee?"

"Jah. I go there five days a week to watch Daryl and help out around the house. On Saturdays, when I'm here at home, I keep busy helping my mamm."

"I understand that, but what about on *Sunndaag*? Couldn't we go

for a buggy ride after church, or maybe I could come by here some evenings so we could spend time together?”

Luella blinked rapidly, as she leaned against the door casing. “I’d rather not make any kind of commitment right now, Eugene. I hope you understand.”

*No, I don’t. I don’t understand at all. If you care about me, then you oughta want us to begin courting.* Eugene reached out and placed his hand on her arm. “Would you at least give it more thought? Maybe sometime next year Atlee will decide to court another woman, and then you won’t have so many responsibilities to worry about.”

She nodded. “All right, Eugene. We can talk about this some other time.” Luella stepped aside. “Now, please come in and have a piece of pumpkin or apple pie.”

“Okay.” He stomped the snow off his boots and stepped inside. Well, at least Luella hadn’t completely shut the door on him or the idea of them courting. As soon as Eugene heard anything about Atlee courting another woman, he would approach Luella again.



After Atlee read Daryl a bedtime story from the new book Luella had given him for Christmas, he tucked the boy in and gave him a hug. “Sleep well, son. I’ll see you in the morning.” Atlee had to smile when he noticed the pair of gloves she’d also given Daryl lying right next to his pillow. Luella was a thoughtful young woman.

“Wait, Daadi.” Daryl pulled his hands out from under the covers. “When will Mammi come home?”

Atlee crossed his arms, holding them tightly to his shoulders so they wouldn’t shake. Even though he’d explained the day of Dena’s death that she’d gone to heaven, he’d been afraid his son might ask

him this question. He swallowed hard and took a seat in the chair beside Daryl's bed. "Your mamm is in heaven with Jesus."

"But she's coming back, right, Daadi?"

Atlee shook his head. "She won't be coming back, son. We won't see your mamm again till it's our turn to go to heaven."

The boy's blue eyes filled with tears. "Then I wanna go to heaven now."

Atlee was at a loss for words. Truth was, he wished he could be with Dena in heaven, too. But it wasn't his or Daryl's time yet. And until God called him to his heavenly home, Atlee would do the best he could to make it through and be a good dad to his son. That's what Dena would have wanted.



## CHAPTER 5

Luella smiled. Since she'd first come to the kitchen to prepare lunch, Daryl had been sitting on the braided throw rug near the warmth of the woodstove, looking at the pictures inside her old storybook about the dog and twin fawns. It had been two weeks since Luella gave Daryl a book about a family of horses for Christmas, but he still preferred the book from her childhood. The boy liked the story so much, Luella had decided to keep it at Atlee's house so she could read it to Daryl as often as he requested. When he grew older and lost interest in the book, she would return it to her cedar chest to read to her own children someday.

"If I ever get married," Luella whispered, as she stood in front of Atlee's woodstove, stirring a pot of chicken noodle soup. She thought about Eugene's desire to court her. *If I were free to let him court me, would our relationship eventually lead to marriage?* Her forehead wrinkled. *Eugene will probably find someone else before I'm free for courting.*

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Luella's thoughts were pushed aside when Daryl started laughing. She figured he must be looking at the picture of the dog holding his paw on top of the one fawn's head. That part always made him giggle, and her, too, recalling what it was like when she was a little girl. It was

good to see the child's happiness. He'd been so sad since his mother passed away.

"My mamm's in *himmel*."

Turning from the stove, Luella knelt on the rug beside him. "Yes, Daryl, your mother's in heaven."

"I'm goin' there, too." He lifted his chin. "I'm gonna tell Mammi she needs to come home. I want her to read me this book, too."

Luella rubbed the little boy's back. It wasn't her place to tell Daryl his mother wouldn't be coming home, so she quickly changed the subject. "How would you like to help me build a snowman after lunch?"

Eyes shining, he bobbed his head. "Can we put a *gehltrieb* in his *naas*?"

Luella bit back a chuckle. "Yes, we'll give him a nose made out of a carrot." She stood and went back to the stove to check on the soup. The chicken and vegetables seemed tender, so she pushed the kettle to the back of the stove to keep it warm. "I'm going out to your daed's shop to call him for lunch. Can you sit there and read your book while I'm gone?"

Daryl's head moved up and down.

"Okay then, I'll be right back." Luella took her woolen shawl down from the wall peg and wrapped it around her shoulders. Then she slipped on a pair of boots and scooted out the back door.

When Luella entered Atlee's shop, a blast of warm air greeted her. The small woodstove in one corner of the room kept the building well heated. "I came out to tell you that lunch is ready," she hollered against the steady *Bang! Bang!* of Atlee's hammer.

He stopped working and turned to look at her. "I'm not really hungerich."

"Oh, but it's important for you to eat. I made a pot of soup, and



it'll warm your insides.”

Atlee said nothing; just looked down at his boots.

“You know, Daryl probably won't eat, either, if you're not there to share the meal.”

After a yielding sigh, he nodded. “You're right, and I don't want to disappoint my boy.” Atlee set the hammer down, grabbed his jacket, and followed Luella out the door.



When Atlee entered the kitchen, he was greeted by a tantalizing aroma. He hung up his jacket and sniffed the air. “Chicken noodle soup—jah?”

Luella nodded. “And I made a loaf of wheat bread to go with it.”

Grinning up at his father, Daryl held up Luella's storybook. “*Sehne die buch?*”

“Jah, son, I see the book.” Atlee leaned over and ruffled the boy's thick auburn hair. “Are ya ready to sit at the table and eat lunch now?”

Daryl clambered to his feet, but before he reached the table, Luella pointed to the sink. “You and your daed should wash your hands first.”

Atlee stiffened. Who did Luella think she was, telling him what to do? The only person he'd ever allowed to boss him around was Dena, but that was because he knew she loved him, and he did what she asked because he loved her. However, Atlee couldn't deny that his hands were dirty and Daryl's probably were, too. So without a word of protest, he pulled out a chair and set it in front of the sink. Then he picked up his son and stood him on the chair. Standing beside Daryl, Atlee turned on the water, grabbed a bar of soap, and proceeded to wash his hands as well as the boy's. By the time their hands were dry and the chair was in its proper place, Luella had set

the soup and bread on the table.

They all took seats and bowed heads for silent prayer. When they finished praying, Luella handed Atlee the bread basket and a jar of apple butter. He stared at the jar several seconds, blinking rapidly. “Dena and I made this apple butter before you came to work for us. It was a fun time, and we enjoyed being in the kitchen together.”

“It’s good, too.” Luella spread some on a piece of bread and gave it to Daryl. “I tasted a spoonful when I first opened the jar.”

Atlee sat, staring at his bowl of soup, as memories washed over him like waves lapping against the shore. *Oh, my precious Dena, how I wish you were sitting here at the table with us.* He blinked again, hoping he wouldn’t give in to the tears threatening to spill over. He needed to be strong for Daryl’s sake.

“I hope you like the soup,” Luella said. “It’s the same recipe my mamm uses—plenty of chicken pieces cooked in the broth, along with diced carrots, onion, celery, noodles, and just the right amount of spices.” She snickered. “My daed always says my mamm’s chicken noodle soup tastes like heaven.”

Daryl tipped his head in Luella’s direction. “My mamm’s eatin’ soup in himmel?”

“It’s hard to say, but maybe so, son.” Smiling ever so slightly, Atlee looked at Luella and winked. It was the first time since Dena’s death that he’d felt even a tinge of humor. *What would I do without my boy?* Atlee wondered. *He’s the one bright spot in my life right now.*



After lunch, Luella left the dishes on the table and read the fawn story to Daryl again. By the time she’d finished, he was fast asleep on the living-room sofa.

Luella slipped back into the kitchen and attacked the dirty dishes. As her hands soaked in the sudsy water, she thought about Atlee. He was still somewhat subdued, and Luella could always tell he was thinking about Dena. But there were also times she'd witnessed in the last two weeks when he'd been trying to work his way out of depression.

Her mind drifted back to Christmas and the gift Eugene had given her. It had been difficult to thank him for the rabbit fur she'd discovered inside the package, when she wasn't even sure what to do with it. Luella had to admit it was soft when she rubbed her cheek against it. Until she found a better place for the hide, she'd placed it on top of her cedar chest. She was thankful, at least, that Eugene hadn't killed the rabbit. He said he'd found it dead in the woods behind their place, and rather than tossing it away, he'd skinned and preserved it, the way he'd learned from a book on taxidermy he'd gotten from the library. It certainly wasn't the kind of gift Luella had expected, but it was the thought that counted.



"Sure wish I didn't have to clean this barn all the time," Eugene mumbled, following his father past a stack of straw.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, Dad."

"You weren't complaining, I hope." Dad stopped walking and turned to face Eugene. "The barn needs to be cleaned, and it won't get that way by itself."

"Jah, I know." Eugene paused at the door of his horse's stall, leaning on the gate. "It's just that sometimes I wish I could do something else besides farming in the warmer months and spending the winter helping out in here."

“The barn is not the only place that needs work in the winter.” Dad nudged Eugene’s arm with his elbow. “Besides, what other work would you want to do? I thought you enjoyed farming with me.”

Eugene shrugged. “It’s okay, I guess, but sometimes I think about how nice it would be to learn some other kind of work.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe horseshoeing, harness repair, or even taxidermy.”

“Those are all good professions, but so is raising hogs and farming.”

“I suppose.” Eugene’s gaze dropped to the floor.

“Is there something else bothering you, son?”

“Jah.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Sure, if you don’t mind taking the time to listen.”

“I always have time to listen to one of my kinner.” Dad gestured to a nearby bale of straw. “Let’s take a seat, and we can talk about whatever’s bothering you.”

Eugene drew in a breath and released it slowly. “Well, as you know, I’ve been friends with Luella Ebersol ever since we were kinner.”

Dad nodded.

“I’ve developed feelings for her, and when I stopped by her folks’ place on Christmas Day, I asked if I could court Luella.”

“What’d she say?”

“Said she didn’t have time for courting. She’s too busy helping out at Atlee Zook’s place.” Eugene groaned. “If she’s too busy to let me court her, then I don’t see how things can ever work out for us.”

Dad quirked an eyebrow. “You thinkin’ of asking Luella to marry you?”

“I want to, but not till we’ve courted awhile. I’m frustrated and just not sure what I should do.”

"My advice is to be patient and wait awhile before you approach her again. For now, just be a friend to Luella."

"I've been her friend since we were children, and where has it gotten me? I have to wonder if she'll ever see me as anything more than a friend. I even gave her a soft rabbit skin for Christmas, but she didn't seem to like it that much." Eugene lifted his hat and pushed a lock of hair back under. "You don't suppose she'll end up marrying Atlee Zook, do you?"

Dad raised his eyebrows. "Now where'd ya get such a silly notion? Why, Atlee's sixteen years older than Luella—almost old enough to be her daed."

Eugene nodded. He hadn't even thought about that. "You have a point. Guess maybe I'm worried for nothing."

"There are a few widowed ladies in our church district, plus a couple of single women in their early thirties. Bet it won't be long till Atlee asks one of them to be his fraa."

Eugene plucked out a piece of straw from the bale they sat on and stuck it between his teeth. "But what if Atlee never remarries and expects Luella to work for him till Daryl's in school and old enough to do things on his own?"

Dad shook his head. "I've never known anyone who could worry so much about nothing." He stood and handed Eugene a pitchfork. "Now let's get back to work. When we're done here, we still have some hogs to feed."

Eugene opened the bale of straw and began spreading it inside his horse's stall. *Think I'll drop by Luella's house some evening next week—just to see how she's doing. If I stay in touch with her, she's less likely to forget about me. And who knows—maybe she'll get tired of working for Atlee and feel ready to become a wife.*

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