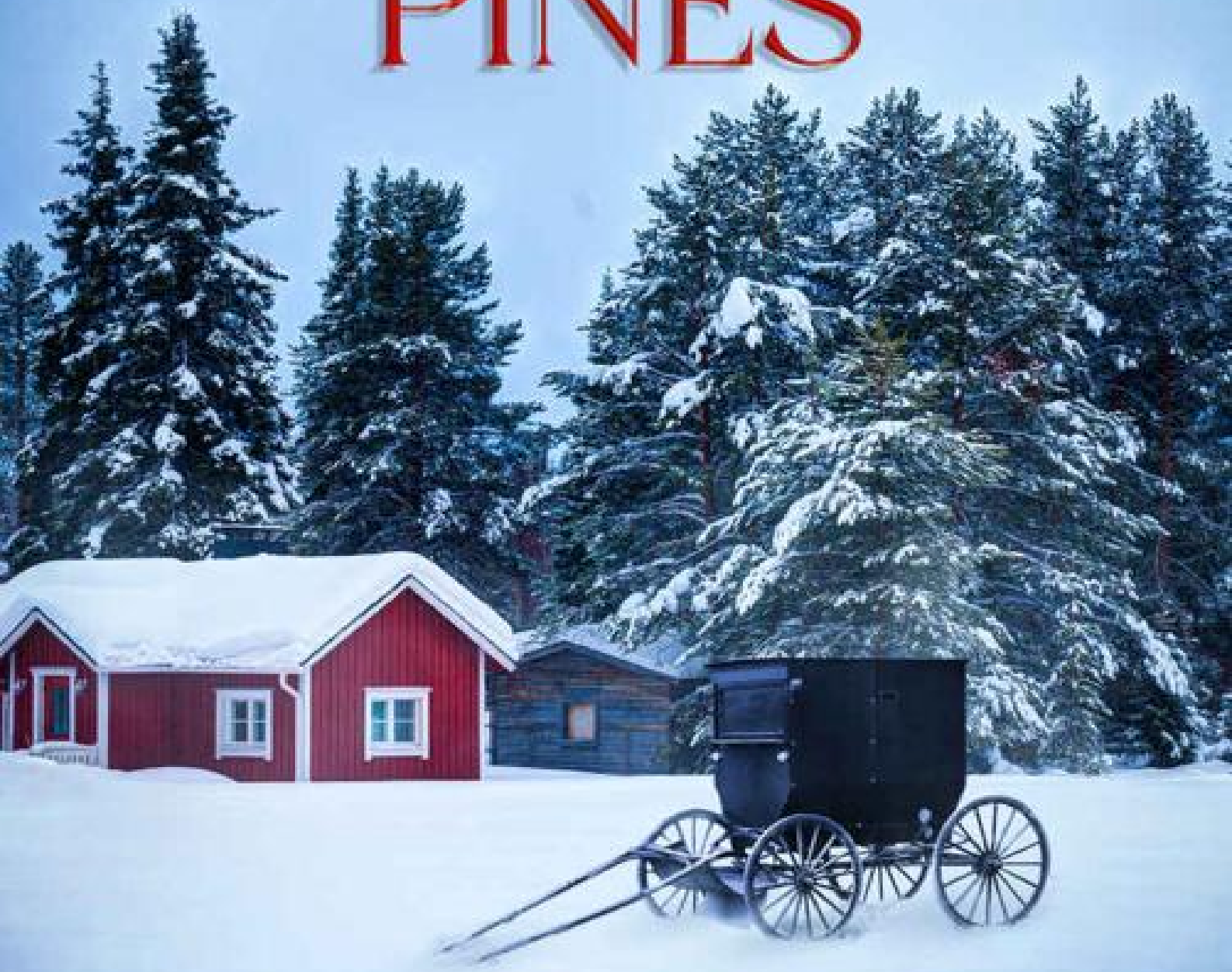


An Amish Christmas
IN
WHISPERING
PINES



SYLVIA PRICE

An Amish Christmas in Whispering
Pines

A Holiday Romance

Sylvia Price

Penn and Ink Writing, LLC

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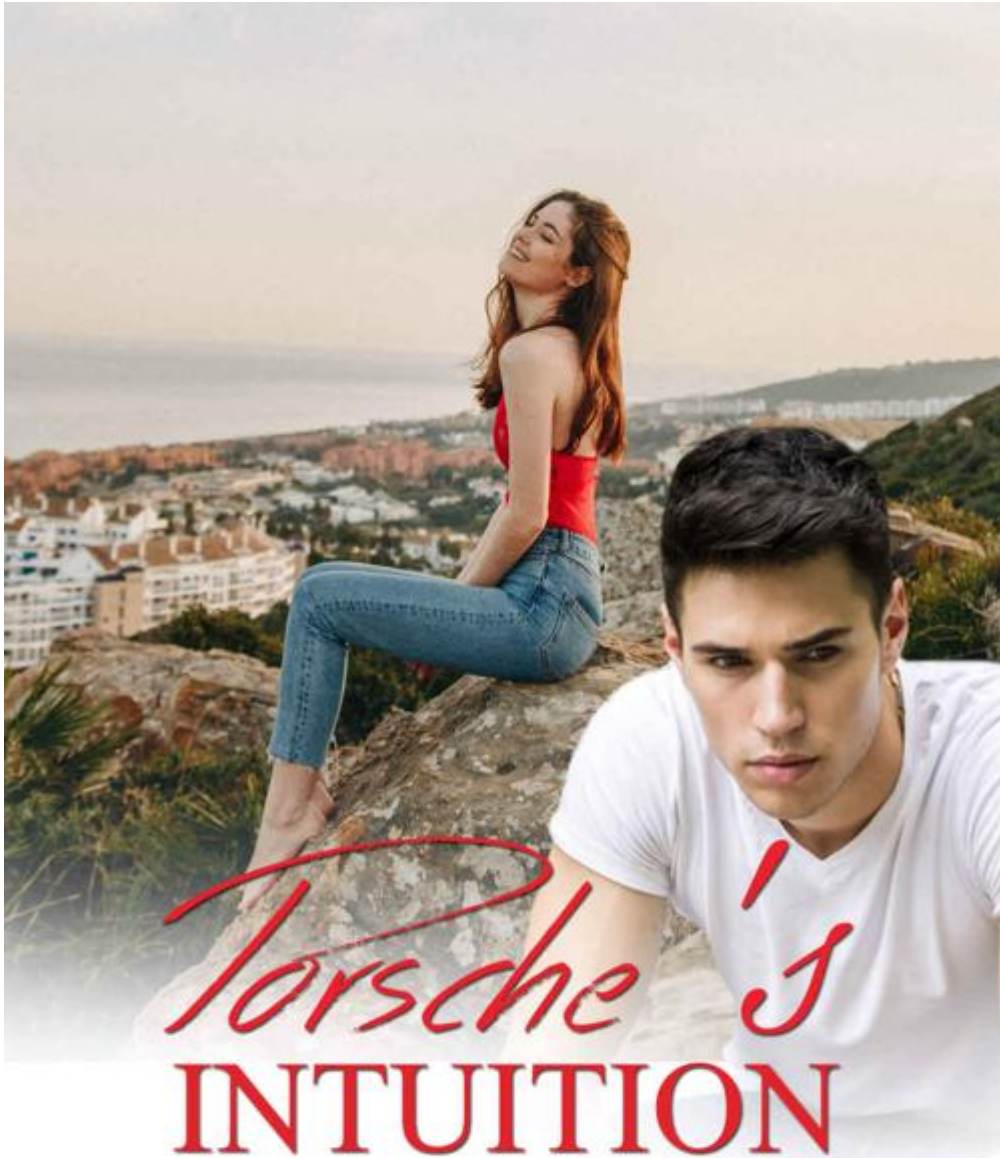
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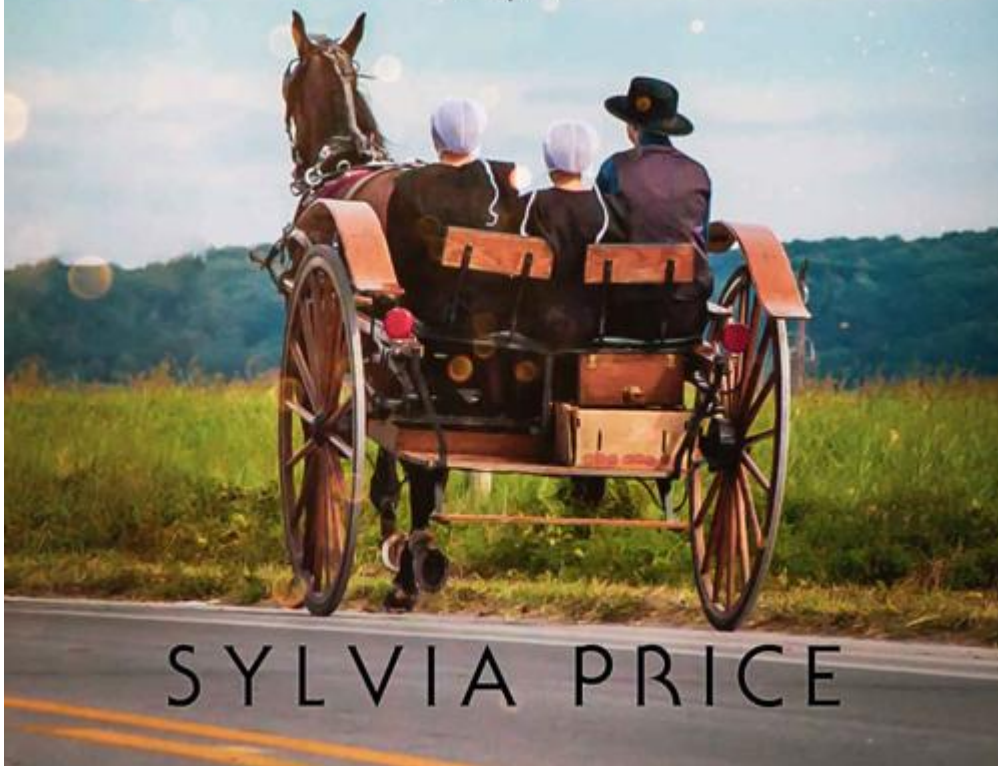


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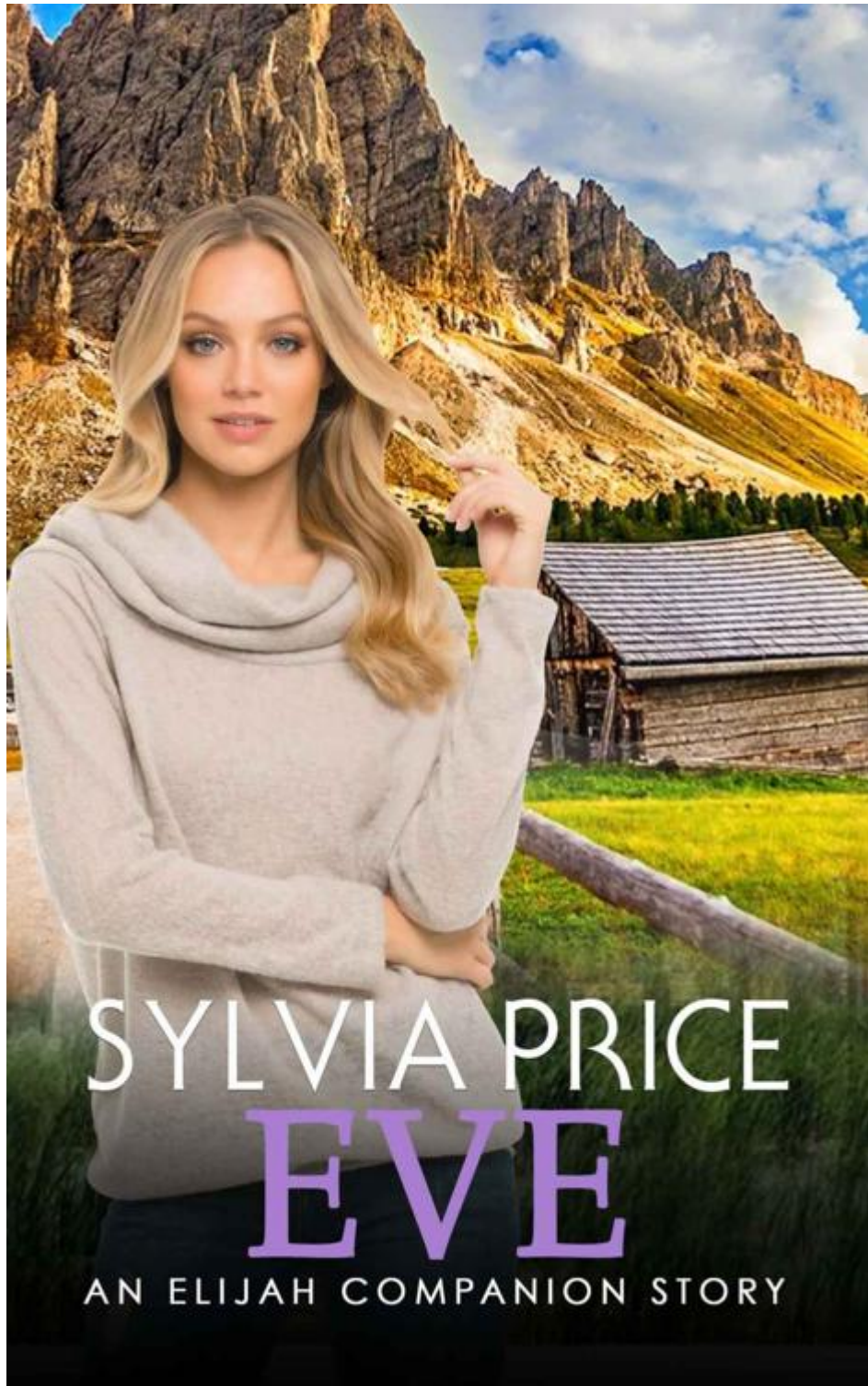
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HOPE *for Hannah's* LOVE

Amish Love Through the Seasons
SHORT STORY



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EVE

AN ELIJAH COMPANION STORY

Praise for Sylvia Price's Books

“Author Sylvia Price wrote a storyline that enthralled me. The characters are unique in their own way, which made it more interesting. I highly recommend reading this book. I'll be reading more of Author Sylvia Price's books.”

“You can see the love of the main characters and the love that the author has for the main characters and her writing. This book is so wonderful. I cannot wait to read more from this beautiful writer.”

“The storyline caught my attention from the very beginning and kept me interested throughout the entire book. I loved the chemistry between the characters.”

“A wonderful, sweet and clean story with strong characters. Now I just need to know what happens next!”

“First time reading this author, and I'm very impressed! I love feeling the godliness of this story.”

“This was a wonderful story that reminded me of a glorious God we have.”

“I encourage all to read this uplifting story of faith and friendship.”

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The Amish of Cardinal Hill Complete Series – <http://mybook.at/cardinalbox>

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Return to Yesterday (The Yoder Family Saga Book 5) – <http://getbook.at/returntoyesterday>

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The Crystal Crescent Inn (Sambro Lighthouse Book 5) –

<http://getbook.at/ci5>

The Crystal Crescent Inn Boxed Set –

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Unofficial Glossary of Pennsylvania Dutch Words

Aamen – Amen

Ach – Oh

Ach du lieva – Oh my goodness

Aenti – aunt

Amisch – Amish

Appeditlich – delicious

Bis widder – Until (we meet) again (a parting phrase)

Boppli – baby

Bruder/brieder – brother(s)

Bu(we) – boy(s)

Daed – dad

Danki – thanks

Dochder – daughter

Eldre – parents

Englisch/Englischer – non-Amish person

Enkel – grandson

Familye – family

Fraa – wife/woman

Frehlicher Grischnaag – Merry Christmas

Gaern gschehne – You're welcome

Gmay – local Amish -community

Gott – God

Gott segen eich – God bless you

Grischnacht – Christmas Eve

Groossdaadi – granddad
Groossmammi – grandma
Gude daag – Hello (literally Good day)
Gude mariye – Good morning
Gude nacht – Good night
Gude naamidaag – Good afternoon
Guder owed – Good evening
Gut – good
Kaffi – coffee
Kapp – Amish head covering
Kind/Kinner – child/children
Kossin – cousin
Kumm – come
Liewer/Liewi – dear (male/female)
Mach's gut – Make it good (a parting phrase)
Maedel/maed – girl(s)
Maem – mom
Mann – husband/man
Nee – no
Ordnung – the written and unwritten rules of the Amish
Rumspringa – running around period for Amish youth
Schweschdre – sisters
Urgroossvadder – great-grandfather
Willkumm – welcome
Wunderbaar – wonderful
Ya – yes

Prologue

Whispering Pines, Winter, 1970

Ava Fisher closed her blue eyes and breathed in slow and deep of the pre-snow air. There was just something magical about the crisp air right before it snowed; a sense of hushedness and anticipation hovered in the atmosphere. After a few moments, she opened her eyes again, sighing softly as she leaned out the window to peer at the sky. The clouds were so full they looked ready to burst at any moment.

“*Ach du lieva*, Ava,” her mother said as she entered the kitchen.

Ava turned to see her mother’s dark brows furrowing in a frown of disapproval. She was dressed in her customary brown house dress and crisp white apron.

“You’ll catch your death hanging out of the window like that,” her mother chided. “Shut the window and *kumm* and stand by the stove to warm yourself.”

Ava took one more deep breath before she closed the window and made her way across the kitchen to the stove; her usually pale hands were pinked from the cold.

“I just love the snow,” Ava said dreamily.

“Don’t let your *daed* hear you saying that,” her mother warned. “He’s been grumbling about it all morning.”

Ava could well understand her father’s feelings even if she did not share them. For ranchers, snow brought with it a whole host of problems, from frozen wells to stable roofs collapsing under the weight of the snow.

“Would you put on the *kaffi*, Ava?” her mother asked as she beat eggs and milk together. “I am sure your *daed* will need something to warm his bones when he *kummt* in for breakfast.”

Ava nodded in acknowledgment as she turned to fetch the coffee from the pantry, then set the large copper pot on to boil.

No sooner had the water started bubbling when the back door opened and in stepped Ava's father, Mr. Fisher, ushered in by a gust of icy air. Mr. Fisher, a tall man with thick brown hair and blue eyes, had passed on his features to Ava. The resemblance between father and daughter was obvious.

"*Gude mariye, Daed,*" Ava greeted as she turned from the stove.

"*Gude mariye, Ava,*" he returned as he pressed the door shut behind him. "Is there *kaffi, Liewi?*"

"Ava is making it now," Mrs. Fisher replied. "Why don't you sit down? Breakfast is almost ready."

Mr. Fisher took his seat at the small table, rubbing his hands together vigorously to try and get some feeling back into his frozen phalanges.

Ava set about making her father a strong cup of coffee and carried it over to him.

"*Danki, Dochder,*" he said gratefully, curling his hands around the mug.

"Sit, Ava," Mrs. Fisher instructed. "Breakfast is ready."

Ava sat down beside her father as her mother carried over two plates laden with scrambled eggs and cornmeal mush.

"*Danki, Maem,*" said Ava as her mother took her seat.

The family held hands and bowed their heads in silent prayer, each thanking God for His provision, blessing, and the food on their plates.

"Eat up," Mrs. Fisher urged. "Before it gets cold."

The family ate in comfortable silence, Mr. Fisher too exhausted for small talk, Mrs. Fisher thinking about her tasks and chores for the day, and Ava content to keep glancing out the window at the sky, which had taken on a pinkish hue.

After breakfast, Mr. Fisher braved the cold outside once again to fetch more wood and coal, while Ava and her mother

washed the dishes. Just as Ava finished drying the last fork, she looked over at the window and saw the first flakes of snow beginning to fall.

“It’s here,” she exclaimed excitedly as she rushed over to the window. “The snow is here.”

Ava stared out as tiny, perfect snowflakes fell silently on the world outside. The first flakes melted as they touched the ground, but soon, the snow fell fast, covering everything in a blanket of white.

“Ava,” Mrs. Fisher charged, “*kumm* away from the window now and make the fire in the sitting room.”

Ava reluctantly but obediently pulled herself away from the magical winter wonderland unfolding outside and left the kitchen to do her mother’s bidding. Soon, a fire crackled happily in the grate in the sitting room.

Ava returned to the kitchen to help knead the dough for bread. She yearned to go outside and revel in the snow, but she knew her mother would not permit her any leisure time until after all the chores were completed.

Ava kneaded the dough with the palms of her hands in a steady rhythm, stretching it out and then folding it over again. Once kneaded, she placed the dough in a bowl on top of the warm stove to rise and returned to the sitting room to stoke the fire and add more wood.

“It’s getting colder,” Mrs. Fisher commented as she stepped into the sitting room. “I think we should stay here and keep warm.”

Ava nodded. There was always mending to get on with—although Ava was not a very good seamstress. She was all thumbs and found it all too finicky.

The snow fell throughout the entire morning. Mr. Fisher returned to the house at lunchtime, and when he came in, his teeth were chattering.

“Come and sit by the stove,” Mrs. Fisher encouraged.

By the time they'd finished lunch, the snowfall had stopped, and bright blue patches of sky were visible between the clouds.

"Come, Ava," Mrs. Fisher said. "Let's do the dishes and then retire to the sitting room."

Ava helped her mother wash the lunch dishes, and then they took their seats in the sitting room. No sooner had they sat down when a knock sounded at the front door. Ava, knowing who it was, got up and hurried to the door.

She pulled the door open to find a tall boy with dark brown hair and bright green eyes grinning at her. Zechariah Schwartz; he had been Ava's best friend for as long as she could remember.

"*Gude daag*," Zechariah hailed, grinning as his green eyes twinkled.

In the snow, behind Zechariah, Ava spotted his sled. It was one of the many traditions they'd adopted over the years.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

Just as the words left his lips, Mrs. Fisher appeared in the hallway behind Ava.

"May I go, *Maem*?" she asked as she turned to her mother, her blue eyes pleading.

Mrs. Fisher sighed. "I don't understand why you two would rather be out in the freezing snow than huddled around a warm fire—"

Ava held her breath.

"But very well, you may go. Just be careful, and don't be out there too long."

"We will," Zechariah promised as Ava hurried to fetch her coat, hat, and gloves.

A short while later, they were trudging through the snow. Ava's cheeks were pink, and her blue eyes were bright with excitement.

As they made their way to their favorite hill, the two passed through the avenue of tall white pines, and Zechariah jumped up to grab a low-hanging branch, bringing a pile of snow down on Ava.

“Zechariah!” Ava complained although she was smiling. Her dark hair was peppered with snow, and she reached up to brush errant flakes out of her hair and off her shoulders. Zechariah leaned over and tugged playfully at her long plait.

“How *kumm* you never see it coming?” he teased. “I’ve done it every year since I grew tall enough to reach.”

“Well, maybe I thought we were too grown up for such childish pranks,” Ava retorted.

Zechariah smiled, his green eyes crinkling. “I’ve decided I am never growing up,” he said, grinning. “Being a *kind* is so much more fun.”

Ava did not disagree. They were both turning twenty that year, which meant they’d soon be expected to marry and start their own families. It was a lot of pressure and expectation, not to mention change, and Ava was more than happy for things to stay the way they were.

“We’re here,” Zechariah announced.

Ava looked up at the hill, which was thick with snow, and she sighed happily to herself. She loved the traditions she shared with Zechariah.

As they huffed and puffed up the steep hill, Zechariah dragged the sled behind them. By the time they reached the top, Ava’s calves were burning, and she was panting from exertion. Still, she hardly noticed, for atop that hill, they had a view of the whole town: white-gray smoke poured out every chimney, and every single roof was white with snow. It was like something out of a postcard.

Zechariah placed the sled on an even patch of ground and anchored it with a foot before turning to Ava, who was still looking out at the town.

“You ready?” he prompted.

She smiled as she turned and climbed onto the front of the sled. Zechariah handed the rope to Ava, and she clutched it tightly between her hands. Zechariah then dropped down so that one knee was on the sled behind Ava and he could use the other to propel them forward. Zechariah jumped on as the sled gained momentum and put his hands over Ava's on the rope to help steer.

As they raced down the hill, the laugh that escaped Ava's chest echoed out across the snowy landscape. She never felt scared; Zechariah always made her feel safe.

At the bottom of the hill, Zechariah and Ava pulled up on the rope, and eventually, they came to a stop. Ava turned to Zechariah, her eyes shining with exhilaration as she met his gaze. Their eyes locked for a long moment, and Ava felt her heart skip a beat.

"Back to the top?" Zechariah proposed with a massive grin, breaking the moment.

"Do you even need to ask?" Ava agreed, trying to mask her disappointment.

In the past few months, Ava had noticed her feelings towards Zechariah changing. They had always been best friends, and she'd always loved him, but something felt different. Maybe it was part of growing up and their relationship was taking its natural course, shifting into something bigger than friendship. Still, she wasn't sure that Zechariah felt the same. He'd never said anything or acted differently in any way to indicate as much.

"You okay?" Zechariah asked.

Ava nodded as she tried to smile.

They went up and down the hill five times before calling it a day. The drop in temperature and clouds billowing in from the east were a sure sign there would be more snow soon.

"Let's get you home," Zechariah said lightly.

As they headed back towards home, laughter rolled toward them, and Ava looked up to see a group of young men about their age coming down the road in their direction. Ava

recognized two of the boys as the Yoder twins, but the third one was a newcomer. She couldn't help but notice how handsome he was; his dark blond hair fell effortlessly, and his strong jawline shaped his attractive face.

"Who is that?" Ava asked curiously in a low voice.

"His name is Asher Albrecht," Zechariah said. "He's *kumm* to live with his *kossins* here in Whispering Pines."

Ava simply nodded as she continued to watch the group of boys.

"My *maem* says that his *eldre* were killed in a tornado this summer," Zechariah continued. "And the Yoders are the only *familye* he has left."

"How sad," Ava said, her heart going out to him.

"*Gude naamidaag*," the Yoder twins said in unison when they got within earshot.

"*Gude daag*," Zechariah said brightly. "I see you had the same idea we had."

"My *familye* is from Kansas," Asher said, his eyes on Ava. "I've never seen snow like this before."

"It's magical," Ava said, smiling.

"It is indeed," Asher agreed. "We haven't been acquainted yet, but I am Asher Albrecht."

"Ava Fisher," she replied.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ava," he said, his tone warm.

Ava could feel the color in her cheeks rising. Asher's beautiful eyes, a soft greenish-gray, when he looked at her, made it feel for a moment as if they were the only people in the world.

"I'm Zechariah Schwartz," he said stiffly.

"Nice to meet you," Asher said, his eyes still on Ava.

"We should probably go," Zechariah said. "We need to get you home."

Ava nodded mutely.

“I hope to see you around soon, Ava,” Asher said, flashing a smile.

She smiled and waved as she turned to follow Zechariah. However, the mood between them, previously charged and excited, had changed to one of solemnity. Zechariah was quiet and somber and had hardly said two words to her by the time they stepped onto the porch.

“You want to *kumm* inside for some hot cocoa?” Ava offered; it was another part of their tradition.

“I’d better get home,” Zechariah said. “My *daed* needs some help before the next snow falls.”

“*Ach*, okay,” Ava said, her face falling. “Next time, then?”

“Sure,” Zechariah agreed. “Next time.”

Zechariah left without another word, and Ava stepped into the house. She could not shake the feeling that something significant had happened that afternoon, something she did not quite grasp.



The snow continued to fall for another two days before the sky finally cleared on the third night. When Ava awoke that morning, the sun shone brilliantly on the world outside. She had not seen Zechariah since they went sledding, but the knots in her stomach tightened every time she thought about his uncharacteristic behavior.

That afternoon, after lunch, there was a knock at the door. Ava and her family were all reading in the sitting room when they heard it.

“I’ll get it,” Mr. Fisher said.

He rose from his chair and left the room. Ava expected him to reappear with Zechariah at his heels, so when Asher appeared behind her father, Ava’s eyes widened in surprise. He held his cap in his hands.

“*Gude naamidaag*, Mr. and Mrs. Fisher,” Asher said. “I am sorry for intruding. My name is Asher Albrecht; I am new to town and am staying with my *kossins*, the Yoders.”

Mrs. Fisher, whose book was in her lap, nodded and smiled at Asher. “*Willkuum*,” she said. “We were sorry to hear about your *eldre*.”

“*Danki*,” Asher said, his face solemn.

No one spoke for a moment as Asher glanced at Ava.

“I was wondering if Ava might like to go for a walk?” Asher enquired. “It’s *gut* weather for it.”

Mr. Fisher raised his eyebrows but said nothing as he looked at Mrs. Fisher. It was not unusual for a young man to come courting, but Asher was a newcomer. Then, to her surprise, Ava’s mother did something she did not expect.

“Ava?” Mrs. Fisher said, turning to her. “Would you like to take a walk with Asher?”

Ava looked at Asher; the corners of his lips were turned up, and she felt a pull towards him that she could not quite explain.

“*Ya*,” Ava agreed. “Some fresh air would be nice.”

“*Gut*,” Mrs. Fisher said. “But don’t go too far.”

A short while later, she and Asher were sauntering side by side around the ranch. Droplets of water twinkled on the ends of the tree branches where the sun had melted the snow. Asher kept stealing sideways glances at her, and each time, Ava’s heart skipped a beat.

“I am surprised my *eldre* let me walk with you,” Ava confessed honestly.

“Because I’m a newcomer?” Asher asked.

Ava nodded.

“I knew they might say *nee*,” Asher admitted. “But I had to take the risk.”

“Why?” Ava asked curiously.

Asher said nothing for a moment. “Can I ask you a question first?”

Ava nodded her acquiescence.

“Are you and Zechariah a couple?” Asher asked, hope apparent in the inflection of his tone and tension in his shoulders.

Ava stopped walking to look at him. “*Nee*,” she said, frowning slightly. “We are just friends.”

Asher’s shoulders relaxed, and he smiled.

“*Gut*,” he said. “That’s what Zechariah said, too.”

Ava’s brows furrowed in confusion. “You spoke with Zechariah?” she asked, the knots in her stomach tightening again.

“I bumped into him in town,” Asher explained. “After our meeting the other day, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you, Ava, but I didn’t want to step on anyone’s toes.”

Ava paused as she took in his words. She’d never met someone so transparent about their feelings. It was as refreshing as it was terrifying.

“What are you thinking?” Asher pressed, eyeing her curiously.

“That you are rather forward,” Ava replied frankly.

Asher didn’t look abashed in the least. “After my *eldre* died, I learned that life is short, and when you feel something, something real and *gut*, you should say it out loud.”

Ava’s gaze searched Asher’s gray-green gaze, and she realized he was quite unlike anyone she’d ever met.

“I like you, Ava,” Asher said forthrightly. “And I’d like to get to know you better if you will let me.”

Ava’s mind raced. Asher was different; he was open, honest, and sincere, but she couldn’t just overlook her newfound feelings for Zechariah. Still, Ava couldn’t ignore the obvious, either.

If Zechariah told Asher that we're just friends, then he clearly doesn't harbor any romantic feelings toward me.

"So?" Asher pressed. "May I call on you again?"

Ava's hesitation was ever so brief before she nodded.

"*Ya*. I'd like that."

Asher practically beamed at her with his toothy grin and shimmering eyes as they continued their walk, with Asher talking about his life before coming to Whispering Pines. Ava did her best to listen, but her mind kept wandering to Zechariah.



Asher called on her twice more that week, and he was candid about his intentions. Yet, as much as Ava admired him and wanted to match the intensity of his feelings for her, she held back.

"He is a nice *bu*," Mrs. Fisher said approvingly as they sat down to dinner one evening. "Such *gut* manners."

Ava wordlessly helped herself to a heaping spoonful of carrots.

"He's knowledgeable, too," Mr. Fisher said approvingly. "His *daed* was a rancher and taught him well."

Still, Ava remained quiet. She had not seen Zechariah all week and had the sneaky suspicion that he was avoiding her.

"When Mrs. Peachey heard he'd been calling on Ava, she was most indignant," Mrs. Fisher said proudly.

It was no secret that Asher had caught the eye of every eligible young woman in town and their mothers. He was handsome and charming, and the sale of his parents' ranch left him with enough to offer a very secure life to whomever he chose to marry.

"When are you seeing him again?" Mrs. Fisher asked.

“Tomorrow,” Ava answered, looking up from her plate. “We are going to the *Grischtdaag* market in town.”

Mrs. Fisher sat back in her chair, satisfaction playing on her features. A public appearance would indicate to the rest of the community that Ava and Asher were a couple.

The following afternoon, Asher arrived to fetch Ava, and they walked into town. The Christmas market had only been implemented a few years prior, but it gave the community of Whispering Pines the opportunity to showcase their various talents and skills, be it jam-making, butter-churning, or meat-curing—all while providing a selection of practical gifts for Christmas.

“We never had a *Grischtdaag* fair in our town,” Asher said as he looked around at the various tables set up along the main street.

“They have the best hot cocoa here,” Ava declared.

“Really? Well, then I’ll have to try it,” Asher said, smiling. “Shall we take a look around?”

Ava nodded, and Asher slipped his hand in hers. As they walked down the street, people whispered not so discreetly. Ava felt her cheeks growing warm under their gaze, but Asher kept shooting her reassuring sideways glances.

As they approached the cheese table, Ava spotted Zechariah standing with a group of young men, with his back to her.

“Will you excuse me for a moment?” she asked.

Ava slipped her hand from his without waiting for Asher’s response and walked over to the group. She tapped Zechariah on the shoulder, and he turned.

“*Gude daag*,” Ava said with a smile.

“*Gude daag*,” Zechariah replied stiffly.

Ava frowned at his coolness. “Is everything okay?” she asked. “I haven’t seen you all week.”

“I’ve been busy,” Zechariah said. “And I see you have been, too—”

Ava glanced over her shoulder at Asher, who was standing a few feet away, watching them. She sighed, shaking her head.

“Why don’t you *kumm* over to the house tomorrow?” Ava invited. “My *maem* is making cookies—”

“I can’t,” Zechariah said brusquely.

Ava exhaled deeply. “Please, Zechariah,” she beseeched. “I’ve missed you.”

His stoic expression softened at her words, but he shook his head.

“I’m going out of town,” he explained.

“What?” Ava replied, not hiding the surprise in her voice.

“My *aenti* is not well,” Zechariah explained. “My *maem* wants to go and see her and spend *Grischtdaag* with her—”

Ava contemplated his explanation. She knew it was selfish, but all she could think of was how much she’d missed Zechariah and how many of their traditions would go unfulfilled that year.

“Ava,” Zechariah said as he stepped toward her and held her gaze. “Can I ask you to do something for me?”

Ava nodded without hesitation.

“Promise me that you won’t make any decisions until I get back—”

In an instant, Asher was at her side, and he slipped his hand back into hers demonstrably. Zechariah’s expression hardened.

“The line for the hot cocoa is getting long,” Asher pointed out. “We should go before they run out.”

Ava looked back to Zechariah.

“When will you be back?” she asked.

Zechariah shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“*Kumm* on,” Asher said, tugging at her gently.

“I’ll see you when you get back,” Ava said, holding Zechariah’s gaze until the last moment as she turned.

Zechariah didn’t respond as Asher steered her toward the hot cocoa. Ava turned back briefly to look over her shoulder, but Zechariah had already turned away.

“Thank you for taking me to the market,” Ava said when she and Asher arrived back home.

“*Gaern gschehne*,” Asher said with a soft smile. “I had a *gut* time.”

“So did I,” Ava agreed. “*Gude nacht*, Asher.”

Ava was just about to turn to go inside when Asher leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, his soft warm lips brushing her skin.

“*Gude nacht*, Ava,” Asher echoed.

Ava, already turning, smiled shyly, gave a brief nod, and headed back inside, closing the front door behind her.



Ava was washing the kitchen window with wide circular movements the next morning when she spotted her father by the barn with Asher. She paused to observe them. She had not even known that he was there.

“I wonder what Asher is talking to *daed* about?” she wondered aloud, turning away from the window to her mother.

Mrs. Fisher simply pursed her lips.

“*Maem?*” Ava pressed at her mother’s visible disinclination to comment.

“It’s *gut* news, Ava,” Mrs. Fisher said emphatically. “Asher will make a good *mann*.”

Ava turned back to the window in time to see her father smiling as he patted Asher on the back.

He came to ask Daed's permission to marry me.

While nothing could wipe the smile off her mother's face that day, Ava, unable to get Zechariah's words out of her mind, felt torn. He'd asked her to wait, not to do anything until he came back.

It was the afternoon of the same day, and Ava had been quieter than normal, lost in her pendulous thoughts. She and her mother were seated beside the fire in the living room; she was supposed to be darning a hole in her stocking but had spent the last while staring into the flames.

"What is it, Ava?" Mrs. Fisher asked.

Ava looked across at her mother, whose forehead was creased with concern.

"Is this about Asher asking your *daed* for permission to have your hand?"

Ava hesitated momentarily before nodding. "He hasn't even brought up marriage to me yet. It just feels rather fast."

"I think Asher has real feelings for you," her mother replied. "He knows what he wants, and when you know, you know," she added with a shrug.

Ava pondered her mother's words. Asher was a decisive person, one to speak his mind and more forthright than most. Still, it all felt so sudden.

"Do you not like him?" her mother prompted.

Ava sighed. "It's not that I don't like him," she explained. "It's more that I don't really know him."

"Well, that's what marriage is for," her mother said as though it were obvious. "You'll have a lifetime to get to know one another."

"But isn't marriage supposed to be about love?"
"I've seen the way that *bu* looks at you," Mrs. Fisher said, smiling softly. "He is in love with you."

Ava worried her bottom lip as she considered her mother's words.

Is it possible that I could grow to love Asher as I love Zechariah?

“Ava,” her mother opined, leaning forward in her chair, “I truly believe that *Gott* is smiling down on you and that He has sent you a young, healthy, and *gut mann* who will look after you. You must think very carefully about all that you will be giving up if you refuse his proposal.”

“I will, *Maem*,” Ava said. “I will.”

“Pray on it,” her mother advised. “*Gott* will give you the answer you seek.”

Ava nodded as her mother rose from her chair. “I’d better get started on supper,” she said.

Mrs. Fisher walked across the room, but when she reached the doorway, she paused for a moment.

“I did not feel romantic love for your *daed* when we got married,” she said, turning to look at Ava. “But I grew to love him in time, and now I can’t imagine my life without him.”

Mrs. Fisher smiled to herself as she turned and exited the room, and Ava was left alone with her thoughts.



Ava and her parents were breakfasting the following morning when Asher arrived at the back door. He smiled, but Ava could discern that he was nervous, and she knew the moment had arrived.

“*Kumm* in, Asher,” Mrs. Fisher said brightly.

Asher stepped into the kitchen, his movements jerky and awkward.

“Sit down,” Mrs. Fisher said. “Would you like some *kaffi*?”

“*Nee, danki*,” Asher said, clearing his throat as he looked at Ava. “I was wondering if I might have a word with Ava

outside?”

“Of course,” Mr. Fisher agreed.

Ava hesitated for a moment before rising and leaving the kitchen, Asher on her heels. A few steps away from the back door, he caught her wrist gently and turned her to face him, his back to the house. Ava could see her parents watching them from the window, and her knotted stomach was set aflutter with the swarm of butterflies in her belly.

“Ava,” Asher started, his voice wavering slightly. “After my *eldre* died, I did not know if I would feel happiness or the comfort of *familye* again, but then I met you. I know that we have not known each other very long, but I can see you are a *Gott*-fearing, hardworking, honest *maedel*. I am in love with you, Ava.”

The tenderness in his eyes testified to the truth in his words.

“I know that you may not yet feel as strongly as I do,” Asher continued. “But I believe that I can make you happy and that we can build a life together, a life that is *gut* and true—”

The knot in her stomach loosened slightly, and the butterflies quieted. Asher was so sincere and genuine, and Ava knew he meant every word. He was promising her to do his utmost to ensure a happy life together.

“Will you marry me, Ava?”

Ava hadn’t known until that moment what she would say, but looking into Asher’s eyes, she saw a future that was too good just to pass by.

“*Ya*,” Ava said as she returned his smile. “I will marry you, Asher.”

Chapter One

Whispering Pines, Fall, 2020

The words of condolence from members of their little community as Sachia Bachman stood beside the three pine coffins sounded as if she were underwater—muted and far away.

The last few days had passed by in a blur. Sachia didn't even recall the details of that morning. Who had laid out her plain black dress? When had she tied her dark brown hair into a bun at the nape of her neck? Someone had also slipped a white handkerchief into her skirt pocket. The details escaped her. All she could think about were the people in those pine boxes.

“Sachia?”

She returned to the present to see a young man with straw-blond hair and a sandy-colored beard standing before her, his light blue eyes brimming with concern. Behind him, his parents and two younger brothers stood, their expressions mirroring his own.

“How are you?” he asked.

Sachia had known Daniel Kuhns her whole life. They'd been childhood friends and went to school together, and while she cared for him, his feelings had always been deeper than her own.

“*Danki* for coming, Daniel,” Sachia said appreciatively.

“Of course,” Daniel said. “You know that I am always here for you.”

Sachia did her best to smile though it took every ounce of strength she had to lift the corners of her mouth. Her family was with God now, and they were free of pain and suffering, but the knowledge that they were gone from this earth and she

would never again see them this side of heaven saddened her immensely.

“Sachia?”

Sachia turned away from Daniel as the bishop approached. Bishop John Burkholder, a tall man with dark hair and a graying beard, was relatively new to the position, having only taken over a few months prior after the previous bishop passed away.

“We will begin the service now if you are ready?”

Sachia nodded mutely.

A row of wooden benches was set up in the sitting room; most people were already seated. For a moment, Sachia did not move; she knew she ought to take her seat in the front row, but her leaden legs refused to move.

“It’s okay,” Daniel reassured her softly, taking her hand.

Sachia followed Daniel as he led her to the bench, where she sat down. The front row was reserved for family, but now that her parents and brother were gone, she had no other family—not even distant relatives. She was alone, and suddenly, panic rose in her chest, pressing, squeezing, choking.

“Will you sit with me?” Sachia implored, looking up at Daniel.

“Of course,” Daniel said as he took the seat beside her.

Sachia stared straight ahead as Bishop Burkholder took his place in front, the three pine coffins silhouetted behind him. He scanned the room with his gaze momentarily, his arms hanging at his sides as he cleared his throat.

“Our *gmay* has known so much death over the past months,” he started solemnly. “Most of you in this room have lost family members, friends, or neighbors, and it is easy to feel overburdened by the weight of grief. This is why it is important to remind ourselves that death is not the end but just the beginning.”

Sachia's hands were folded in her lap. She could sense Daniel watching her, but she kept her attention on the bishop.

“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in *Gott*, believe also in me,” Bishop Burkholder quoted. “In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.”

The bishop looked at Sachia and smiled at her.

“Amos, Hannah, and Henry are with *Gott* now, and they know no more suffering or hurt. They are safe in the Lord's arms.”

Sachia nodded as she exhaled shakily. She would see her family again one day; she was certain of that.

“Death is a natural part of each and every one of our journeys,” Bishop Burkholder continued, looking away from Sachia and out at the congregation again. “And we can take comfort in knowing that when our time comes when *Gott* calls us home, we will enter into His house and discover the eternal rest and peace that He promises to all those who are faithful.”

After the Bishop's sermon, the community sang two hymns. Then Daniel, along with eleven other men of the community, rose from their seats and walked to the front of the room. They positioned themselves around the three coffins and lifted them onto their shoulders in synchrony. Bishop Burkholder led the way out of the room, with the men proceeding behind him. Sachia followed, with the rest of the community in succession. No one spoke as they exited the house; all heads were bowed in silent prayer.

The walk to the cemetery was short, and the graves, previously dug by the hands of the men who now carried the coffins, waited like black holes, ready to claim their victims' lifeless bodies. The community gathered around as the coffins were lowered into the graves. Sachia profusely blinked back tears, finding strength in God and in knowing that this was not the final curtain on the stage of Life.

When the coffins had been lowered to the soil, the community followed the Bishop's lead as he took a step forward and bowed his head.

"As we say our final earthly farewell, we pray that You grant us the courage to continue living with faith, hope, and love, knowing that we will be reunited with our departed loved ones in Your heavenly kingdom. *Aamen.*"

"*Aamen,*" the voices echoed.

Sachia lifted her head as she exhaled shakily. The community began to turn away, breaking off into groups, but Sachia remained in place, watching as the men started to spade soil over the graves again.

"Sachia," Mrs. Kuhns said as she put a gentle hand on the small of her back.

Sachia turned to look at her.

"Are you ready to go?" the older woman said, smiling sympathetically.

Sachia nodded. The Kuhns family had kindly offered to host an after-service lunch in their barn, where the community would all go directly from the cemetery. Sachia was not hungry but knew she must attend.

"*Kumm,*" Mrs. Kuhns prompted gently as she put her arm around Sachia's shoulders.

Sachia let herself be led by Daniel's mother out of the graveyard and to the Kuhns's property. Inside their barn, a line of tables had been set up, and people were already seated, their plates loaded with mashed potatoes, ham loaf, pies, vegetables, and rolls.

Sachia's mother had always maintained that grief makes people hungry, which was why, after a funeral, folk eat all the foods meant to be comforting.

"Why don't you sit down, Sachia?" Mrs. Kuhns suggested. "I'll fetch you a plate."

Sachia found a seat and sat down. A few minutes later, Mrs. Kuhns returned with a plate stacked with food.

“Try to eat,” she said. “You need your strength.”

Sachia nodded as she picked up her fork, but her stomach was a massive knot. A child’s cry saved her from having to force-feed herself, and the two women turned to see Mrs. Kuhns’s youngest child had fallen and scraped her knee.

“I’ll be right back,” Mrs. Kuhns assured Sachia as she turned and hurried off to her daughter.

Sachia was left alone, but she could feel the eyes of the community on her. She did her best to focus on the plate of food, but she could not muster up the enthusiasm to eat even a single morsel.

“Is she all right?” Sachia asked when Mrs. Kuhns returned.

“*Ya,*” she confirmed.

Sachia nodded, but even in her grief, she could see something was amiss by the frown lines on Mrs. Kuhns’s forehead.

“What is it?” Sachia asked in concern as she put her fork down.

Mrs. Kuhns sighed. “It’s nothing,” she said. “It’s only that I promised to take a plate of food to Mrs. Albrecht, and there is so much that needs to be done here—”

Ava Albrecht was an older member of their community. She’d lost her husband a few weeks earlier and was only starting to recover from the illness that had almost taken her life, too.

“I’ll do it,” Sachia volunteered.

“*Ach, nee,*” Mrs. Kuhns said. “I couldn’t ask you to do that—”

“I don’t mind,” Sachia insisted. “In fact, I could use the distraction.”

Mrs. Kuhns hesitated a moment and then smiled.

“*Danki,* Sachia,” she said. “That would be most appreciated. I’ll put together a plate for you to take over to

her.”

A short while later, Sachia was on her way to the Albrecht house. She was glad to escape the barn and well-meaning concerned gazes. She was grateful for the community and their support over the past few days but tired of being at the center of everyone’s attention. She just needed a minute to catch her breath and not feel under scrutiny.

The Albrecht house was located at the end of the street, just off the main road. It was a pretty but modest house. Up until the previous spring, the garden had earned the admiration of every passerby, but the Albrechts’ poor health meant that the garden had not been tended to, and the beds were now full of weeds, the plants wilted from lack of water.

Sachia walked up the paved pathway to the house. A thick layer of dust covered the wooden railing around the porch. Carrying the plate carefully, she crossed the creaky porch to the front door and rapped on the wood with her knuckles. Sachia then stepped back and waited, listening for the sound of footsteps, but there was only silence.

She knocked again—but still no answer—so she reached for the handle and pushed the door open just enough to stick her head inside.

“Mrs. Albrecht?” Sachia called.

She waited for a reply, but there was nothing. Suddenly a chesty cough echoed from down the hall—Mrs. Albrecht coughing—and Sachia pushed the door open further and stepped inside. She followed the rattling sound towards the bedroom, and as she stepped inside, she saw the older woman gasping for air. Sachia rushed over to her, placing the plate of food on the side table. She put a firm hand on Mrs. Albrecht’s back and patted her firmly, helping to loosen the phlegm that was caught in her bronchi.

“Are you all right?” Sachia asked, eyeing Mrs. Albrecht in concern.

The older woman nodded as she leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes for a moment. She’d aged since

the last time Sachia saw her, and she'd lost a considerable amount of weight; her skin hung off her bones. Mrs. Albrecht was wearing her nightgown and had a thick woolen shawl around her shoulders.

"I am sorry for just barging in," Sachia apologized. "I did knock—"

Mrs. Albrecht nodded but said nothing as she took deep, ragged breaths, her face scrunched in concentration.

"I brought you some food," Sachia explained. "I offered to bring it for Mrs. Kuhns—"

Mrs. Albrecht opened her blue eyes and frowned.

"You shouldn't be troubling yourself," she said, her voice gruff. "Not with everything you've been through."

"It's no trouble," Sachia assured her.

Mrs. Albrecht met her gaze, and Sachia read something in her eyes that told her the old woman understood her desire to escape for a while.

"Here," Sachia said, turning to retrieve the plate. "You should eat."

She helped Mrs. Albrecht sit up and realized they would need a tray and cutlery. She returned the plate to the side table.

"The kitchen is at the end of the hall," Mrs. Albrecht said, reading her mind.

Sachia nodded as she turned and left the room. She walked to the end of the hall and into the kitchen. Just like the garden outside, the kitchen was in an absolute state of chaos. Dirty dishes were piled in the sink and overflowed to the countertop, and mice droppings dotted the table. The glass panes in the large window were so caked with dust and grime that barely any rays of light could break through.

Sachia walked over to the kitchen drawers and located a knife and a fork. She then turned to look for a tray and spotted one resting behind the faucet. Once she'd retrieved it, she left the kitchen and returned to the bedroom.

“The house is a mess,” Mrs. Albrecht apologized as soon as Sachia returned.

Sachia wordlessly set the tray up on Mrs. Albrecht’s lap before retrieving the plate again and placing the cutlery on either side.

“Don’t you have anyone who could *kumm* and stay with you?” Sachia asked, unable to mask the concern in her voice.

“*Nee*,” Mrs. Albrecht answered, shaking her head. “Asher and I never had any *kinner*, and everyone else is long gone.”

Sachia nodded. She knew how it felt to be entirely alone.

“Will you sit with me?” Mrs. Albrecht asked. “I never did like eating alone.”

Sachia nodded. There was a straight-backed chair in the corner of the room that she fetched and brought to the side of the bed.

For a while, neither of them spoke. Sachia watched the older woman eat, relieved that she had an appetite.

“I was sorry to hear about your *familye*,” Mrs. Albrecht said, looking up at Sachia.

“*Danki*,” Sachia said, smiling faintly.

The women fell silent again. Outside, Sachia heard a robin sing, and she smiled to herself.

“What is it?” Mrs. Albrecht asked, looking at her inquisitively.

Sachia shook her head, still smiling. “Once, when I was a girl, we had a robin that kept coming into the house. It drove my *maem* mad because it would *kumm* inside and make a mess on the clean dishes and countertops. She’d always shoo it outside, grumbling under her breath. Then one day, we came home to find my *daed* feeding the robin scraps of bread. It turned out he’d been feeding the bird for weeks, which was why it kept coming back.”

Mrs. Albrecht smiled. “I am sure your *maem* wasn’t too happy to make that discovery.”

“*Nee*,” Sachia agreed. “But my *daed* loved birds, all living creatures, for that matter; it’s just part of who he is—was.”

Sachia smiled sadly as the room fell silent again.

“I suppose I’d better get back,” she said; people would start wondering where she was.

Sachia rose from the chair. “Will you be all right?” she asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Mrs. Albrecht assured her.

Sachia nodded as she turned to go. In the doorway, she hesitated a moment and cast a glance back at the older woman. She met Mrs. Albrecht’s eye, and the older woman smiled at her, but it was a smile devoid of joy. Instead, she just looked exhausted and forlorn.

Sachia’s heart stirred with compassion and empathy for this old woman who had not another soul in the world to call family. “Maybe I can stay for a few more minutes,” she said.

Mrs. Albrecht’s eyes briefly reflected gratitude as Sachia returned to her seat, and for the next while, the two women talked about nothing and everything. Before either of them realized, it was late afternoon.

“Where has the time gone?” Mrs. Albrecht asked sleepily as she stifled a yawn.

Sachia smiled. “I’ll let you get some sleep,” she said.

Mrs. Albrecht nodded, her eyes drooping.

Sachia got up from her seat again, and by the time she reached the door, the older woman was fast asleep and snoring peacefully. Sachia left the house, and as she made her way home, she thought about how unexpected the day had turned out to be. She’d never been one to make friends easily, yet talking to Mrs. Albrecht was easy, natural, and effortless.

As she made her way back home, Sachia got the sense that her being the one to visit Mrs. Albrecht’s house that day was God-ordained. For reasons Sachia did not quite understand, He wanted their paths to cross.



Sachia woke the following day to an empty, quiet house. She was certain she'd never grow accustomed to the silence. She got up, washed, and dressed in the chilly morning air and then went into the kitchen. Her brother's ginger cat was sitting in front of the stove, and Sachia bent down to scratch him behind the ears. She then stoked the coals with the iron poker before putting the water on to boil.

After preparing herself a simple breakfast of eggs and toast, Sachia attended to her chores, and then, when those were done, she decided to go and check on Mrs. Albrecht.

Upon arriving at the house, Sachia found the older woman asleep. She considered leaving and returning later but decided rather to keep herself occupied until Mrs. Albrecht woke up.

Sachia started in the kitchen. She washed the tower of dirty dishes, cleaned the mouse droppings and grime off the table and countertops, and washed the window with newspaper and vinegar. Once she'd finished, she swept the floor and then went outside to replenish the coal stocks.

Just as she stepped back into the kitchen, lugging the heavy coal bucket, she came upon Mrs. Albrecht, her shawl pulled tightly around her body. She was surveying the room in bewilderment.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Albrecht," Sachia apologized, suddenly wondering if perhaps she may have overstepped. "I just came to see that you were all right and didn't want to wake you—"

Mrs. Albrecht silently met Sachia's gaze.

"Shall we have some tea, then?" the woman said.

Sachia smiled, her shoulders dropping in relief.

"*Ya*," she said. "I'll put the kettle on."

Sachia stayed at the house with Mrs. Albrecht until late in the afternoon again, and despite the older woman's objections,

she promised to visit again the following day.

As promised, Sachia returned to the house the next day—and every day that week. She helped Mrs. Albrecht with the chores and the cooking, and in return, the older woman kept her company, regaling her with tales of her life and providing companionable silence in between.

“You don’t have to keep coming back,” Mrs. Albrecht assured her on Sunday. “I’m getting better; I can manage well enough on my own.”

Sachia had come to bring Mrs. Albrecht a plate of food from their post-church lunch. She may have been growing stronger but was still too unwell to leave the house. They were in the kitchen, the fire burning brightly in the grate.

“I don’t mind,” Sachia said as she washed the dishes.

“A young *maedel* like you should have better things to do than fuss over an old *fraa* like me—”

Sachia sighed as she turned away from the sink.

“I don’t have anything better to do,” she admitted with a shrug. “And besides, I like coming here.”

The older woman raised a skeptical gray eyebrow.

“I do,” Sachia insisted. “But if you want me to stop coming over, I will.”

Mrs. Albrecht seemed to be weighing her words before sighing.

“Well, I suppose if you want to keep coming, I won’t stop you,” she said with an appreciative twinkle in her eye. “But I do think it’s best if you start calling me Ava.”

Sachia smiled. “Sure,” she said happily. “So, shall we play a game of checkers, then?”

“All right,” Ava agreed. “Although I’m convinced you keep letting me win.”

Sachia bit her lip to keep from smiling and letting the cat out of the bag. The two women sat down to play checkers, and it became somewhat of a tradition. From then on, every

Sunday, they would sit by the fire in the kitchen and play until the day began to give way to dusk.

As fall transitioned into winter, an unlikely friendship grew between Sachia and Ava, yet, to them, it made absolute sense. Neither of them had anyone in the world left save each other, and this was a commonality that defied the constructs of age, maturity, and experience.

Chapter Two

Peebles, Scotland, Winter, 2020

Twenty-five-year-old Marcus Duncan stood at the window of his family home, looking out at the Cuddy River whose banks flanked the old stone house's perimeter. Marcus had not been home since the previous Christmas, almost a year prior.

"Mr. Duncan?"

Marcus turned to face the tall man dressed in coveralls, a clipboard in his hand—Mr. Ferguson. Marcus had hired him and his removal company.

"Aye, what is it?" Marcus asked.

"I jist wanted tae confirm wi' ye whit pieces'll be goin' intae storage and whit'll be goin' tae the auction."

Marcus sighed as he ran a hand through his cinnamon-hued hair, then turned, extending his hand. Mr. Ferguson walked up to him and handed Marcus the clipboard. He frowned in concentration as he surveyed the list.

"Aye, this looks fine," Marcus confirmed, handing the clipboard back to the man and then wordlessly turning back to the window and folding his long muscular arms across his chest. The news of his father's death had come out of the blue. Marcus last saw him in June when the elder Duncan had traveled to Edinburgh to have dinner with Marcus for his twenty-fifth birthday. His father did not like Edinburgh, always citing that it smelled like too many people, and their time together, like always, had been strained.

He'd received a call from a friend of his father a week earlier informing him that his father suffered a heart attack while walking his dogs. Marcus took the first train he could get, but he arrived too late; his father had already passed.

A dog barked in the distance, and Marcus's gaze dropped to his father's prized two black and tan Gordon Setters in the

garden below. Marcus watched the dogs for a few moments. He was granted compassionate leave from work—at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, where he had worked for three years ever since he finished his degree in horticulture—but he knew he'd have to get back before too long. He loved his job, and he was superb at it. According to his father, he'd inherited his green thumb from his mother.

Marcus sighed softly as he turned away from the window and ambled over to the large oak desk that had once been his father's. As a boy, he was never allowed in the study. It was off limits to him, but now the study was his—as was the house.

He sat down behind the desk, the sense of prohibition that had been drummed into his young mind still lingering. The top of the desk was covered in an array of files and papers, all of which Marcus was meant to be sorting. He pulled open the top drawer, seeking a stapler, but there was none to be found, so Marcus systematically searched the remaining drawers. As he pulled open the bottom drawer and scratched around, he came across a stack of opened envelopes bound together with string.

Marcus's fingers curled around the letters as he removed them. The paper was yellow with age. He carefully untied the string. Written on the front of the envelope was his mother's name, "Grace," but he did not recognize the surname: "Schwartz"—German? Or perhaps Dutch? It must have been his mother's maiden name. The date on the envelope was nearly twenty-five years prior, November 18, 1995. Marcus fingered and turned over the first envelope, then slid his fingers inside and removed the single sheet of paper. He unfolded it and began to read:

Liewi Grace,

Danki for your last letter. I did not show it to your daed, as I knew it would just upset him. I have not told him I have been writing to you; he would disapprove. Every day, I pray to Gott that He will reunite our familye one day, be it on this earth or in His heavenly kingdom.

I miss you. Send news of your Englisher and the kind.

Gott segen eich,

Maem

Marcus frowned as he reread the words, many of which were unfamiliar but which he recognized as being probably Dutch or German. Marcus's mother had died of cancer when he was five years old, and his father never liked to talk about her. It had been a great point of contention between them that his father would not talk about her, which was why Marcus knew so very little about her or her origins. He'd always assumed she was Scottish, but he now knew that was not the case.

Marcus set the letter down and turned the envelope over again. There was a return address written in the top left-hand corner.

Harvest Hill Road

Whispering Pines, OH 43804

USA

My mother was from America.

Marcus sat in his chair, absorbing the discovery. Then he leaned to the left and reached into his right back pocket and pulled out his phone.

"Siri," he said, bringing his phone to his mouth. "What do you know about Whispering Pines, Ohio?"

"Whispering Pines is an Amish community located in Ohio, USA," Siri replied instantly.

"Amish?" Marcus said under his breath. "Ma mother was Amish?"

Marcus glanced at the pile of letters again, unable to believe that his father had never told him. Marcus's knowledge of the Amish was considerably limited. In fact, he could list on

one hand all he knew about them, and everything he knew was gleaned from movies.

He reached for the next envelope. The date on the front read March 4, 1996, almost four months after the first letter.

Liewi Grace,

Danki for the photograph of the little boppli. He looks just like you except for the hair, which is such an unusual color. I hope he is sleeping better at night now.

Everything here is gut. As I write this letter, your daed is working in the garden. Spring is here now, and everything needs tending. The yellow daffodils have kumm up again; they were always your favorite, even as a maedel.

Last night, I dreamed that you and I were together again, and when I woke up my pillow was wet with tears. I miss you, Dochder, and continue to pray that Gott will find a way for me to see you again and to meet my enkel.

I think of you often, and although he doesn't say it, your daed thinks of you, too.

Gott segen eich,

Maem

Marcus stared at the slanted handwriting, his mind racing.

This letter was written just a few months after I was born.

He skimmed through the stack of letters, noting the dates written on the front of the envelopes. There were over thirty letters in all; the last one was written in early 2000, meaning his grandmother must have stopped writing after his mother died. Marcus stared at the last letter, still in a state of disbelief.

“Knock, knock,” a gruff voice said, interrupting his discovery.

Marcus looked up to see his father's best friend, Ian Murray, leaning against the doorframe, his arms folded across

his chest. He was a tall man with a thick head of salt-and-pepper hair and dark blue eyes.

“Just popped in tae see how ye were gettin’ on,” he said.

Marcus sighed as he nodded. “Good,” he said. “Most o’ the furniture’s been moved intae storage, and the auctioneers are comin’ later today.”

Ian nodded as he looked around the room, and neither of them spoke for a moment.

“Look, Ian,” Marcus started. “I’m glad ye popped by. I’m headin’ back tae Edinburgh in the mornin’, and I was hopin’ ye’d take the dugs (dogs)—”

“Yer leavin’ so soon?” Ian asked, frowning slightly. “I thought ye might stay for a while.”

Marcus shook his head. He’d already been there long enough, and every minute he was in that house reminded him of his childhood, which was not a happy time for him. After his mother died, Marcus’s father retreated into himself, and Marcus found himself growing up alone for all intents and purposes. At seven years old, his father sent him to boarding school, and at eighteen, when he finished school, he moved straight into the dorms at the University of Edinburgh. He had not lived in the family house in almost twenty years.

“So will ye take ’em?” Marcus asked.

“Ye sure?” Ian said. “Ye know how much yer father loved those dugs.”

“Aye,” Marcus replied. “But they’ll not be happy stuck in a flat all day.”

“All righ’,” Ian agreed, uncrossing his arms. “If ye’re sure.”

Marcus nodded. Growing up, he always felt that his father loved his dogs more than his own son, and he’d resented it. Still, it wasn’t the dogs’ fault, and they would be happier in the countryside.

“I’ll bring ’em around this evenin’,” Marcus said.

Ian nodded as he turned to go.

“Ian—”

Ian turned back, his blue eyes meeting Marcus’s expectantly.

“Did ma father ever say anythin’ about me mother’s kin? Who they were or where they came from?”

Ian frowned as he shook his head and shrugged a shoulder. “Yer father never liked tae talk about yer mother,” he answered.

“So he never mentioned anythin’ about where they’d met or where she grew up?” Marcus pressed. “Ye were his best friend; surely, he told ye somethin’?”

Ian shook his head. “Yer father went tae America right after school and returned with Grace,” Ian said. “He never elaborated on the details.”

“Didnae me mother ever talk tae ye about where she’d come from?” Marcus persisted.

“She told me that she didnae like tae talk about her life in America,” Ian explained. “That she’d had a fallin’ out with her parents.”

Marcus frowned, recalling what his grandmother had written in her letters. It was clear from the way she wrote that after his mother left the Amish community, her father wanted nothing to do with her or with her son.

Ian sighed. “Yer father never got over losin’ yer mother,” he said. “And I think he buried her and everything about her deep inside him. But just ’cause he dealt with it that way doesnae mean ye have tae.”

Marcus nodded as he gave Ian a tight-lipped smile.

“I’ll see ye later,” Ian said.

He turned, and his heavy footfalls disappeared down the hallway, leaving Marcus alone with his questions.



As the Edinburgh-bound train traveled through the Scottish countryside, Marcus held the stack of letters in his lap. His carriage was only half full, with people widely spaced apart. Everyone donned cloth or surgical masks, and a caustic chemical smell lingered. Though the pandemic was slowing down in terms of the rate of spread of infection, restrictions were still in place.

Marcus sighed as he leaned back in his seat. He hated the scratchy feeling of the mask, not to mention how he always felt as if he couldn't breathe properly. His grandmother's letters were a good and welcome distraction. Since stumbling upon them, Marcus had been able to dwell on little else despite the recent loss of his father. He kept imagining what his mother's life had been like before meeting and marrying his father and moving across the world. She'd given up everything: her family and her home, and the letters were the only proof, the only connection to the life that she left behind.

Yet, discovering the letters had left Marcus with more questions than answers. Why had his father kept them? Surely, he would have known that Marcus would find them one day. Maybe that was why he'd held onto them—so that Marcus would learn the truth about his mother and her American heritage.

It was midmorning by the time Marcus arrived back in Edinburgh. He walked the short distance from the station to his apartment and dropped off his bag, placing the pile of letters on the small desk in his living room. Marcus then changed into his work clothes—a pair of dark denim jeans and a parka—before fetching his bicycle from behind the door and carrying it down the stairs and outside.

Established in 1670, the Royal Botanic Garden was nestled in the heart of the city of Edinburgh. As a boy, Marcus had visited every year and knew then that it was the only place on earth where he wanted to work. His mother had loved gardens, and she first brought Marcus to the Edinburgh gardens when he was but an infant.

The garden, over seventy acres in size, was used as a place for conservation, research, and education and was one of the oldest botanical gardens in the world, which, to Marcus, made it that much more special.

The garden was divided into several areas, each with its own unique and fascinating collection of plants. Marcus, however, worked primarily in the glasshouses. Especially popular in the winter months when many of the other plants would go dormant, they were also warm and humid and offered visitors a brief respite from the cold outdoors.

When Marcus arrived at the garden a short while later, he parked his bike in the staff parking lot and made his way to check in with his supervisor, Mr. Angus Craig.

“We didnae expect you back so soon,” Mr. Craig remarked as Marcus entered his office. “Did ye no’ want tae take more time? Ye have leave owed tae ye.”

“I wanted tae come back,” Marcus replied.

Mr. Craig nodded, but there was a crease between his dark brows. “Aye, righ’, well, Blair’s o’er in the Tropical Palm House. She’s been havin’ a wee bit o’ trouble with the ventilation system. Maybe ye could give her a hand?”

Marcus nodded as he turned to go.

The Tropical Palm House was home to various species, including trees, ferns, orchids, gingers, and even carnivorous pitcher plants.

As Marcus stepped inside the humid house and walked down the aisle, he could hear Blair grumbling under her breath. Her slender face was scrunched up in concentration, her long blonde hair pulled into a messy bun atop her head.

“Oh good,” she sighed when she spotted Marcus approaching. “You’re back. I can’t figure out this ventilation system—”

Marcus smiled as he leaned over, adjusting the controls slightly as Blair watched.

“There,” he said. “Done.”

Blair frowned. “Seriously?” She sighed in exasperation.

“Dinnae fash (don’t worry),” he said with a grin. “It just takes a bit o’ practice.”

Blair came from England to work at the Botanic Garden and had only been there a few months. Mr. Craig had asked Marcus to take her under his wing and show her the ropes.

“That’s if Mr. Craig doesn’t fire me first,” Blair said in mock vexation.

“Aye, he won’t,” Marcus assured her. “Ye’re good at yer job; it just takes time tae learn all the tricks.”

Blair smiled gratefully but then frowned. “I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I should be asking how you are after everything with your father.”

“I’m all righ’,” Marcus replied neutrally.

Blair nodded, but something in her soft blue eyes communicated that she did not quite believe him.

“You know you can talk to me,” Blair said, placing a hand on his forearm. “About anything—”

“Aye,” Marcus said with a nod. “We’d better get back tae work.”

It was late afternoon when Marcus left work; as he made his way to the staff parking lot to retrieve his bike, footsteps behind him prompted him to turn, where he saw Blair, her long blonde ponytail swishing from side to side as she walked. He stopped, asking, “Ye all righ’?”

“Yes, fine,” Blair answered, slightly out of breath. “I was—I was just wondering if you might like to grab a drink...”

Blair’s blue eyes, bright and hopeful, reaffirmed Marcus’s sense that she might be into him; with everything going on, though, he just didn’t feel he was in the right headspace to consider getting involved with anyone.

“Can I take a rain check?” Marcus requested kindly. “I could use an early night after everythin’—”

“Sure,” Blair said, her expression becoming slightly guarded. “We can do it another time.”

“Thanks, I’ll see ye in the mornin’, then.”

“See you then,” Blair echoed.

Marcus turned and headed towards the bike rack. He could sense Blair’s gaze on him and felt guilty for turning her down, but he had too much on his mind.

As he entered his apartment, the stack of letters on the desk, where he’d left them that morning, was the first thing to greet him. They had consumed his thoughts all day, and he could not entirely understand the degree of preoccupation they triggered.

Perhaps it’s because I’m completely alone now; my mother and father are dead, and I have no other family in Scotland.

Though he’d never really given much thought to how it might feel to have no family, Marcus never felt more isolated and alone in the days after his father’s passing. The discovery of the letters, as much as they catalyzed confusion at learning the truth about his mother’s family, also brought a sense of comfort in knowing that maybe he wasn’t alone after all.

Marcus retired to bed early that night but could not fall asleep. Despite his exhaustion, his mind refused to settle, whirling like a windmill on a windy day, so a little after midnight, he gave up on the idea of sleep and walked over to his desk. He sat down and, without giving it much thought, wrote a letter to his grandmother, using the return address in the timeworn letters.

On his way to work the following day, Marcus posted the letter. He had no idea if it would ever reach her or if she or his grandfather were even still alive, but there had to be a reason his father kept those letters after his mother died, and whether they received the letter or not, something compelled him to at least try.

Chapter Three

Sachia sat at the wooden desk, her posture vertical but her head bent forward, her brown eyes focused on the green skirt in her lap; its hem had come loose. As she carefully ducked and dived the needle through the material, her thick-rimmed glasses slid down her nose, eliciting a sigh. She pushed them back up, biting her bottom lip in concentration. She'd never been very good at needlework.

The small bell above the shop door tinkled, calling time for a reprieve, and Sachia looked up to see Ava entering. She was accessorized with a woolen cap and a thick gray shawl. Her hair, which peeked out from under the cap, was a steely gray color, which contrasted against the bright blue of her eyes. Her face was plumper now, and her cheeks held a healthy rosy glow.

"It's just me," Ava said, breathing heavily as she entered the shop and closed the door behind her. "Brrr! I smelled snow on the way over."

"Ava," Sachia chastised patiently. "You shouldn't be out in the cold, not with your chest—"

Ava waved a wrinkled hand in the air dismissively.

"Seriously, Ava," Sachia insisted. "You know the doctor told you to be careful."

"Well, why don't you make me a cup of tea, then?" Ava challenged good-naturedly. "Warm the old bones."

Sachia smiled in affection for her friend as she turned and walked over to the small coal stove burning brightly in the corner of the shop. She placed the kettle on top of the stove, then turned back to Ava.

"Had any customers in today?" Ava asked.

"One or two," Sachia said. "Both looking for *Grischtdaag* gifts."

Ava nodded as she shuffled over to the large armchair by the fire and lowered herself carefully into it. She exhaled deeply as she sank the last distance into the armchair, her body enveloped by the cushions.

Sachia volunteered at the little charity thrift shop on Main Street in Whispering Pines as a teenager and had accepted a full-time job there a few weeks prior. Initially hesitant to accept because it would mean she'd have less free time to help Ava, she took them up on the offer when the older woman insisted she take the job. Since then, Ava had come for a cup of tea every afternoon. Even now, with the colder weather, Sachia could not dissuade the older woman. Still, she worried about her. She had not recovered fully from her illness, and Sachia was working hard to put some meat on her bones and to build up some health and immunity.

The kettle began to bubble on the stove, and Sachia removed it from the heat and made the tea. She handed a mug to Ava, who accepted it with a grateful smile.

“*Danki*,” she said.

Sachia sat on the small ottoman opposite Ava, clutching her mug between her hands.

“I have some more of Asher’s things that we need to sort,” Ava said, sipping her tea. “See what can be donated to the shop.”

Sachia bobbed her head in reply.

“I was thinking we could sort through them this weekend,” Ava said as her icy fingers coiled around the cup, allowing the warmth to seep into her.

“Actually, I thought we might do something else this weekend,” Sachia said.

“What?” Ava frowned.

“The *Grischtdaag* market is opening,” Sachia said, smiling. “I thought we could go together.”

Ava frowned as she sat back in her chair.

“I thought you were worried about my chest?” she contested. “And now you want me to spend hours outside in the cold?”

“Come on,” Sachia said. “It’ll get you into the *Grischtdaag* spirit.”

“I was thinking I’d approach *Grischtdaag* with a more Scrooge-like attitude this year,” Ava commented.

“Ha ha,” Sachia said, rolling her eyes. “Look, I know it’s been a hard year for both of us. I just think that maybe the spirit of *Grischtdaag* might brighten up our year a little.”

Ava sighed. “Fine,” she agreed. “We’ll go to the *Grischtdaag* market.”

Sachia clapped her hands in childlike delight as Ava raised an eyebrow.

“It’ll be great,” Sachia declared.



“Ava?” Sachia called as she stepped in through the front door. “You ready?”

The older woman came shuffling out of her bedroom, dressed in so many layers she resembled an onion. A warm woolen coat, dark blue scarf, woolen hat, and black mittens completed her arctic ensemble.

“You know the *Grischtdaag* market isn’t being held at the North Pole, right?” Sachia teased, unable to restrain the amused upturned corners of her mouth.

Ava grumbled something under her breath, and Sachia grinned.

“Where’s your stick?” Sachia asked.

“Right by the door,” Ava said, pointing to the walking stick leaning against the wall.

Sachia retrieved it and handed it to the older woman.

“Right, let’s go,” Ava said.

“Before we go, are you sure you don’t need an extra pair of mittens?” Sachia asked, trying her best to keep a straight face.

Ava lifted her walking stick and poked Sachia playfully. “Any more lip from you, missy, and you can go to the market on your own.”

Sachia pursed her lips as she slid her arm through Ava’s, and the duo left the house. Sachia supported Ava’s weight as they descended the two porch steps.

“Be careful,” she warned. “The paving stones are slippery.”

The friends walked arm in arm towards the center of town, where the market was always hosted.

“Do you remember going to the market when you were my age?” Sachia asked curiously.

“*Ach, ya,*” Ava said, smiling to herself. “It was where Asher and I had our first date.”

“Really?” Sachia asked.

Ava nodded, but she’d stopped smiling, and Sachia noted a crease between her two gray brows.

“Are you all right, Ava?” Sachia asked in concern.

“Hmm?” Ava said as if she were lost in thought. “*Ach, ya,* I am fine.”

As they rounded the corner, Sachia and Ava stopped to admire Main Street, which had been turned into a scene from a storybook. Green and red garlands hung from the buildings, and large red bows had been affixed to all the lamp posts. The air was alive with children’s laughter and the tinkling of sleigh bells. Rows of tables stacked with an array of Christmas goodies lined the pavement. Each stall was selling something unique, a Christmas display of the various talents that had been bestowed upon the residents of Whispering Pines.

“*Kumm* on,” Sachia said excitedly.

She led Ava toward the stalls. The first table was loaded with baked goods: Christmas cookies, friendship loaves, apple dumplings, gingerbread cakes, cinnamon rolls, and peppermint candy bars. Sachia's mouth practically watered.

"These all look *appetitlich*," she gushed.

"I'll take two gingerbread cakes and half a dozen cinnamon rolls, please," Ava said, reaching into her coat pocket for her money.

Sachia quirked an eyebrow at her friend in surprise.

"What?" Ava said with a grin. "You're the one who's always telling me I need to get some meat on my bones."

Sachia smiled but said nothing as they continued to meander past the various tables.

"Mrs. Albrecht," Mrs. Kuhns greeted brightly. "You are looking so well."

Mrs. Kuhns was standing behind a table loaded with wooden toys, chopping boards, rolling pins, and candlestick holders, among other things. Each was exceptionally handcrafted without a hint of imperfection.

"Are these all Daniel's?" Sachia asked as she surveyed the table.

"*Ya*," Mrs. Kuhns confirmed proudly.

"Where is he?" Sachia asked, looking around. "Is he here?"

"*Nee*," Mrs. Kuhns said, shaking her head. "He has too many orders to fulfill before *Grischtdaag*, so I volunteered to man his stall."

Sachia nodded just as a group of people approached the table, and the two stepped back.

"Enjoy the market," Mrs. Kuhns called as they moved on.

Sachia and Ava walked the length of the street, but although they were not rushing, Sachia could see the older woman was getting tired.

“How about some hot cocoa?” Sachia suggested.

“Sounds *gut*,” Ava agreed.

“Why don’t you sit? I’ll wait in line.”

Sachia helped Ava over to a wooden bench and then joined the end of the line for hot cocoa. As she stood waiting, people-watching, she became aware of the tall man in front of her; he had hair the color of cinnamon and fair skin.

“Come on,” he grumbled.

Sachia surreptitiously peered around to see a flat rectangular contraption in his hands. It had a bright screen, which he was tapping furiously. She realized almost at once what it was. Her brother had told her about some of the modern technologies when he returned from *Rumspringa*. He’d described this to her as a smartphone that *Englisch* people used to keep in contact with one another.

The young man exhaled in frustration as he raised his arm, pointing his gadget up to the sky, and Sachia frowned, wondering what he was trying to do. The man suddenly turned around and looked at her, and she was momentarily taken aback by the hue of his eyes, a rich, warm amber. He was also rather handsome, with a strong, chiseled jawline and thick dark eyebrows.

“D’ye ken (do you know), where I can get a signal in this place?” he asked, his tone impatient.

Sachia frowned. She’d never heard an accent like his before.

“Signal?” Sachia said, the word sounding strange on her lips.

“I need tae make a call—”

“*Ach*, I see,” Sachia said. “Well, there is only one phone in town, and it’s in Mr. Blank’s post office,” she explained. “But it won’t be open again until morning.”

The young man groaned as he ran a hand through his hair. “There’s only one phone in this entire town?” he asked incredulously.

“*Ya*,” Sachia confirmed. “We don’t find much use for them here.”

“Ye dinnae say,” the man replied dryly.

Sachia frowned but said nothing.

“D’ye think this Mr. Blank would open the shop for me now?” the man asked, hope infusing his tone.

“You could ask him,” Sachia said. Although she could not begin to fathom what could be so important it couldn’t wait until morning.

“Is he here? Could ye point him out tae me?”

Sachia scanned the market and spotted Mr. Blank with his family; they were all seated in the horse-drawn carriage that rode around the town every Christmas market, and it was leaving for its next circuit. Sachia and her family had done it every year until now.

“Hello?”

“You’ve just missed him,” Sachia said, turning back to face the young man. “He’s gone off in the carriage with his *familye*.”

The young man followed Sachia’s line of sight as the horse-drawn carriage rode past, the bells on the reins tinkling merrily.

He looked down at his phone again, shaking his head.

“Is it really that important that it can’t wait?” Sachia asked.

He turned and held her gaze with his amber one.

“I dinnae expect ye tae understand,” he said condescendingly. “But for those of us who bide in the real world, phones are kinda important.”

“My world is just as real as yours,” Sachia retorted, glaring at him. “And what are you even doing here if your phone is that important to you?”

The man opened his mouth to reply, but as he did, an older man came walking up to them and put his hand on the younger man's arm. Sachia knew him; his name was Zechariah Schwartz. He lost his wife during the pandemic, too. Sachia had gone to her funeral a few months earlier.

"Are you making friends, Marcus?" he asked, smiling at Sachia.

"Not exactly," Marcus grumbled.

"Sachia, this is my *enkel*, Marcus Duncan; he's just arrived from Scotland."

"Scotland?" Sachia repeated in disbelief. "I didn't even know that you had an *enkel*, Mr. Schwartz."

Zechariah smiled. "He found some old letters and wrote to me," the man explained. "And I asked him to *kumm* and visit, and he did, just in time for *Grischtdaag*."

Sachia looked up at Marcus again, thinking maybe she'd gotten him all wrong; maybe he wasn't entirely disagreeable.

"I told ye, I cannae bide that long," Marcus said. "I'm needed back at work."

Or maybe not, Sachia thought to herself.

"Marcus works in the Royal Botanic Garden," Zechariah informed her proudly. "In Edinburgh."

"What's that like?" Sachia asked curiously.

"Can we go?" Marcus directed at Zechariah, completely ignoring Sachia's question. "I've got a few emails I need tae send back at the house."

"*Ya*, of course," Zechariah said. "It was *gut* seeing you, Sachia."

Without another word, Marcus and Zechariah turned to go, leaving Sachia in the line for hot cocoa. She watched them walk off, frowning.

I've never met someone so rude in all my life!

“Where’s the cocoa?” Ava asked pointedly when Sachia returned empty-handed.

“Um, sorry,” she apologized. “I was distracted—”

Ava frowned as she looked up at Sachia. “Are you all right?”

“Did you know that Zechariah Schwartz has an *enkel* visiting from Scotland?” Sachia asked instead of responding to Ava’s question.

A shadow crossed over Ava’s face.

“*Nee*,” she said shortly. “I didn’t know that.”

“Well, he’s a real delight,” Sachia said sarcastically.

“Can we go?” Ava asked. “It’s getting cold.”

“Sure. Let’s go.”

Sachia helped Ava up, and they walked home together. Neither of them spoke as they walked in comfortable silence. Sachia could not get the rude visitor from Scotland off her mind, and she hoped very much that she would not run into him again.

Chapter Four

Marcus sat at the round wooden table in the small kitchen, his fingers moving quickly over his laptop keyboard as he composed a reply to Blair's email. Once done, he pressed send, but the email remained in the outbox, and he sighed in annoyance as he leaned back in his chair.

"I suppose it takes some getting used to," Zechariah offered, trying to be sympathetic.

Marcus looked up from his laptop to see his grandfather standing in the doorway. He was once a tall man, like Marcus, but age had stooped him.

"I dinnae ken how ye do it," Marcus said as he ran a hand through his thick hair.

Zechariah smiled. "Well, you can't miss what you've never had," he replied.

Despite his irritation, Marcus mirrored his grandfather's smile. He'd arrived in the small town of Whispering Pines that morning, and it felt surreal, like stepping back in time.

"Would you like some *kaffi*?" Zechariah offered as he walked across the kitchen to the china hutch that stood against the eastern wall.

"Aye," Marcus said, closing his laptop.

When Marcus had sent that letter to his grandmother, he did not allow hope to be kindled in expecting a response. After all, he didn't know his grandparents, whether they were alive, or if they even wanted to be in contact with him. So when Marcus arrived home from work a mere week later and discovered the envelope in his mailbox from Whispering Pines, Ohio, to say he had been surprised was an understatement. The letter was from his grandfather, and in it, he expressed regret that his wife, Abigail, had died during the height of the pandemic. Marcus had written back to him that very night, and they exchanged several letters over the course of the next two weeks. In his last letter, Zechariah had asked

Marcus to travel to America so that they could meet. Marcus was initially hesitant. He'd already missed so much work with his father's funeral and sorting out the estate. Yet, he could not ignore the compulsion flooding through his veins. This was his mother's family, *his* family, and he felt that he owed it as much to himself as to her to at least meet them.

So Marcus had asked his boss for more time off and booked a flight that same day.

"Do you take milk? Sugar?" Zechariah asked, turning to look at Marcus.

"A wee bit o' milk," Marcus said. "No sugar."

Zechariah nodded as he turned back to the task at hand. A few minutes later, he walked over to Marcus and handed him a mug of hot coffee.

"Thanks," Marcus said, taking the mug from him.

Zechariah sat down in the opposite chair, and for a long moment, neither spoke.

"It's nice to have some company," Zechariah shared as he took a sip of coffee. "Ever since your *groossmammi* passed, the house has been too quiet."

Marcus wordlessly sipped the bitter coffee.

"I never said in my letters," Zechariah added, "but I was sorry to hear about your *daed's* passing."

Marcus took another sip of coffee, then raised a brow in irritation and set the mug down.

"Were ye, then?" he asked, frowning. From the letters ma gran wrote tae ma mother, it seemed there wasnae much love between the two o' ye."

Zechariah shifted in his chair, considering his answer.

"*Nee*," he agreed. "But you must understand that marrying an *Englischer* is not common practice among the *Amisch*. When your *maem* met your *daed* during *Rumspringa*, then decided to leave the faith and move to Scotland, well, it was a shock for all of us. There was nothing we could do—"

“Ye could’ve supported her decision,” Marcus argued, unable to keep the judgment from his voice.

“I know it’s hard to understand,” Zechariah explained. “But we were hurt by her choice to leave. When she chose your *daed* over us, she was choosing to abandon her *familye*, her community, the Church.”

“Ma gran wrote tae her, though,” Marcus said, his brow wrinkling as he considered the thought. “She wanted tae ken me.”

“*Ya*,” Zechariah answered. “She did, but she never told me about you. I had no idea that you existed before I received your letter a few weeks ago.”

Marcus gave no response.

“Marcus, what happened with Grace, your *maem*, will remain one of, if not the biggest, regrets of my life—that we never had the chance to make peace before she died.”

“So ye forgave her, then?” Marcus asked. “For leavin’?”

“Not a day goes by that I don’t wish I could talk to her again,” Zechariah admitted, his voice quivering and his eyes glistening. “But I made my choice, and now I must live with the consequences.”

Marcus studied his grandfather’s weathered face, the downturned corners of his mouth, the sadness in his gaze, and he knew he meant what he said.

“Well, I am going to go up to bed,” Zechariah said, effectively ending their conversation on the matter for the night. “And be sure to make yourself at home while you are here.”

“Thank ye,” Marcus said.

Zechariah pulled himself into a standing position, and as he shuffled past Marcus, he paused briefly to put a wrinkled hand on his shoulder.

“I’m glad you came, Marcus.”

Without another word, Zechariah hobbled out of the kitchen, leaving Marcus alone.

Marcus wasn't sure yet if visiting Whispering Pines had been the right move. He'd hoped it would be a chance for him to meet his mother's family, but what if he was just opening wounds that had long since scabbed over?



The following morning, Marcus dressed in a pair of joggers and a hoodie and laced up his sneakers before heading out for a run. The world outside was icy, the ground covered in a thick layer of frost. Marcus could not get over how quiet it was; he could hear birds in the trees and roosters crowing in the distance—such unfamiliar sounds that each one reverberated through him.

He slipped his earbuds out of his pocket and popped one in each ear, then opened the music library on his phone and selected shuffle. He walked down to the small garden gate and paused to do a few stretches before exiting onto the road.

For Marcus, running was his way of relaxing. When running, he focused on the beat of the music and the rhythm of his body as he moved, one foot in front of the other. It was the only time of day when he had true solitude, able to block out the rest of the world.

Beads of perspiration formed on his neck as he rounded the corner into Main Street, where the market had been held the previous night. *Smack!* He crashed right into someone with such force that his left earbud was knocked out and fell to the ground.

Marcus found himself face-to-face with the girl from the hot cocoa line. She was carrying a basket piled high with used books.

“Not ye again,” Marcus grumbled.

“You need to watch where you're going,” Sachia rejoined, her cheeks flushed with surprise and irritation.

“Ye’re the one who crashed intae me,” Marcus retorted, leaning down to retrieve his dislodged earbud.

Sachia’s dark brow furrowed as she hitched the basket to rest on her hip. “I don’t know how people behave in Edinburgh,” she enunciated, “but here, we apologize when we bump into someone.”

“Go on, then,” Marcus said with a glint of superciliousness, crossing his arms across his chest. “I’m waitin’.”

Sachia sighed in exasperation and shook her head. “I have better things to do with my time than stand here debating basic etiquette with you.”

She rolled the basket across her hip to in front of her once more and indignantly pushed past him. Marcus turned to watch her go, an incredulous expression borne out of both chagrin and amusement reflected on his face. He popped his earbud back in and headed down the street again, stopping outside the general store. He pushed the door open, and a small bell jingled merrily.

“*Gude mariye,*” a cheerful voice boomed across the room.

Marcus looked up to see the man from the carriage ride the previous afternoon, Mr. Blank, and removed his earbuds as he walked over to the counter. Mr. Blank regarded him in the same manner as everyone in town appeared to do, with an amalgam of curiosity and apprehension.

“What can I do for you this morning?” he asked.

“I was wonderin’ if I could use yer phone?” Marcus enquired.

Mr. Blank pursed his thin lips and took on a regretful mien.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “The blizzard that came through about a week ago took all the phone lines down in the town over. The phone hasn’t been working ever since.”

“Do ye have any idea when it will be fixed?”

Mr. Blank shook his head.

“I’ve been trying to get a message to them—the phone company—but without a phone, it’s been a difficult feat,” he explained.

Marcus swiped a hand through his hair in annoyance.

“Suppose it’s a bit ironic, isn’t it?” Mr. Blank chuckled. “Needing to use the phone to get the phone fixed. Kind of like the whole chicken or egg dilemma.”

Marcus’s stony look assured Mr. Blank the irony was not lost on him but that he found not an ounce of humor in the situation. He was no doubt already feeling on edge at the lack of modern communication available in the backward town.

“I’m stayin’ with ma granda’, Zechariah Schwartz,” Marcus said. “Will ye let me ken when the phone gets fixed?”

“Sure,” Mr. Blank agreed. “I can do that.”

“Thanks.”

With a nod, Marcus turned and exited the general store; as he stepped back out onto the street, he bumped straight into Sachia Bachman again. This time, she was carrying a large box.

“Are you following me?” she snapped, her brown eyes flashing.

“Dinnae flatter yerself,” Marcus retorted.

Neither of them spoke for a moment as his eyes scanned the array of bric-a-brac inside the cardboard box.

“What are ye doin’ with all this? Marcus asked, unable to curb his curiosity. “Are ye stockpilin’ supplies for the winter? If that’s the case, ye probably need tae swap out the chipped teacups for some fresh—”

“Ha ha,” Sachia tossed out humorlessly. “Now, are you going to get out of my way?”

Marcus stood motionless for a moment, then stepped out of her way, and Sachia walked on and disappeared into a shop just a little further down the street.

Marcus shook his head in perplexity as he reached into his pocket and retrieved his earbuds again. He put them in his ears, hit play on his smartphone, and made his way back to his grandfather's house.

"How was your run?" Zechariah asked as Marcus stepped into the kitchen.

"Good," Marcus answered.

"Are you hungry?" Zechariah asked. "I'm making eggs."

"Sure," Marcus replied, walking over to the table and sitting down.

Zechariah carried over a heavy pan, shuffling his feet, and Marcus could not miss the way his hands shook as he served him a spatula full of scrambled eggs. After he'd served Marcus, he served himself, then sat down at the table.

"I was wondering if you'd help me take some things into town this afternoon," Zechariah said, looking across the table at Marcus. "If you have the time."

Marcus nodded as he savored a mouthful of eggs.

It's not like I have anything better to do.

After breakfast, Marcus took a shower and dressed in a change of clothes. His grandfather was in his bedroom with the door closed when Marcus reappeared, so he wandered around the house awhile. His grandfather's house was modest, with four rooms in its entirety; off the kitchen was a simple living room, and opposite the living room were two bedrooms.

Unlike Marcus's childhood home, the furnishings in all the rooms were crafted from plain wood; there were no heavy antiques with embroidered cushions, no ornate light fittings, no drapes pooling on the floors. Every piece was designed to be practical and useful.

In the living room, a wooden cross adorned the wall above the fireplace, and on the mantelpiece, stood a small clock. With the exception of the two brightly colored quilts that hung over the backs of the rocking chairs, the entire room was neutral.

Marcus spotted a wooden table with several books stacked on top in the corner of the living room and walked over to scan the book titles. He withdrew a book from the middle of the stack about gardening in Ohio. He opened the cover, and as he did, he spotted a name written on the flyleaf: “Grace Schwartz.”

This book belonged to my mother.

Marcus carefully and somewhat reverently paged through the book, feeling a strong connection to his mother in holding something that she had held, reading the words that she had read. Part of Marcus expected his grandfather to have erased all evidence of his mother from the house, but he hadn't.

“Marcus?” Zechariah called.

Marcus quickly returned the book to the pile, just as his grandfather appeared.

“Will you be all right to leave in about an hour?” Zechariah asked.

Marcus nodded. “Sure.”

His grandfather smiled at him before turning and retracing his steps in his customary shuffle-walk. Marcus looked around the room for a moment longer, then headed outside to meander around the small garden.

Many of the plants in the garden were dormant, but as he walked around, Marcus spotted a large American cranberry bush and a hellebore, the Christmas flower. A large red twig dogwood stood in the corner of the garden, its bright stem conspicuous against the brown and gray landscape. The far end of the garden housed a large white pine tree. He'd seen a lot of white pines in town and deduced that was from whence the town's name came. Marcus came across an old swing that hung from a thick, horizontal branch. The rope had rotted over the years, and the swing slung askew, but as it gently moved in the cold breeze, Marcus imagined his mother, as a girl, sitting on the swing.

Marcus spent over an hour in the garden before heading inside, down the short hallway to his grandfather's bedroom.

Expecting the door to be closed, he saw his grandfather, through the open door, sitting on the side of the bed with a suitcase of clothes.

As Marcus watched his grandfather, he got a strong impression that he was interrupting something; Zechariah was holding a woolen scarf in his hands, sitting motionless, and did not look up as Marcus stepped into the doorway.

After a few moments, Marcus cleared his throat, and Zechariah looked up at him, his contemplation broken, and quickly put the scarf into the suitcase and buckled it closed.

“Are ye ready tae go?” Marcus asked.

“Ya,” Zechariah replied, getting up slowly from the bed.

Marcus watched as he lifted the heavy suitcase off the bed, and by the time he’d shuffled the short distance to the bedroom door, he was panting with the exertion.

“Here,” Marcus said, reaching for the handle of the suitcase. “Let me take that.”

Zechariah gratefully relinquished the suitcase to Marcus, and they made their way out of the house in silence.

“What’s in the bag?” Marcus asked as they descended the porch steps.

Zechariah did not answer immediately, and as Marcus cast a sideways glance at him, he noted that his grandfather still appeared melancholy.

“They’re some of your *groosmammi*’s things,” Zechariah answered sadly. “I’ve been meaning to part with them for a while...”

Marcus had never been the sentimental type to hold onto birthday cards or old printed plane tickets and the like. So when his father passed, he was determined not to hold onto anything from the past. Yet, watching the auctioneers carry away his father’s things, seeing his whole childhood packed into the back of a truck and driven away, took a much greater toll on him than he would ever have expected. So he had an inkling of what his grandfather was experiencing.

“Still,” Zechariah continued, clearing his throat. “I decided that her things weren’t doing anyone any good gathering dust in the cupboard. Might as well give them to someone who can get some use out of them.”

Marcus nodded. He understood the pragmatism of his grandfather’s decision, but now being privy to what was in the suitcase, Marcus’s frame of mind was affected. He’d never met his grandmother, yet he was carrying a suitcase of her personal belongings.

This is the closest I’ll ever get to her.

Marcus and Zechariah headed down Main Street until they came to a small shop where a collection of bric-a-brac was creatively arranged in the display window. Marcus hesitated briefly at noticing the same chipped teacup he’d seen but an hour before in the cardboard box that Sachia Bachman carried.

Zechariah pushed the door open, and Marcus followed him inside. As he stepped inside, he spotted Sachia. She was not alone, though, but was talking to an older woman with gray hair and startling blue eyes.

“Ava,” Zechariah said in surprise, stopping dead in his tracks as his shoulders stiffened.

The older woman looked at his grandfather, saying nothing for a moment, but the tension between them was practically palpable. Marcus’s gaze slid over to Sachia, and their eyes met briefly.

“I-I’m sorry to interrupt,” Zechariah apologized, his gaze bouncing away from the older woman to Sachia. “I’ve brought some donations for the shop.”

“That is very kind of you, Mr. Schwartz,” Sachia said kindly.

Zechariah nodded mutely.

“Ye work here?” Marcus asked as he surveyed the crowded shop, frowning.

“*Ya*,” Sachia answered stiffly, immediately shifting into defensive mode.

“Give her the suitcase, please, Marcus,” Zechariah instructed.

Marcus handed Sachia the suitcase, and her fingers brushed his hands in the transfer. He let go of the handle in surprise.

“Sorry,” Sachia mumbled, not meeting his eye.

Marcus tucked his hands into the pockets of his jeans, and for a long awkward moment, no one spoke.

“Well, we’d better get going,” Zechariah said, his eyes shooting to Ava and lingering on the older woman momentarily.

“*Danki* for the donations,” Sachia said, smiling.

Zechariah nodded again before he turned and exited the shop. Marcus caught Sachia’s eye for a moment before he, too, turned and followed his grandfather. To Marcus’s astonishment, as he stepped outside, he saw his grandfather moving it down the street at a fast clip he didn’t know the old man was capable of achieving.

“Zechariah!” Marcus called after him. “Wait up.”

Marcus hurried after him, catching up with the older man as he turned a corner. His grandfather’s face was pale, and he was noticeably out of breath, but he did not slow his pace.

“What’s goin’ on?” Marcus asked, putting a concerned hand on Zechariah’s arm.

His grandfather stopped suddenly as if Marcus’s touch had broken the spell he was under.

“Are ye okay?” Marcus asked.

Zechariah nodded wordlessly, breathing heavily.

“Ye gonnae tell me what’s goin’ on?” Marcus pressed. “Ye look like ye’ve seen a ghost.”

His grandfather exhaled shakily.

“I knew that *fraa*, Ava, when I was a young *mann*,” Zechariah explained. “She and I grew up together, and she was my best friend, but she was also the first *maedel* that I ever loved.”

“So, what happened?” Marcus asked.

“I went away for a few months to care for an ailing *aenti*. I left Ava a letter, but when I returned home, she was engaged to another man...”

Marcus heard the longing in his grandfather’s voice—and something else: bitterness, perhaps? Or regret?

“What happened next?” Marcus asked, now curious.

Zechariah shrugged. “She was engaged to Asher Albrecht, and by all accounts, she’d fallen in love with him. He was handsome and charming, a newcomer to town who’d won the hearts of everyone.”

“But what about the letter?” Marcus pressed.

“I assume she read it,” Zechariah said, gesticulating with his upturned hand. “But she never mentioned it, so I did what I had to in order to move on. As time passed, I eventually met and married your *groosmammi*.”

Marcus grimaced. “But wisnae that difficult? Livin’ in the same town, separated by only a few streets?”

“It was,” Zechariah said with a sigh, his eyes distant. “But leaving wasn’t an option for either of us, so we just got on with our lives.”

“Did ye love ma gran?”

“I grew to love her. And we had a happy life together.”

The two men fell silent for a moment. The wind was picking up, blowing in large gray clouds from the east. “We should get home,” said Zechariah.

Marcus eyed the clouds with a nod, and they made their way back to the house. As soon as they stepped in through the front door, his grandfather turned to him.

“I’m tired,” he said. “I think I will go to bed early. Will you be able to make yourself something for supper?”

Marcus nodded.

“Gute nacht.”

Marcus watched as his grandfather shuffled to his bedroom and stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

That night, sleep eluded Marcus as he lay awake staring at the ceiling, his mind a flurry of thoughts that mirrored the flurry of snowfall outside. Though Marcus had not intended to spend more than a few days in Whispering Pines—and had been very clear with his grandfather from the start about only coming to meet him and get answers to the burning questions sparked by the letters—Marcus could already tell after only two days that his grandfather was lonely. And as much as he didn’t want it to bother him, it did. Despite this, Marcus knew he couldn’t stay; he had a life and responsibilities in Edinburgh, friends, and a job that he loved. Whispering Pines, poles apart from Edinburgh in its ways, may as well have been on another planet—and one that had no place for him.

Marcus rolled over onto his side to glimpse the world outside, now pitch black, not a streetlight or flickering lamp to act as a beacon in the darkness. He restlessly rolled onto his back again, wishing he could just shut it all off and fall into a peaceful slumber, but the more he tried, the more intrusive thoughts invaded his mind.

Once I return home, I don’t know when—or if—I’ll ever come back to Whispering Pines, so why do I feel so guilty about leaving a man I barely know? Granted, he is my only living relative, but, I mean, this is the twenty-first century; surely, we can keep up with writing letters and still have some kind of relationship.

Yet, as much as he tried to placate himself with this thought, he knew better. He had never been great at communication, even with modern technology for instant messaging and video calling. His grandfather had none of these innovative means of keeping in touch, not even email. So, in all likelihood, they’d write to each other for a few

months, then slowly, the novelty would fade, they'd run out of things to talk about, or Marcus would get caught up in his work and life and the gaps between his responses would increase until they petered out completely. Months would fade into years, and the more time that passed, the guiltier he'd feel, and the guilt would stop him from reaching out. Marcus knew himself. He could promise to write, but since he could predict the inevitable outcome, he would in effect be deceiving his grandfather—which just didn't sit right.

But I cannot stay, of that much I am certain. So what am I to do?

As the minutes ticked by into hours, Marcus eventually gave up on the idea of sleep and got out of bed. He pulled on his dressing gown and walked to the kitchen. He stopped short in the doorway at the unexpected sight of his grandfather seated at the small table. His chin was lowered toward his chest, and an empty mug sat in front of him. He looked so small and forlorn, sitting there all alone. Marcus wondered if he should just go back to his room to give the man quietude. However, just as the thought crossed his mind, his grandfather looked up at him.

“Couldn't sleep either?” Zechariah asked.

Marcus shook his head.

“Come, sit. I'll make you some tea.”

Marcus hesitated again before he stepped into the kitchen and walked over to the empty seat at the table. Zechariah got up and shuffled over to the stove, and Marcus watched as he lit the plate under the kettle.

“I've been thinkin' about the story ye told me earlier,” Marcus said. “About Ava.”

“*Ach?*”

“I was wonderin' why ye never tried tae sort things out between the two o' ye.”

Zechariah turned to him, and in the shadowy light of the small coal stove, he looked spectral.

“When I found out that Ava was getting married, I was heartbroken,” Zechariah explained. “The only way I could think to deal with it was to avoid her, but in doing so I hurt her —”

“Aye, but it’s been fifty years,” Marcus pointed out, leaning forward in his chair. “Surely, it’s in the past.”

Zechariah sighed, shaking his head sadly. “Time passes over all of us, Marcus. But that doesn’t mean it leaves no shadow behind.”

Marcus sat back in his chair, watching his grandfather. *If I could somehow help fix things between my grandfather and Ava, I wouldn’t feel so guilty about leaving. It would be a solution to him being all alone. The only problem is, how?*

Chapter Five

“Ava?” Sachia called as she stepped in through the front door.

“I’m in the kitchen,” Ava replied.

Sachia closed the door and headed down the hallway. Ava, seated at the small kitchen table with a cup of tea and a crossword puzzle, was bent over the paper, her face creased in concentration.

“A small, decorated tree sprig hung upside down from the ceiling,” she read aloud. “Nine letters.”

Sachia pondered the clue for a moment. “Mistletoe,” she replied with a pleased grin.

Ava bit her bottom lip as she scribbled in the word and then sat back, satisfied. Sachia walked over and peered at the page; across the top of the page, were the letters “Christmas Crossword” in bold red, with the “o” artfully fashioned like a wreath.

“Where did you get this?” Sachia asked curiously.

“Mrs. Byler’s *Englisch* friends sent it to her with a Christmas card. And she knows how much I love crosswords, and she doesn’t really care for them, so she gave it to me.”

Sachia smiled. Ava was always looking for new ways to maintain her mental acuity.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” Ava asked, changing the subject.

Sachia shrugged. “I just wanted to see how you are?”

“I’m fine.”

Sachia pursed her lips as she nodded, eyeing Ava closely. She had astutely discerned something amiss with Ava the last couple of days. First, at the Christmas market and then the previous afternoon when Zechariah Schwartz visited the charity shop with his aggravating grandson. Sachia wasn’t sure

exactly what was going on, but there was one common element, and that was Zechariah.

“You’d better get going,” Ava said, chewing the end of her pencil. “You’re going to be late.”

Sachia glanced at the clock on the far wall and nodded. “I’ll see you later this afternoon for tea—”

“Actually, I don’t think I’ll *kumm* by the shop today,” Ava said, avoiding Sachia’s eye.

“Why not? Are you feeling unwell?”

“*Nee, nee,*” Ava said, waving a hand dismissively. “I just have some things around the house that I’d like to—”

“All right,” Sachia said easily. “I’ll pop by after work, then.”

“Have a *gut* day,” Ava said, bending her head over her crossword puzzle once more.

Sachia paused, momentarily assessing Ava before she turned and left the kitchen.

As Sachia made her way into town, she mused over what it could be that was troubling Ava; whatever it was, she planned to get to the bottom of it.

The charity shop was rather busy that morning, with the residents of Whispering Pines coming in to buy last-minute Christmas presents—Christmas day being only a few days away.

Around noon, the small bell above the door tinkled, and Sachia looked across from the rack of clothes she was sorting to see Marcus Duncan stepping into the shop.

“Can I help you?” Sachia asked, doing her very best to be polite.

“No,” Marcus said as he walked over to the table of crockery and picked up a tarnished silver fork. “I’m just looking.”

Sachia remained silent as she watched Marcus turn the fork over in his fingers.

“Well, let me know if you need any help,” she said, returning to the clothing rack.

Marcus walked around the shop, picking up items occasionally to study them, and Sachia kept casting sideways glances at him, wondering what on earth he was up to. As she observed him, his handsome features became difficult to deny, no matter how irksome his personality. He had a striking profile, a high brow, and a strong, chiseled jaw. Not to mention his manly physique and firm muscles.

“Aye, ye ken,” Marcus said, turning to catch her watching him. “There’s somethin’ ye could help me with—”

Sachia quickly averted her gaze, her cheeks warm.

“And what is that?” she asked as she hung a heavy woolen coat back onto the rack.

Marcus crossed the room, and suddenly, he was standing beside her, so close that she could see the flecks of bronze in his amber eyes.

“I’d like tae get Zechariah somethin’ for Christmas.”

“*Ach*, okay,” Sachia replied, looking around the room for ideas. “What did you have in mind? A set of handkerchiefs, perhaps, or—”

“No,” Marcus said, the corners of his lips turning up in an enigmatic grin. “I dinnae want tae get him anythin’ from here ___”

Sachia frowned, not bothering to hide her irritation at his smirkiness. “Then I am not sure I can help you,” she said. “There are some other shops on Main Street that you could try ___”

“No,” Marcus corrected. “The gift that I want tae give him cannae be bought in a shop.”

Sachia’s forehead furrowed in confusion.

What does he really want, and why is he being so cryptic?

“I don’t understand what you want from me,” she said a tad curtly. “And quite frankly, I am a little busy, so maybe you could take your riddles elsewhere.”

Sachia turned to move away, but just as she did, Marcus reached out and caught her wrist.

“Let go of me,” she demanded.

Marcus immediately complied, and Sachia’s heart galloped as she glared up at him.

“I’m sorry,” Marcus said more respectfully, “but I need yer help. Ye’re friends with Ava Albrecht, are ye no’?”

“*Ya*,” Sachia answered, her expression softening slightly. “But what has this got to do with Ava?”

“I’d reckon she’s no’ told ye about the history between her and Zechariah?” Marcus asked.

Sachia frowned in thought. “*Nee*. She’s never mentioned anything about Zechariah—”

Marcus gave a nod. “Aye, accordin’ tae Zechariah’s story, he an’ Ava were good friends when they were bairns (children), and he was very much in love with her. He was keen on makin’ her his wife, but he went away for a time tae care for his aunt, and when he came back home, she was engaged tae another man—”

“Asher,” Sachia interjected.

“Aye,” Marcus confirmed. “After that, they didnae speak again. They both married their chosen partners and moved on with their lives.”

Sachia wondered why Ava had never mentioned Zechariah, that they had once been such close friends, especially after his recent visit to the shop while she was there.

“I ken that he still regrets that they lost their friendship,” Marcus said. “So I want ye tae help me get them intae the same room so they can talk and figure things out.”

Sachia’s eyes widened in surprise at Marcus’s suggestion.

“You’re not serious?” she asked incredulously.

“Aye, I am,” Marcus insisted.

Sachia shook her head. “But it’s been fifty-odd years,” she argued. “That’s a lot of water under the bridge—”

“I ken,” Marcus agreed. “That’s why I need yer help.”

Sachia considered the idea for a moment, but she knew Ava; she was as stubborn as a mule, and if Ava had not mentioned Zechariah to Sachia, she had a reason.

“I’m sorry,” Sachia eventually replied. “But I just don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

Marcus sighed unwearyingly. “Listen,” he beseeched. “I ken that you and I didnae get off on the right foot, but I’m headed back tae Scotland in a wee bit, and I’d like tae go back knowin’ that I tried tae reunite Zechariah with his oldest friend and love.”

Sachia searched Marcus’s eyes, where his genuine sincerity was apparent, and for the first time since meeting him, she thought that perhaps he wasn’t all bad after all but that she had possibly just encountered him on a bad day—though she never would have pegged him for the matchmaking type.

“Fine,” Sachia conceded. “I’ll think about it.”

“Thank ye,” Marcus said as he smiled widely.

Marcus’s smile threw Sachia off guard, and she blushed again. The small bell above the door tinkled, interrupting their interlude, and Sachia turned around to see Daniel Kuhns walking toward her, his smile faltering as he caught sight of Marcus.

“Daniel,” Sachia greeted. “It’s so *gut* to see you.”

Daniel didn’t respond, his gaze fixed on Marcus.

“This is Zechariah Schwartz’s *enkel*, Marcus Duncan.”

Daniel nodded. “I heard there was an *Englischer* in town. I didn’t know that the two of you were acquainted.”

Sachia glanced at Marcus, whose arms were folded across his chest.

“We aren’t,” Sachia answered. “Well, not really. Marcus is looking for a present for his *groosdaadi* for *Grischtdaag*.”

Daniel nodded, his gaze still fixed on Marcus.

“Well,” Marcus said. “I’d better get goin’. Sachia, I’ll come back again tomorrow and get an update on that gift.”

Sachia nodded as Marcus turned and left the shop, leaving her and Daniel alone together.

“So?” How have you been?” she asked. “I saw your *maem* at the market, and she told me about all your orders—”

“I don’t think you should be friends with Marcus Duncan,” Daniel interjected, ignoring her questions. “He’s an outsider, and from what I’ve heard, he has no respect for our ways.”

Sachia pulled a face. “Marcus and I are not friends,” she stated.

The look in Daniel’s blue eyes as he regarded her suggested that he didn’t quite believe Sachia.

“I don’t want to quarrel with you,” Daniel eventually said. “I actually came to ask if you would like to go ice skating this afternoon.”

There was a large lake to the east of the town, and every year, when the ice was hard enough, the townsfolk would go ice skating.

“I would love to, but I can’t,” Sachia explained. “I’m having dinner with Ava tonight.”

Daniel’s countenance fell in disappointment.

“Perhaps tomorrow?” Sachia suggested.

“Sure,” Daniel agreed, his face brightening again. “I’ll *kumm* by the shop at closing time, and we can walk together.”

“I’ll see you then,” Sachia confirmed.

Daniel smiled at her as he turned to go.

For the rest of the day, Sachia was distracted by Marcus’s unusual request and what had really gone on between Ava and

Zechariah all those years ago.

After closing the shop, Sachia made her way back to Ava's house.

"Ava?" Sachia said, stepping through the front door. "It's just me."

There was no response, so Sachia closed the door and walked down the hall. The bedroom and kitchen were both empty.

"Ava?" Sachia called as she stepped into the doorway of the sitting room.

She spotted the older woman asleep in her rocking chair by the fire, a book open in her lap. She was snoring so peacefully that Sachia did not want to disturb her, so she turned and walked back to the kitchen to prepare some supper.

Sachia was just checking the casserole in the oven when Ava ambled into the kitchen, yawning sleepily.

"Dinner is almost ready," Sachia said, smiling at her. "Why don't you take a seat."

Ava shuffled over to the table and sat down, and Sachia joined her, sitting in the seat across from her.

"So, Marcus Duncan came into the shop today," Sachia said, tilting her head slightly.

"*Ach*, really?" Ava said, not meeting her gaze.

"He was looking for a *Grischtdaag* gift for his *groosdaadi*—"

Ava's expression was peculiar and her body language strained. She still would not meet Sachia's eye.

Marcus's version of events must be true; Ava and Zechariah broke each other's hearts.

"Ava," Sachia prompted, leaning forward in her chair. "Will you tell me what happened between you and Zechariah?"

Ava's lips thinned in disquiet, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. She seemed to be wrestling with memories.

“I'm sorry,” Sachia apologized. “I shouldn't have asked —”

“It's all right.” Ava sighed, looking across at her. “If you want to know what happened, I'll tell you—although there's not much to tell.”

Ava exhaled, and Sachia waited for her to continue.

“Zechariah and I were *gut* friends growing up, better than *gut*; we were the best of friends. We were inseparable until the day that we weren't.”

Ava paused, her expression distant.

“So what happened?” Sachia pressed.

“It was the winter of 1970, and I was very much in love with Zechariah,” Ava said, smiling at the memory. “But I had no idea how he felt about me. He'd never given any indication that he felt anything for me other than friendship. Then one day, Asher arrived in town. He was handsome and charming—quite the catch—and he only had eyes for me.”

Sachia had heard many stories from Ava about her and Asher, and they always sounded perfectly suited in every way. She never would have guessed that Ava once had feelings for anyone else.

“From the moment that he arrived, Asher was very straightforward about what he wanted,” Ava continued. “We'd only known each other a couple of weeks when he asked me to marry him.”

Sachia raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“I was still very much in love with Zechariah when Asher proposed,” Ava admitted. “But Asher was a good match. He was everything a young *maedel* could want, and my *daed* and *maem* adored him. In fact, he charmed the whole town.”

“Did you?” Sachia asked. “Love him, I mean.”

“I think I was in love with the idea of him,” Ava explained. “But my heart belonged to Zechariah.”

Sachia’s bow knitted in puzzlement. “Then why did you marry Asher?”

“It’s complicated,” Ava said, shaking her head. “It was what my *eldre* wanted, and in truth, I was scared to turn down Asher. I knew that if Zechariah didn’t reciprocate my love, then I’d be throwing away a *gut* life with a kind, generous, and handsome *mann*.

“Why didn’t you just talk to Zechariah?” Sachia asked.

“I wanted to,” Ava admitted, “but from the moment Asher showed up, Zechariah distanced himself from me, and then, just before *Grischtdaag*, he told me that he was going away.”

“To care for his *aenti*,” Sachia interjected.

“*Ya*. He left Whispering Pines, and some part of me wondered if he was running away, because surely, if he felt the same way for me, as I did for him, then he would have stayed behind and fought for me.”

“So you agreed to marry Asher?”

“I did,” Ava corroborated. “And when Zechariah came back to Whispering Pines, everything was different.”

“Did you two ever talk about it?”

“*Nee*,” Ava said with a shake of her head.

Sachia didn’t take her eyes off Ava, whose blue eyes were misted over. In all the months Sachia had known Ava, she was always so strong, but now she looked so old, so vulnerable.

“So that was it?” Sachia asked. “It was just over?”

Ava sighed as she nodded.

“Zechariah ended up getting married the year after I did, and that was that.”

Sachia was quiet for a moment. It still seemed such a pity that Ava and Zechariah's friendship had been severed so suddenly, and Sachia couldn't help wondering if Ava's retelling was as simple and clean-cut as she made it out to be.

"Did you ever think about trying to fix things with Zechariah?"

"*Nee*," Ava replied. "It was easier to just let the past stay in the past, and as my *maem* predicted, I grew to love Asher. Although *Gott* never blessed us with *kinner*, we had a *gut* marriage, a happy one, and I did not want to do anything to inadvertently jeopardize what we had."

Sachia pursed her lips thoughtfully. "What about now? Now that Asher is gone. Would you want to try and make things right?"

Ava frowned, then shook her head. "I think too much time has passed to open up old wounds," she said. "Fifty years is a long time, our hurts are scarred over, and we are both different people now. I don't think it would do anyone any good dredging up the past.

Sachia sat back in her chair in contemplation.

Ava isn't interested in fixing things with Zechariah, which means Marcus's idea to reunite them is a no-go.

"I think I am going to go to bed," Ava suddenly declared.

"You don't want some supper?" Sachia asked, scrunching her face at Ava's atypical behavior.

"*Nee, danki*."

Sachia rose and helped Ava to her feet, and the older woman's body sagged into her.

"Can I help you into bed?" Sachia offered.

Ava reached up and cupped Sachia's cheek affectionately in her palm. "You're a *gut maedel*. But I can manage on my own."

Sachia smiled with a nod as Ava turned to go.

"*Gude nacht*," she called after her.

Once Ava had left the kitchen, Sachia took the casserole out of the oven and turned off the heat. She placed the steaming aromatic dish on top of the stove and sighed. She had not meant to upset Ava by asking her about Zechariah, but it was clear that bringing up the past was difficult, painful, and emotionally taxing for her. Despite fifty years' worth of winters having passed and the fact that commonly, time healed all wounds, Sachia could not help but feel as if the wounds left by Ava and Zechariah's suddenly broken and still unresolved friendship never healed properly—almost as though it had healed incorrectly, like an unset broken bone, which leaves a permanent limp as a result. Though Ava's story left Sachia with a heavy heart, she did not feel it was right for her to initiate the only way possible to ensure complete healing—re-breaking the incorrectly healed bone and re-setting it, an exceedingly excruciating process. It was Ava's story, after all, not hers, and Ava had made it clear that she wanted to leave the past in the past.

Chapter Six

The next morning, Marcus jogged down Main Street, and as he approached the charity shop, he came to a stop, removed his earbuds, and slipped them into his sweatpants pocket. The bell tinkled to announce his arrival as he pushed the door open. He scanned the room, but Sachia was nowhere in sight.

Since the previous day when he'd thought up his plan to reunite his grandfather with his oldest friend and love, the more he thought about it, the more it seemed like the perfect plan. His grandfather was lonely, and Marcus could not stay in Whispering Pines with him, so the plan was a win-win for both of them. All Marcus needed was for Sachia to agree to help.

Where is she?

Marcus was about to turn around and leave when Sachia emerged from a back room carrying an armful of dusty old books.

“Ach, gude daag,” she said, stopping dead, a small crease appearing on her smooth brow.

“Hi. I’ve come tae ask if ye have considered what we were talkin’ about yesterday,” Marcus stated, cutting right to the chase.

Sachia wordlessly walked over to a large bookshelf and set the stack of books down on the third shelf.

“So?” Marcus entreated. “Will ye help me?”

Sachia turned to him and sighed. “I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “But I can’t help you.”

Marcus took a step forward, his brow furrowed. “Why no’?”

“Because Ava doesn’t want to bring up the past,” Sachia explained. “She told me as much last night—”

Marcus’s brow crinkled.

“I know you are trying to do something kind for your *groosdaadi*,” Sachia acknowledged. “But when I asked Ava about it last night, she got really upset, and I just don’t think it’s my place to interfere.”

Marcus exhaled sharply. He had not expected Sachia to refuse; he needed her help.

“I cannae do this by maself,” he said, gritting his teeth.

“I am really sorry,” Sachia said, her blue eyes sincere. “I wish I could, but it just doesn’t feel right to go against Ava’s wishes.”

Marcus shot a hand through his hair, not bothering to hide his annoyance, and the sincerity in her expression only moments earlier disappeared, and her countenance hardened.

“Look,” Sachia said sternly as she folded her arms across her chest. “I don’t know how things are done where you *kumm* from, but here, we respect other people’s wishes.”

“Ye’re just afraid,” Marcus accused.

“I am not afraid,” Sachia argued. “And if you are so concerned about your *groosdaadi* being lonely, maybe you should consider staying—”

“I cannae stay,” Marcus cut in.

“Why not?” Sachia challenged. “Is this town too backward and boring for an *Englischer* from the big city?”

The contempt in her voice was obvious, and Marcus’s shoulders stiffened.

“Ye ken naethin’ about me,” he said sharply.

“That might be so. But I don’t want to risk upsetting Ava because you feel bad about leaving your *groosdaadi* when you return home.”

Marcus’s expression hardened. “Yer makin’ this intae a big thing,” he said. “All I want is tae get them tae talk.”

“Well, you are going to have to do it on your own,” Sachia declared resolutely. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have work to do.”

Sachia turned away from him, and Marcus hesitated momentarily, but when it was clear she wasn't going to reconsider, he strode to the door and exited the shop, slamming the door behind him.

He walked back to his grandfather's house, fuming.

He muttered to himself, fists balled. "I've never met anyone as frustrating as Sachia Bachman! Who does she think she is in judging me? Just because she chose to live in a town without electricity or Wi-Fi, does she think that makes her somehow better than me?"

Marcus was still grumbling to himself when he stepped inside the house, and as he walked toward his bedroom, he suddenly stopped and backtracked a step. His grandfather, seated in one of the old rocking chairs in the living room, had his head bent over a stack of cards in his lap.

"Zechariah?" Marcus prompted, stepping into the room. "Are ye all righ'?"

Zechariah looked up, and though he did his best to smile, Marcus saw the glistening tears in his eyes.

"What are ye readin'?" Marcus asked gently.

"*Ach*, it's nothing," Zechariah said, clearing his throat and blinking the tears away.

Marcus walked over to him, and as he neared, he could make out the illustration on the top card; it was of two children, a boy and a girl, seated on a sled that was racing down a snowy hill. The green-eyed boy was sitting in front, holding the rope, while the girl had her arms wrapped around his waist, her eyes closed, and her cheek pressed against his back. Whoever had illustrated the card was indeed talented, for they managed to capture the children's exhilaration and delight and the unspoken tenderness between the two figures.

"They're *Grischtdaag* cards," Zechariah explained, looking up at Marcus. "Ava and I used to exchange them every year.

"May I see them?" Marcus asked.

Zechariah hesitated a moment before handing Marcus the stack of cards. Each card had the same two figures depicted on the front, the green-eyed boy—his grandfather—and the blue-eyed girl—Ava. In each unique image, the two were partaking in some kind of winter activity together—roasting chestnuts, sledding, skating, or building a snowman. As Marcus studied them, his imagination changed the figures before his eyes. They both grew taller, and their faces lost the roundness and smoothness of youth, but the closeness between them, the love, remained unchanged.

“Ava was always much better at *Grischtdaag* cards than I was,” Zechariah said, smiling to himself. “I could hardly draw a stick figure, but she insisted we do it every year—”

Marcus looked down at his grandfather, whose eyes had misted again.

“I don’t know why I kept them all these years,” he thought aloud, turning to look at the fire that was burning in the grate. “Nostalgia, perhaps.”

Marcus didn’t comment, but he knew exactly why his grandfather had kept those cards—he still loved Ava, even after fifty years.

“D’ye regret no’ fightin’ for her?” Marcus asked as he handed the cards back to his grandfather.

Zechariah sighed as he looked down at the two figures on the sled. “Ava made her choice,” he said with a shrug. “And if things worked out differently, I’d never have met your *groossmammi*, we’d never have had Grace. Or you. I have many regrets, but I do not regret the life and the love that *Gott* blessed me with.”

Instinctively, Marcus reached over and laid a hand on his grandfather’s shoulder, and the older man looked up at him and smiled.

“Well,” Zechariah said, clearing his throat again. “I think that’s enough of a trip down memory lane for one morning. I think I’ll go and lie down for a bit.”

He leaned on the arms of the old rocking chair and pushed himself up. Marcus watched as he walked over to the bookshelf and placed the cards in a wooden box before closing the lid. He then turned and left the room, leaving Marcus alone.

For the rest of the day, Marcus could not settle. He tried reading, but his mind kept drifting back to the look he'd seen on his grandfather's face that morning. While Marcus understood that his grandfather did not regret how his life had turned out, it was clear he still loved and missed Ava. It seemed ridiculous to Marcus that now, with nothing standing in their way, they were not giving it another chance.

By late afternoon, Marcus was determined to change Sachia's mind, so while his grandfather retired to his room for another nap, Marcus fetched his coat and left the house. He walked along the narrow street toward the center of town. It had started to snow again, and his auburn hair was damp by the time he got to the charity shop.

Marcus pushed the door open and stepped inside, but to his surprise, he found Ava seated behind the wooden desk. She had her head bent over a crossword puzzle.

"Gude naamidaag," she said.

Her blue eyes met Marcus's as she looked up, and her expression faltered for a moment before she recovered herself.

"I was lookin' for Sachia," Marcus said, looking around the room.

"She's not here," Ava explained. "She went skating."

Marcus nodded without replying, and for a moment, neither of them spoke.

"Is it something that I can help you with?" Ava asked.

"Nae," Marcus declined. "Thank ye."

Ava tilted her head slightly as Marcus shifted on his heels.

"You look a lot like her," Ava suddenly remarked.

Marcus frowned, momentarily trying to decipher her comment. No one had ever said that to him before; everyone always said he was the spitting image of his father.

“Your *maem*,” Ava clarified. “She was a lovely person.”

“You kent her?” Marcus asked in surprise.

“Of course,” Ava said. “She used to help run the Sunday school.”

“I didnae ken that,” Marcus answered.

“*Ach, ya*,” Ava said, smiling. “The *kinner* just loved her. In fact, everyone loved her.”

Marcus hardly remembered his mother. In fact, he could count the memories he had of her on one hand. Yet, he’d never stopped to consider that the people in this town knew her right from the moment she was born. It felt strange that these people knew his mother better than he did.

“Everyone was very upset when she left,” Ava said. “She was a big part of our *gmay*—”

“Then why did she leave?”

“Because she fell in love,” Ava said with a sad smile. “And when it comes to matters of the heart, sometimes we have to make difficult choices.”

“D’ye think ma mother made the right choice, leavin’ her home, her family?”

Ava smiled wistfully. “I learned long ago that sometimes there is no right choice. Sometimes we have to do what we think is right and make the best of whatever path we’ve chosen to take.”

Marcus studied Ava for a moment, and she smiled at him.

“The lake is just half a mile east of the town,” she disclosed.

“Thank ye.”

Ava nodded, and Marcus turned to go.

As he made his way east, Marcus pondered over what Ava had said about choices, and he could sense from the way she spoke that she, like his grandfather, had regrets about the past. This knowledge drove Marcus to be even more determined to make things right between them again.

As Marcus neared the large lake's vicinity, peals of laughter echoed in the frigid air. When he summited the snowy bank, he spotted at least ten people skating on the pond. He narrowed his eyes as he searched for Sachia and spotted her with the young man he'd met in the shop the day before—although he could not recall his name.

The snowfall had stopped, and as Marcus made his way towards Sachia, a group of teenage girls stopped and watched him, whispering behind their hands and giggling, but Marcus ignored them.

“Sachia?” he called from the edge of the ice.

She stopped and turned to him, and the light-haired man beside her frowned.

“Can I have a word with ye?”

“I think we said all there is to say this morning,” Sachia replied.

Marcus exhaled sharply.

“Please?” he persisted, doing his best to keep his tone polite.

Sachia didn't answer immediately, and her young companion skated forward protectively.

“You don't need to speak with him if you don't want to,” he said loud enough for Marcus to hear.

“This is nae concern o' yers,” Marcus said, glaring at the young man.

“Sachia is my friend,” he retorted. “And if she doesn't want to talk to you, she doesn't have to—”

Marcus opened his mouth to argue further, but before he could, Sachia put a hand on the younger man's arm.

“It’s okay, Daniel, she said as she turned and skated easily across the ice towards Marcus. Over her shoulder, Daniel’s brow was furrowed, and his mouth was pressed into a hard line.

“So?” Sachia said as she came to a halt in front of him. “What else is there to say?”

“Can we walk?” Marcus asked, glancing warily over at Daniel.

Sachia sighed. “Fine. But let me change my shoes.”

Marcus waited as Sachia skated across the ice to retrieve her boots. Daniel did not take his eyes off of Marcus, and by his bristled demeanor, Marcus was sure Daniel felt threatened by him.

He has no reason to be, though.

“Okay,” Sachia said as she fastened the button on her boot. “Let’s walk.”

They turned and walked away from the lake, but they’d only gone a short way when Marcus stopped and turned to her.

“I ken ye dinnae want tae meddle,” Marcus started. “But I want ye tae change yer mind and help me.”

Sachia sighed.

“Just hear me out,” Marcus implored. “I ken ye dinnae fancy me much, and ye reckon I’m just doin’ this so I dinnae have a guilty conscience about leavin’ Zechariah on his own when I head back tae Scotland, and ye’re nae wrong, there’s a bit o’ truth in me wantin’ tae ease ma guilt. But there’s more tae it than that, ye ken. Ma granda’s no’ gotten o’er Ava, and I dinnae think she’s moved on, either.”

Sachia opened her mouth, then closed it again, and Marcus knew he’d hit the bullseye with his point. Ava wasn’t over Zechariah; deep down, Sachia knew that.

“But what if it just makes things worse?” she asked. “Ava is the only *familye* I’ve got, and I don’t want to do anything that’s going to jeopardize that.”

“I ken,” Marcus said. “But I’m no’ askin’ ye tae do anythin’ more than help me tae get them in the same room together. I reckon if we just get them tae talk, they’ll figure it all out between themselves.”

Sachia was quiet for a moment as she frowned. “That’s all?” she said. “Just get them in the same room together?”

“That’s all,” Marcus assured her.

Sachia exhaled heavily, then nodded. “Fine,” she finally agreed. “I’ll help you.”

Marcus grinned at her, his eyes dancing.

“So what’s your plan?” Sachia asked.

His grin turned sheepish. In truth, he hadn’t thought further than convincing Sachia to help him.

“Figures,” Sachia muttered with a sigh. “Okay, well I cook for Ava most nights, so do you think you could convince your *groosdaadi* to *kumm* around to the house tonight for dinner?”

Marcus nodded slowly.

“Okay, well, you go and pick up what we need from the store and meet me back at my house in an hour,” Sachia said as she turned to leave.

“Wait,” Marcus said. “Ye want me tae go shoppin’?”

“This is your idea,” Sachia called back over her shoulder.

“But where do you live?”

“You’ll figure it out.”

As Marcus watched her walk away, his creased brow smoothed as he broke into a grin. His plan was in motion.

An hour and a half later, Marcus arrived at Sachia’s house. He’d had to ask the store owner, Mr. Blank, for Sachia’s address, which caused more than a few raised eyebrows, turned heads, and wagging tongues. At least he was successful.

“You’re late,” Sachia said as she opened the door.

“Aye, well, ye’re the one who sent me out shoppin’,” Marcus grumbled. “I cannae even take two steps in this town without someone stoppin’ tae ask me somethin’ about Scotland or ma job.”

“People are curious,” Sachia commented with a shrug as she led him into the kitchen.

Marcus followed, carrying two brown grocery bags in his arms. As he stepped into the kitchen, he surrendered one to Sachia, who set it on the counter.

“There’s enough food in here to feed an army,” she quipped as she peered into the bag.

Marcus disregarded her remark as he began to unpack the other bag, laying the ingredients on the table.

“What is all of this?” Sachia asked, frowning as she surveyed the items.

“Ingredients for smash burgers,” Marcus answered. “Obviously.”

“Smash what?” Sachia asked, her brow puckered.

“Dinnae tell me that ye have never eaten a smash burger before,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Have ye been livin’ under a rock?”

Sachia folded her arms as she glared at him. “Do you want my help or not?” she asked.

Marcus sighed. “Aye,” he said. “I just don’t ken what’s so wrong with smash burgers for dinner...”

“It’s *Englischer* food,” Sachia said candidly.

Marcus clicked his tongue. “And what’s so wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Sachia said, shrugging. “But we’re making meatloaf.”

“Meatloaf” Marcus repeated, wrinkling his nose.

“Be careful,” Sachia warned. “If the wind changes, your face will stay like that.”

“Ha ha,” Marcus rejoined dryly. “But seriously, meatloaf?”

“It’s a classic *Amisch* dish,” Sachia retorted. “Why don’t you try it first before you cast judgment.”

“Fine,” Marcus said, tipping his head. “Whatever.”

Sachia turned and walked over to the cupboard under the sink and removed a large skillet, which she placed on the stove before walking back over to the counter and picking up the minced meat.

“Can I ask ye somethin’?” asked Marcus.

Sachia nodded as she turned to him.

“Why do people keep callin’ me an *Englischer*? They all ken that I’m from Scotland.”

“*Ya*, everyone knows that you are from Scotland,” she acceded. “The word *Englischer* refers to anyone who is not *Amisch*.”

“But ma mother was Amish,” he countered. “So disnae that make me part Amish, then?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” she explained patiently. “Being *Amisch* is not something one simply inherits from one’s parents. It’s a way of life that one *chooses*. Everyone in our *gmay*—our community—has the option to leave. We are all free to do so, which is why we have *Rumspringa*. It’s a chance to experience life outside our *gmay* and decide if we want to live in this world or the outside world—your world.”

Why anyone would choose a powerless, Wi-Fi-less existence was still a mystery to Marcus although he appreciated that they had the freedom to choose.

“Did ye ever go on *Rumspringa*?” Marcus asked, the foreign word sounding strange as it rolled off his tongue.

“*Nee*,” Sachia said, shaking her head. “But my *bruder* did before...”

Sachia’s voice trailed off as she dropped her blue eyes. Marcus knew that look—he knew what it felt like to be an

orphan, and for the first time since he'd met Sachia, they finally discovered something they had in common—although he was certain that it was not the type of commonality either of them would have willingly chosen.

“I’m sorry,” Marcus said gently. “Zechariah told me about yer family.”

“*Danki*,” Sachia said, her eyes mirroring the pain she still felt at talking about her family.

Silence lingered for a few moments.

“Well, we’d better get started on supper,” Sachia said.

“What can I do tae help?” Marcus asked, looking around.

“You can chop the onions,” Sachia answered as she reached for the bag of onions.

“Seriously?” Marcus asked somewhat reluctantly.

Sachia shrugged. “You wanted to help,” she reminded him.

As she reached for the onions to hand to Marcus, he reached for them, too, and his fingers brushed against the back of Sachia’s hand.

“Sorry,” he said as he pulled his hand back as though he’d touched a red-hot oven plate.

Sachia averted her gaze and said nothing as she handed him the onions and a sharp knife.

Marcus removed an onion from the bag, situated it on the chopping board, and cut into the crunchy bulb; immediately, his eyes started to tear up. By the time he’d finished chopping the second onion, tears were streaming down his face. When he glanced over at Sachia, the corners of her mouth were turned up in amusement.

“Ye’re enjoyin’ this,” Marcus accused amiably.

“Maybe I am,” Sachia admitted, smiling.

Marcus picked up the diced onions in two hands and carried them over to her.

“*Danki*,” Sachia said as she held up the bowl into which she meant him to drop them.

Marcus sniffled and blinked rapidly as he wiped his eyes with the back of his sleeve. He was close enough to Sachia that he could feel the warmth of her body.

“Are you all right?” Sachia asked, looking up at him.

“Aye,” Marcus said, taking a step back from her. “I’m fine.”

There was a slight crease of concern in Sachia’s expression, but she made no further comment as she started to stir the meatloaf mixture with a wooden spoon.

“Well, I’d better get home and have a wee word with Zechariah,” Marcus said, clearing his throat. “That’s if ye can manage on yer own from here.”

“I am sure I manage,” Sachia said wryly.

“Aye, well, I’ll see you soon.”



Marcus stepped in through the back door and found his grandfather seated at the kitchen table with a half-empty mug of milky tea. He was staring into the distance, his expression pensive.

“Hi,” said Marcus as he closed the door behind him. “Everythin’ all righ’?”

“Sorry,” Zechariah said, pivoting in his chair and pulling his gaze back to the present. “I was a million miles away. Where have you been?”

“Went for a walk,” Marcus replied—he had walked, so it was the truth.

Marcus, having come in, leaned against the wooden china hutch.” Do we have any plans for dinner?” he asked.

“Not really. Although I can whip up some beans on toast.”

“Aye, as temptin’ as that sounds, I have a better idea,” Marcus countered. “I had a wee encounter with Sachia Bachman on ma walk, and she invited us over tae her house for supper.”

Zechariah’s gray brows shot up so fast they almost bordered his hairline.

“Och, it’s no’ like that,” Marcus said. “She was just bein’ friendly, ye ken.”

Zechariah nodded slowly. “She’s a lovely *maedel*.”

“We should go in about half an hour,” Marcus said, choosing to disregard Zechariah’s comment.

Marcus left the kitchen and went into his bedroom; he picked up the book lying face down on the bed and settled into the window seat. But when he realized he’d read the same sentence four times, he gave up; he couldn’t focus. He set the book down again, walked over to the wicker dressing table, and glanced at his reflection in the mirror. He ran a hand through his thick cinnamon-hued hair, pushing it back from his forehead as he leaned forward on the top of the dressing table, scrutinizing his face to identify any likeness to his mother in his features.

Marcus turned away from the mirror, and as he did, writing on the inside of the door caught his eye. He stepped over and crouched down to examine the writing. His mother had recorded her height every year until she was eighteen; as he ran his fingers down the door over the figures, a lump formed in Marcus’s throat. When he first came to Whispering Pines, Marcus hadn’t known what to expect, but being in that house, his mother’s childhood home, made him feel closer to her somehow, as if echoes of her presence still lingered.

“I’d forgotten that was there,” Zechariah said, smiling sentimentally from the hallway.

Marcus flinched, not having sensed his grandfather’s presence.

“Sorry,” Zachariah apologized. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Aye, it’s all righ’,” Marcus said, rising to his feet.

Neither of them spoke for a moment, and as Marcus glanced at the writing again, he thought, *I wonder if ma mother would have recorded ma growth, too, if she’d been around longer.*

“We should be on our way,” Zechariah said, clearing his throat.

“Aye,” Marcus agreed.

The two men set off together and a short while later arrived at Sachia’s house. As they climbed the two porch steps, Zechariah suddenly stopped, and Marcus followed his line of sight, spotting Ava seated in the sitting room by the fire.

“Ava’s here?” Zechariah asked rhetorically, turning to look at Marcus.

“Looks tae be,” Marcus stated the obvious, shrugging.

Zechariah hesitated. “I don’t think this is such a *gut* idea,” he said. “She wouldn’t want me here.”

Marcus frowned. “Fifty years have passed. Dinnae ye think it’s time for ye both tae bury the hatchet?”

Zechariah exhaled shakily. “All right,” he agreed with a semi-decisive nod.

Marcus smiled at him encouragingly as he closed the distance to the front door and rapped on the wood. Out of the corner of his eyes, Marcus noted his grandfather shifting on his heels; it was clear he was nervous.

I’m sure it’ll all be fine once they’ve broken the ice. After all, what is the worst that could happen?

Chapter Seven

Sachia reached for the doorknob, her stomach squirming in discomfort.

I sincerely hope I don't live to regret my decision to help Marcus.

Part of her still wavered on whether she was doing the right thing, but she knew that if there was a second chance at happiness for Ava, she had to try.

“*Willkumm*,” Sachia said, smiling nervously as she opened the door. “Please *kumm* in.”

She stepped aside to let Marcus and Zechariah inside. They both removed their thick woolen coats and hung them on the wooden rack behind the front door.

“Supper is almost ready,” Sachia said. “Why don't you both *kumm* and warm yourselves by the fire in the sitting room.”

“*Danki*, Sachia,” Zechariah said with a tentative smile although she could sense from the stiffness of his shoulders that he was as nervous as she was.

As Sachia led them to the sitting room, Ava looked up from her crossword puzzle.

“Who was at the door...”

Her voice trailed off as Zechariah stepped into the modest room, and Ava's blue eyes widened.

“I hope you don't mind. I invited some guests to join us for supper,” Sachia said brightly, injecting cheer in her tone to keep it light.

Ava wordlessly stared at Zechariah.

“It's *gut* to see you again, Ava,” Zechariah said, his voice tremulous.

“Why don't you take a seat?” Sachia suggested. “I'm just going to check on the supper.”

“I’ll come and help,” Marcus volunteered.

Sachia left the sitting room and headed down the narrow hallway to the kitchen with Marcus hot on her heels. As she stepped into the warm room, she turned to him.

“This was a bad idea,” she whispered, shaking her head in dismay. “Did you see the look on Ava’s face?”

“It’ll be fine,” Marcus said in a reciprocated whisper. “They just need some time tae talk.”

Sachia frowned with pursed lips, reminding Marcus of a caricature of a Looney Tunes cartoon character.

“Go and see if they are talking to one another,” Sachia instructed. “I’ll check on the meatloaf.”

The words had barely left her mouth when Zechariah appeared in the doorway.

“*Danki* for the invitation, Sachia,” he said. “But I think I should go.”

Marcus looked intently at Sachia, tilting his head in his grandfather’s direction and wordlessly imploring her not to let him leave.

“Don’t go,” Sachia said. “Supper is ready.”

Zechariah shifted on his feet. “I think you will all have a better time without me—”

“Please stay,” Sachia contended kindly.

Zechariah glanced over his shoulder, then sighed. “All right,” he agreed. “I’ll stay.”

Sachia smiled brightly at him. “Why don’t you both take a seat at the table? I’ll go and call Ava.”

Sachia turned and left the kitchen; however, when she stepped into the sitting room, Ava wasn’t there. The rocking chair was empty, and the crossword puzzle lay discarded on the table.

Sachia frowned as she looked around, and she suddenly spotted Ava through the front window, standing on the edge of

the porch.

Sachia opened the front door, stepping out into the chilly night air.

“Ava?” Sachia pressed. “What are you doing out here? It’s freezing.”

Ava stood silent as Sachia walked across the porch to where she was standing.

“Ava?”

“Why did you invite him here?” Ava asked, turning to look at her.

“I’m sorry... I...I just thought it would be a *gut* opportunity for you two to talk—”

“I told you that I didn’t want to bring up the past,” Ava interjected accusingly.

“I know...” Sachia said meekly. “I am sorry, Ava, but won’t you just *kumm* back inside and have some dinner?”

“I’m tired,” Ava said, turning away from her. “I think I’ll just go home.”

Sachia’s heart sank, but she knew the older woman well enough to know that like a stubborn goat when she’d made up her mind about something, there was very little that would change it.

“I’ll walk with you—”

“I can get back on my own,” Ava said tersely. “You have guests.”

“Ava, let me help you,” Sachia insisted. “The road is slippery—”

The older woman waved her hand dismissively in the air as she slowly descended the porch steps, and Sachia watched her go, feeling riddled with guilt.

“She’s gone,” Sachia said as she stepped back into the kitchen.

“Gone?” Marcus parroted, his eyes widening in disbelief. He was standing at the stove wearing oven mitts, the meatloaf dish in his hands.

Sachia nodded as she folded her arms across her chest.

“I’d better be going, too,” Zechariah said. “*Danki* for your hospitality, Sachia.”

Zechariah got up from his seat and turned to Marcus.

“Ye go on ahead,” Marcus said. “I’ll be righ’ behind ye.”

Zechariah nodded as he left the kitchen. Marcus set the steaming meatloaf down on the top of the stove. Sachia waited until she heard the soft click of the latch on the front door before speaking.

“I knew this was a bad idea,” she said, shaking her head. “I never should have listened to you.”

“Then why did ye?” Marcus asked, a frown playing on his features.

“I don’t know,” Sachia admitted. “But you didn’t see the look on Ava’s face...”

Marcus doffed the oven mitts and walked across to her. “Aye, things didnae go as planned, but we’ll give it another shot—”

“*Nee*,” Sachia said firmly, shaking her head emphatically. “Ava doesn’t want to talk to Zechariah, and I should have respected that.”

The muscles in Marcus’s jaw tensed visibly. “Ye cannae just give up,” he countered.

Sachia looked up into his amber eyes, which were fierce with determination.

“I’m sorry, Marcus. But Ava is the only family I have left.”

“Sachia—”

“I have to go and make sure Ava got home all right,” Sachia interrupted, effectively ending the debate. “And you

should find your *groosdaadi*.”

Without another word, Sachia turned and left the kitchen. She grabbed her coat from behind the door and made her way down the street to Ava’s house. As she followed Ava’s footstep trail in the snow, she heard coughing and found the older woman leaning on a mailbox, out of breath.

“Ava!” Sachia said as she hurried over to her. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she spluttered.

“I’m helping you home,” Sachia said assertively.

She slid her arm through Ava’s and supported her all the way back home. “Why don’t you lie down? I’ll make some tea?”

Sachia led Ava to her bedroom, then disappeared to the kitchen and returned shortly with two cups of tea. Ava was seated on the edge of her bed, an old shoe box in her lap. As Sachia stepped into the room, Ava looked up at her with a sad smile tugging at her lips.

“Come and sit,” Ava said quietly, patting the space on the bed beside her.

Sachia walked across the room, set the cups down on the bedside table, and sat down on the bed beside Ava. Ava wordlessly handed her the shoebox. Sachia accepted it, holding it and eyeing it curiously.

“Open it,” Ava eventually instructed.

Sachia complied and stared at the contents inside—an assortment including hand-drawn Christmas cards, a sprig of pressed larkspur, a piece of lace, yellow with age, and a small pin in the shape of a cross.

“What is all of this?” she asked.

“Memories,” Ava said nostalgically.

Sachia reached into the box and removed one of the cards, which had a rather crudely drawn red cardinal on the front. She opened the card and silently read the words.

“This is from Zechariah,” Sachia said, turning to look at Ava. “Are all these things from him?”

Ava nodded.

Sachia glanced down into the box again, a small crease forming on her smooth brow. “And you kept all of it? For all this time?”

Ava smiled softly. “I told you what happened between me and Zechariah,” she said. “But I didn’t tell you that after Zechariah returned to Whispering Pines and learned of my engagement, he wouldn’t even look at me. I visited his house every day for two months, but he refused to see me. When that didn’t work, I wrote him letters pleading for our friendship, but he never wrote back. Then one day, I literally bumped into him in the street in town, and he did not even meet my gaze. It was as if I no longer existed.”

Ava exhaled shakily as she fiddled her fingers in her lap.

“I had no idea that when I agreed to marry Asher, I would lose Zechariah as a friend,” Ava said thickly, her voice raw with emotion. “That he would completely cut me out of his life as if all those years, all those memories, meant nothing to him.”

“He was in love with you,” Sachia said gently. “Maybe it was just too painful—”

“Then why didn’t he fight for me?” Ava challenged, desperation tinging her voice. “If he loved me so much, why did he choose silence? How could he just cut me out of his life if he loved me?”

“I don’t know,” Sachia confessed.

“Eventually, Asher put his foot down,” Ava said. “He could see how much pain I was in, the anguish I carried with me, and in the end, I had to let Zechariah go. It was the only way I could move on and make my new marriage work, so I did it; I let him go.”

Ava breathed a ragged sigh.

“Do you understand now why I can’t open the door to him again? Even after all this time, I know that I should have forgiven him, that *Gott* would want me to forgive him, but whenever I am near him, all I can think is that he had had fifty years to make things right, to fight for our friendship, but he chose every day not to, to just throw it aside like discarded junk.”

“Maybe he wants to fight now,” Sachia challenged with love lacing her tone.

“Maybe it’s too late,” Ava returned as she reached for the shoebox and replaced the lid.

She rose from the bed and carried the box over to the tall wooden dresser, where she reached up and placed the box on the top shelf before closing the door.

“I’m sorry for getting upset with you earlier,” Ava said, turning to Sachia. “I know you meant well, but the past needs to remain where it is; I am too old and tired to fight anymore.”

Sachia watched Ava walk over to the window and draw the curtains, not answering. Zechariah had hurt Ava, and even after all this time, the pain of his actions still cut deep. Sachia couldn’t imagine how hard it must have been for Ava to let Zechariah go, but she understood better now why Ava was so against letting him in again.



Sachia spent the night at Ava’s but left early the next morning to open the charity shop. The school’s Christmas festival was scheduled for that afternoon, so Sachia would be closing the shop early, and there was a lot of work to be done before then.

Large gray clouds gathered in the sky above, and a chilly breeze blew from the east as she walked towards Main Street. Sachia tucked her hands into her coat pockets as she picked up her pace, eager to get inside and sheltered from the cold.

Main Street, when Sachia turned onto it, was surprisingly quiet. As she approached the shop, she spotted Marcus. He was dressed in running pants and a gray sweatshirt.

“What are you doing here?” Sachia asked as she drew near.

“I went tae yer house,” Marcus said. “But ye werenae there.”

“I stayed over with Ava,” she explained as she slid the key into the lock and pushed the door open.

“Aye, well, I need tae talk tae ye,” Marcus said, coming in behind her and pulling the door shut.

“I haven’t changed my mind,” Sachia reiterated as she walked over to the desk and put her bag down. “And neither has Ava; your *groosdaadi* really hurt her.”

“I’m truly sorry for that,” Marcus answered. “But it’s all the more reason tae try and help them put things righ’.”

“I told you last night, Marcus. I’m out.”

“So that’s it? Marcus cajoled. “Ye’re finished, then?”

Sachia faced him and sighed. “You’re really not going to give up, are you?” she said.

“I dinnae plan on it,” Marcus said earnestly.

Sachia shook her head. “Well, you’re on your own.”

Marcus opened his mouth to argue, but the little bell above the door tinkled and announced Daniel Kuhns. At the sight of Sachia with Marcus, Daniel’s merry countenance morphed into a frown.

“Daniel,” Sachia said, “This isn’t a *gut* time—”

“Aye, Marcus said coldly. “We were in the middle of a conversation.”

“What is *he* doing here?” Daniel directed to Sachia, ignoring Marcus.

“Nothing,” Sachia said, not wanting to try and explain.

“Well, that’s no’ very friendly,” Marcus said sardonically.

Sachia threw him a hard glance before she turned to Daniel. “Was there something you wanted?”

“I came to see if you were going to the *Grischtdaag* festival at the school,” said Daniel, his body angled away from Marcus in a non-verbal expression of his estimation of the foreigner.

Marcus was smirking, but Sachia ignored him.

“I am,” Sachia confirmed.

“Can I walk with you?” Daniel asked.

“I actually promised Ava I would go by the house and fetch her. Can we just meet you there?”

“Sure,” Daniel agreed, the hope in his gaze fading but not completely diminishing.

Sachia smiled politely as his gaze scanned around the shop. “Was there something else?” she asked.

“*Nee*,” Daniel said, his gaze flicking briefly to Marcus. “I’ll see you this afternoon.”

Sachia nodded as Daniel turned and left, leaving her and Marcus alone again.

“I’d better go, too,” Marcus declared.

Before Sachia had time to respond, Marcus slipped out and was gone. She shook her head and sighed. There was no doubt that Marcus had zero intention of giving up on his plan to get Zechariah and Ava together.

Chapter Eight

Marcus made his way back to his grandfather's house, his mind racing.

Sachia may no' be willin' tae help me anymore, but I dinnae intend tae give up.

"Zechariah?" Marcus called as he stepped into the kitchen.

"I'm in the sitting room," Zechariah called back.

Marcus headed down the hallway and found his grandfather seated in the rocking chair, staring into the fire. They hadn't talked much since the night before when Ava skipped out on dinner; his grandfather had been quiet and pensive ever since.

"Everything all right?" Zechariah asked.

"Aye," Marcus replied. "I thought that I'd like tae go tae the school's Christmas festival."

Zechariah frowned. "Really?"

"Aye," Marcus confirmed.

He could understand his grandfather's reaction. Since arriving in Whispering Pines, he had not exactly what one would describe as 'adapted well' to the Amish life, but Ava was going to be at the school that afternoon.

"All right," Zechariah agreed.

Marcus gave a satisfied nod.

"Let's have some lunch first, then go," Zechariah said.

Marcus and his grandfather left for the school right after a light lunch. Large gray nimbostratus clouds peeked over the horizon, and the wind was picking up by the time they arrived at the little school.

"Looks like a storm's on the way," Zechariah projected.

A crowd of people bustled around the schoolyard, and Marcus craned his neck, looking out for Ava, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“Let’s go inside,” Marcus suggested.

Zechariah nodded, and as they stepped inside, Marcus received curious stares, but he ignored them. He scanned the small room but saw no sign of Ava or Sachia.

“Marcus?”—Marcus turned to see his grandfather sitting down, an empty chair beside him—“It’s about to start.”

Marcus took a seat, but his eyes remained glued to the door. After a few minutes, though, when everyone was seated, a man in the back got up and closed the door. Marcus scanned the heads in the room again and his gaze stopped on Daniel Kuhns, but he was not with Sachia or Ava. Marcus’s stomach sank.

They’re no’ comin’.

He momentarily toyed with getting up and leaving, but just as the thought crossed his mind, movement from the front of the room caught his attention.

“*Gude naamidaag*, everyone.”

Marcus turned to see a tall man with dark hair and a graying beard and dressed in a dark plain suit addressing the room.

“*Gude naamidaag*, Bishop Burkholder,” the audience chorused.

“*Danki* all for coming to this year’s *Grischtdaag* festival. I’m sure you are as excited as I am to see what our *kinner* have prepared for us today.”

General nods and murmurs of approval skittered around the room as the bishop smiled.

“First up, we have the youngest *kinner*, who have prepared a special rendition of ‘*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*.’”

The audience applauded as the bishop took his seat and a group of six-year-olds filed onto the stage and took their

places. The room grew quiet as they started to sing, and Marcus slid down in his chair and sighed.

There's no way I can leave now.

After the singing came more singing and then a Biblical retelling of Jesus' birth. Outside, with the weather turning, and the wind whistled through the cracks around the windowpanes and under the door, but it was drowned out by an enthusiastic group of twelve-year-olds singing "Hark the Herald Angel Sing."

Finally, after what felt like hours to Marcus, the bishop took the stage once more.

"Wasn't that simply *wunderbaar!*" he gushed, grinning. "Let's give our *kinner* a round of applause."

The audience clapped loudly as the children all filed on stage again, beaming at the accolade.

Marcus clapped half-heartedly.

"Now, usually we would have refreshments—"

Marcus groaned quietly.

"But by the looks of the weather outside, it might be best that everyone gets home before the storm hits. *Danki*, all for coming, and *Frehlicher Grischtstag*."

Everyone started getting up from their seats and exiting the schoolroom. Marcus helped his grandfather out of his seat, and they went out into the schoolyard together.

"Let's get ye home," Marcus said, eyeing the ominous sky.

They walked back to the house, but as Zechariah opened the back door, Marcus held back.

"There was something I needed to do in town," Marcus said. "I need tae go back."

Zechariah frowned.

"I'll be back before the storm hits," he assured.

Without giving his grandfather a chance to argue, Marcus hurried off into town and made a beeline for the charity shop. As he walked down Main Street, fresh snow started to fall, swirling as the wind howled down the narrow street. He spotted Sachia through the store window. She had a clipboard in her hands, her bottom lip between her teeth in concentration.

“Was that meant tae be funny?” Marcus asked as he walked in through the doors.

Sachia looked across at him, confusion curving her brow. “What are you talking about?”

“I went tae the festival,” Marcus said agitatedly. “I had tae sit through two hours o’ tone-deaf bairns singin’ Christmas carols—”

Sachia pursed her lips, unsuccessful in hiding her smile.

“It’s no’ funny,” Marcus declared. “Why didnae ye bring Ava?”

“She wasn’t feeling up to it,” Sachia replied simply.

“I thought ye people did everything together,” Marcus grumbled.

“Ava has had a weak chest since the pandemic,” Sachia explained. “I was worried about the storm.”

“Well, I’ve just wasted two hours o’ ma life that I’ll never see again,” Marcus tossed out in annoyance.

“Don’t be such a Grinch,” Sachia chided. “And it’s your own fault; no one invited you.”

Marcus gritted his teeth. “Yer boyfriend was there,” he said dryly.

“Daniel is not my boyfriend.”

“Does he ken that?” Marcus asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sachia met his gaze, her forehead wrinkling. “What does it even matter to you?”

“It doesnae,” Marcus said matter-of-factly, shrugging.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you are really annoying?”

Marcus put his hand over his heart dramatically, and Sachia rolled her eyes.

“If you said all that you came to say, then I need to get back to work,” she said.

The view of the world outside through the windows revealed a flurry of white, and the icy wind rattled the glass in its panes. Marcus turned and reached for the door handle.

“What are you doing?” Sachia stated more than asked. “You can’t go out in that.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll freeze to death before you make it back to your *groosdaadi’s*,” Sachia insisted.

Ignoring her, Marcus pushed the door open.

A gust of wind and snow put a foot in the door, and he quickly pushed it back and slammed it again, turning to Sachia, whose eyebrows were raised as if to say, “I told you so.”

Marcus sighed as he slid his hands into his pockets, and his shoulders slumped as he looked around the shop with disinterest.

“You can help me with the inventory,” Sachia suggested. “Seeing as we are stuck here.”

“Pass,” said Marcus brusquely.

He could feel Sachia’s disapproving gaze on him as he browsed around the small shop. Near the window, where there was a table of trinkets, Marcus picked up a small porcelain figurine and examined it. The figurine was of a man clad in a thick brown fur coat with a disheveled beard and hunched shoulders. He was carrying a switch in his left hand and had a threadbare rucksack on his back. He wore a mischievous look on his painted face.

“What is this supposed to be?” Marcus asked, turning to Sachia.

Sachia looked up from her clipboard at the figurine in Marcus's hand.

"It's a Belsnickle," she said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"A what?" Marcus asked, his brow furrowing.

"A Belsnickle," Sachia repeated. "Legend goes that he visits people's homes during the *Grischtdaag* season wearing a beard to disguise his identity."

"Isn't that kind o' creepy?" Marcus asked, scrutinizing the little figurine who was grinning mischievously.

Sachia sighed, barely masking her impatience. "He's not creepy. He visits homes and asks children questions about their behavior throughout the year. If they've been *gut*, then the Belsnickel will give them small gifts or treats."

"And if they havenae been good?" Marcus asked.

"Misbehaving children get a playful swat with his switch."

Marcus raised his eyebrows.

"It's not much different from getting coal in your stocking," Sachia reasoned.

He put the small figurine back on the table and looked out the window. The world was still white. As he turned away from the window, his stomach grumbled in protestation of hunger.

"Have ye got anything tae eat?" he asked.

Sachia gave an almost imperceptible sigh as she turned and walked over to the small desk, where she opened the drawer and extracted a silver tin. She removed the lid and set it down on the desk before walking over to Marcus.

"Here."

"What are they?" he asked suspiciously.

"Sand tarts," she replied.

Marcus peered inside the tin.

“If you don’t want them—”

“No, I’ll try one,” Marcus said, reaching into the tin and taking out a thin cookie covered in cinnamon sugar.

He took a bite and nodded. “This is good,” he affirmed, taking another bite.

“Finally, we found something *Amisch* that you like,” Sachia quipped dryly.

“It hasnae been that easy for me, either,” Marcus defended, helping himself to another sand tart. “Comin’ here has been like travelin’ a hundred years back in time.”

“But surely you did some research before coming?”

“Aye,” Marcus agreed. “But the reality o’ it is quite different from expectations.”

“I don’t have anything to compare it to,” Sachia said honestly. “I’ve never left Whispering Pines.”

“Dinnae ye ever wonder what the world outside this place is like?” Marcus asked in disbelief. “Dinnae ye want tae get on an airplane and see the world?”

“It must be hard for you to understand,” Sachia said. “But our way of life means living simply and humbly, never wanting for more than what we have.”

“Ma mother wanted more,” Marcus reasoned.

“What was she like?” Sachia asked.

“I dinnae ken much,” Marcus said, shrugging. “I was a wee lad, only five when she died.”

Sachia frowned. “I didn’t realize that you were so young.”

“Aye,” Marcus replied. “I do ken that it was ma mother who made me want tae be a horticulturist. Ma father never liked talkin’ about her, but he told me once that she was only ever truly at peace when she was outside with her hands in the soil.”

Sachia smiled. “It must run in the family, then. Zechariah has one of the finest gardens in all of Whispering Pines. It’s a pity you won’t be able to see it in the spring. It’s quite the sight.”

Marcus nodded, and for a while, they fell silent. “I still cannae believe that ma mother lived in this town for most of her life,” he said.

“Your father never told you she was *Amisch*?” Sachia asked, the surprise evident in her voice.

Marcus shook his head. “No. I only found out after ma father passed when I came across letters that ma gran had written tae ma mother.”

“That must have been quite a shock,” Sachia said with compassion.

“Aye,” Marcus agreed. “Although it shouldnae have been. Ma father was a man o’ few words, a true Scot who didnae like tae talk about how he felt. But I believe he kept ma gran’s letters for a reason, that he wanted me tae ken the truth about ma mother’s kin.”

“Did your *daed* pass from the pandemic?” Sachia asked with kind concern.

“No. He had a heart attack last month.”

“I’m so sorry, Marcus.”

“Aye,” he said, nodding contemplatively.

“I’m sure he was proud of you, though,” Sachia said. “With your job at the Botanic Garden and everything?”

“I dinnae ken if he was,” Marcus admitted. “Ma father wasn’t much o’ a talker, and I reminded him too much o’ ma mother; after she died, he couldnae stand tae look at me, so he shipped me off tae boarding school as soon as he could.”

“That must have been hard,” Sachia sympathized.

Marcus sighed as he turned back to the window. He didn’t like talking about the past.

“Are ye still needin’ help finishin’ that inventory?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Sure,” Sachia agreed, handing him the clipboard.

For the next while, he and Sachia worked on the inventory. She counted and called, and Marcus recorded. The storm continued to rant and rave in a tantrum outside with no imminent signs of letting.

“I should put some more coal on the stove fire,” Sachia said when they took a break.

“I’ll do it,” Marcus offered.

He walked over to the small stove in the corner of the room and scooped a heap of coal from the bucket. But as he pulled the stove door open, a cloud of soot erupted and left Marcus coughing and spluttering.

“Are you all right?” Sachia asked.

“Aye,” Marcus said, coughing into his elbow. “I think so.”

He turned to Sachia, and she giggled.

“What?” he said, frowning.

“Nothing,” she said, giggling again.

Marcus caught sight of his reflection in the window: his whole face was black with soot, resembling some kind of mine worker after a hard day’s work.

“Here,” Sachia said, biting back her giggles. “Let me help.”

She walked over, raised her apron, and started to wipe his face gently. Their eyes locked, and Marcus’s heart skipped a beat.

“All done,” Sachia said, taking a step back.

“Thanks,” Marcus said, clearing his throat.

Sachia turned and made her way back to the desk while Marcus took a seat beside the coal stove. Neither spoke for a while.

“Did Ava ever mention anythin’ about a letter that ma granda’ wrote her?” Marcus asked, looking across at Sachia.

Sachia looked up and shook her head. “*Nee*. She never mentioned a letter.”

“He said that he wrote it before he left for his aunt’s house,” Marcus explained.

“Ava never said anything about it. Do you know what it said?”

Marcus shook his head, and Sachia frowned. “How strange,” she said.

Marcus nodded thoughtfully, and they fell silent again, the wind buffeting and howling outside.

“Can I ask you something?” Sachia probed gently.

Marcus turned to look at her. “Aye.”

She rose from her seat at the desk, walked over to where he was sitting, and sat down in the chair opposite him.

“Do you believe that you will see your *familye* again one day?” she asked.

Marcus hesitated for a moment before he nodded. “Aye,” he answered.

“Do you ever think about what you would say to your *eldre* when you see them again?”

“Sometimes,” Marcus said after a few seconds’ contemplation. “Do you?”

Sachia smiled sadly as she nodded. “Sometimes, I forget they’re gone. I find myself talking aloud in my house, but there’s no one there.”

“I hadnae seen ma father for near six months when he passed away,” Marcus shared. “And the last time we spoke, we had an argument. Ye see, I’d invited him tae come tae Edinburgh for Christmas, but he refused tae leave the dug.”

Marcus paused, thinking back to that phone conversation, the last time he’d heard his father’s voice. All those last words,

spoken in anger.

“I always thought there would be more time,” he continued regretfully. “That one day, ma father and I would be able tae sit down and talk about all the things that had been left unsaid for years.”

He looked over at Sachia; her brown eyes were brimming with empathy.

“But it wasn’t your fault,” she said. “What happened with your *daed*—”

“Aye,” Marcus said. “Maybe it wasnae all ma doin’. But I could have tried harder; I could have picked up the phone and called him.”

“One day, you’ll get the chance to make things right,” she encouraged.

“Aye,” said Marcus softly.

They fell silent for a while.

“D’ye no’ think things can be fixed?” he asked. “Between ma granda’ and Ava?”

Sachia sighed. “I don’t know,” she said.

Marcus nodded.

“I know you want to help, Marcus. But it’ll never work if Ava and Zechariah refuse to talk to one another about the elephant in the room.”

Marcus knew that she was right. As much as he wanted to help his grandfather right the wrongs of the past, he couldn’t, not unless they wanted to fix it as much as he did.

“Aye,” he agreed. “I reckon ye’re righ’.”

Marcus turned back to the coal stove, disappointment weighing on him. He’d been so determined to fix things for his grandfather so that he could return to Scotland knowing he was not leaving him all on his own.

“I’ll keep an eye on him for you,” Sachia said, reading his mind.

“Thanks,” Marcus said, smiling softly.

Sachia smiled back at him, and for a moment, their gaze locked again.

“The storm’s stopped,” Sachia said suddenly.

Marcus turned to see that she was right. The world outside was quiet; the wind had stopped howling, and the white wall of snowfall was dissipating.

“I should probably get back,” Marcus said. “Zechariah will be worried.”

Sachia nodded.

“Can I walk ye home?” Marcus offered.

“Sure,” she agreed.

Marcus helped her lock up the small charity shop, and together they trudged through the snow down Main Street. When they reached Sachia’s house, she turned to face him.

“*Danki* for your help this afternoon.”

Marcus nodded.

“Perhaps your *gut* deeds have earned you some credit with the Belsnickle,” she teased.

Despite himself, Marcus smiled. “Have a good night,” he said.

“*Bis widder*,” Sachia replied.

Marcus froze. “My mother used tae say that,” he said, his eyes widening. “When she tucked me in at night. I didnae remember until now.”

Sachia smiled softly at him.

“What does it mean?” he asked.

“It’s something we say when we part,” Sachia explained. “It means, ‘until we meet again.’”

Marcus had not heard the words in nearly twenty years, yet they struck a chord with him, especially since he’d long believed he would never again hear them. Sachia turned and

walked up the path towards the house. He waited until she was inside before he turned and made his way back to his grandfather's house. As he walked, he thought about that afternoon, about Sachia. He'd never spoken much to anyone about his relationship with his father, yet he felt comfortable talking to Sachia about it. Perhaps it was because she was a stranger to him that in a few days, he'd be leaving and not likely see again. Or perhaps it was something different that he couldn't quite name or describe.

Chapter Nine

As Sachia readied for bed that night, she contemplated that afternoon's events, how unexpected it had been to be trapped in the small charity shop with none other than Marcus Duncan.

The more I think about it, the more I believe Gott has His fingerprints all over it. He used us being forced together to show me another side of Marcus. Before this afternoon, I didn't particularly like him at all, but now I understand him a bit better; what happened between him and his father left an indelible mark on his heart, a mark still busy healing and, like anyone in pain, Marcus sometimes lashes out at others when hurting. I need to show him grace and help remind him that Gott loves him.

"Gott," Sachia prayed, "Marcus and I are alike in as many ways as we are different; we've both lost our *eldre* and are clinging onto the only person we have left as *familye*. I can understand that Marcus is worried about leaving his *groosdaadi* yet why he feels he can't stay in our world, a world that isn't his. Please help Marcus's heart to heal. Help me to be kind and gracious with him, *Gott*, when he acts out in his pain, still fresh. Show him that You are all about love, forgiveness, restoration, and healing—and that in You, we will always have a *familye* on earth, fellow Believers who become our *brieder* and *schweschdre* and *maems* and *daeds* in the Lord. *Aamen.*"

Sachia woke the next morning to a clear day. The sun was shining brightly, and the scene outside her window resembled that of a serene landscape painting. She sighed contently to herself as she turned away from the window and quickly dressed in the chilly morning air before undoing her long brown plait and securing her hair into a neat bun at the nape of her neck.

When done, Sachia headed downstairs, out the front door, and made her way down the snowy street towards Ava's house.

As she approached, she saw the older woman peering through her front room window, and as Sachia stepped onto Ava's porch, Ava opened the front door.

"*Gude mariye*," Sachia sing-songed brightly.

"*Ach du lieva*, Sachia," Ava replied. "Do you know I slept right through the storm? I only woke up half an hour ago, and when I looked out the window, the whole world had turned white."

Sachia smiled as she leaned forward and kissed Ava affectionately on the cheek.

"You're in a *gut* mood this morning," Ava noted.

Sachia shrugged. "Why not? The world is a winter wonderland, and *Grischtdaag* is around the corner."

Ava smiled. "Come inside. I've just made a fresh pot of *kaffi*."

As they sat down for their morning coffee, Sachia animatedly rehashed her afternoon in the charity shop with Marcus to Ava.

"So he's not as awful as you thought?" Ava summarized.

"*Nee*, he's not," Sachia agreed. "He can still be rather annoying, but now I understand why, and we have more in common than I thought."

Ava quirked an eyebrow as she drained her cup.

"What?" Sachia asked.

"Nothing," Ava said in a feigned glib tone. "Just remember that he's leaving in a few days."

"*Ach*, it's not like that," Sachia insisted.

"Okay," Ava accepted, nodding.

They fell silent for a few moments.

Ava is wrong. I don't feel that way about Marcus. And anyway, I could never feel anything romantic for someone who didn't share my views or way of life. A love like that would never work.

“Speaking of *buwe*, how’s Daniel?” Ava asked, changing tacks.

“Fine,” Sachia replied casually with a nonchalant shrug.

“He’s a nice young *mann*,” Ava opined. “From a *gut familye*.”

Sachia said nothing. This was not the first time that she’d heard someone try and put forward Daniel like this to her; her mother had reiterated the same thing countless times before she passed. Sachia knew Daniel was a good man, but no matter how much she wished she had stronger feelings for him, she just didn’t.

After a few seconds of contemplation, Sachia slowly said, “I am just not sure if Daniel is the right person for me.”

“Love can grow,” Ava reminded her. “I know that better than anyone. If you choose a *gut* and godly *mann* for his character and integrity, you will grow to love him over time.”

Sachia nodded mutely. She was sure she’d grow to love Daniel if she gave him a chance, but she wanted something more, a love that felt bigger than the whole sky, one that was present before getting married and could just grow deeper, longer, wider, stronger.

Ava leaned across the table and touched Sachia’s hand. “Don’t write him off just yet, okay? He might surprise you.”

“Okay,” Sachia agreed.

Ava smiled as she leaned back in her chair.

“So, shall we get started on sorting Asher’s things?” Sachia prompted. “I need to be at the charity shop in an hour.”

“Right,” Ava said, pushing herself up. “Let’s get to work.”

Sachia followed Ava into Asher’s study. It was a small room with a large bookshelf against the eastern wall and a pine desk in the center. Sachia had only been in the study a handful of times before. She moseyed over to the bookshelf and folded her hands behind her back as she scanned the titles. There

were so many books covering so many subjects: religion, food, farming, history, and even fiction.

“It seems that Asher really loved to read,” Sachia commented over her shoulder.

Ava nodded where she sat at his desk, going through the drawers. “He did,” she answered fondly. “I used to tease that he spent more time in this study reading than he spent with me.”

Sachia smiled. “Are you sure you want to give all of these away?”

“There’s no point in leaving them there to gather dust,” Ava said. “I’d rather let someone else enjoy them. It’s what Asher would want.”

Sachia nodded as she reached for a book titled “*Bonnet Strings: An Amish Woman’s Ties to Two Worlds*.” As she removed it from the shelf, an envelope slipped from between the pages and landed on the floor at Sachia’s feet. She frowned as she leaned down to pick it up. The seal had not been broken, and as she turned the envelope over in her hands, she noticed that the paper was yellow with age.

“What’s that?” Ava asked from across the room.

“I don’t know,” Sachia answered. “It fell out of this book.”

Ava frowned as Sachia walked over to her. “It has your name written on the front,” Sachia said as she handed the envelope to Ava.

The older woman took it from her, her wrinkled brow creased as her lips silently traced the letters.

“It’s from Zechariah,” Ava said in puzzlement, looking up from the envelope.

Sachia’s eyes suddenly widened, and her lips formed an ‘o’ as she remembered the letter that Marcus had mentioned the previous afternoon.

“What is it?” Ava asked, studying Sachia’s expression.

“Zechariah told Marcus that he wrote you a letter before he left for his *aenti*’s house,” Sachia explained.

Ava shook her head, her lips quivering. “*Nee*,” she said with a single shake of her head. “I never got a letter.”

Sachia’s mind raced as she put all the pieces together.

This must be the letter that Zechariah wrote to Ava before he left Whispering Pines all those years ago. But if this is the letter, it means that Asher found it first, intercepted it, and hid it from Ava. For over fifty years, he kept the letter a secret from her, yet he never opened it.

“Ava?” Sachia spoke, concerned. “Are you okay?”

The envelope shook in Ava’s trembling hands as she stared at it.

“Are you going to open it?” Sachia asked.

Ava nodded as she exhaled shakily. She reached for a silver letter opener on the desk and slid it under the lip of the envelope. She carefully removed a single sheet of paper and unfolded it. Sachia did not take her eyes off Ava as she read; when Ava was done, she put her hand over her mouth and closed her eyes in apparent anguish.

“Ava?” Sachia pressed as she walked around the desk and put her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Are you all right? What did it say?”

Ava shook her head at a loss for words as she handed Sachia the piece of paper.

Liewi *Ava*,

I am leaving in the morning for my aenti’s house. But I could not go without writing you this letter. I asked you tonight at the Grischtdaag market if you would wait for me to return before you made a decision about Asher. But I didn’t get a chance to tell you why I asked this of you. It is because I am in love with you, Ava. I’ve been in love with you for as long as I can remember, and if you feel the same way about me, then wait for me, and when I return, we can be married.

Zechariah

“*Ach*, Ava,” Sachia said, her heart aching as she lowered the letter.

“How could this be?” Ava whispered, looking up at Sachia again, her blue eyes misty. “How could Asher have kept this from me all this time?”

Sachia’s heart sank as she shook her head. “He wanted you to himself,” she said quietly.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The pooled tears in Ava’s eyes rolled down her face and dripped onto the empty envelope. Sachia stepped forward to put her arms around the older woman’s shoulders and squeezed her tightly.

“I am so sorry,” she said, her heart aching for Ava.

Sachia held Ava as she sobbed quietly, her own throat thick with emotion.

“I need to speak to Zechariah,” Ava said suddenly.

Sachia frowned. “Are you sure? This is all such a shock; maybe we should just take a minute—”

“*Nee*,” Ava said resolutely, shaking her head. “It’s been fifty years; he needs to know that I never got his letter, that Asher kept it from me.”

Ava got up from the chair as fast as her old bones would allow and walked out of the study with Sachia on her heels. She donned her thick gray coat and her scarf, which she wrapped tightly around her neck. By the time she’d put on her shoes, she was breathing heavily.

“Ava,” Sachia coaxed. “Why don’t we have some tea? You shouldn’t be getting yourself worked up like this; it’s not *gut* for you.”

Sachia wasn’t sure if Ava had heard her or not.

“Ava?”

“I have to go and speak with him, Sachia,” Ava declared, her blue eyes fierce with determination. “I have to tell him.”

“All right,” Sachia acquiesced. “Let’s go.”

She slid her arm through Ava’s and helped her out of the house and down the porch steps. She supported Ava’s weight as they trudged through the thick snow together, every now and then casting a sideways glance at Ava, whose face was pale.

Ava was out of breath by the time they arrived at Zechariah’s house. They climbed the two porch steps and walked towards the front door.

“Are you sure about this?” Sachia asked.

Ava nodded firmly, so Sachia reached over and rapped on the door.

Chapter Ten

Marcus and Zechariah's breakfast while seated at the kitchen table was interrupted by a knock at the front door.

"I wonder who that could be so early," Zechariah mused aloud.

"As long as it's no' carolers," Marcus said wryly.

Zechariah chuckled as he struggled to get up from his seat.

"I'll get it," Marcus offered.

Zechariah smiled gratefully as Marcus got up easily from his seat and walked out of the room. He pulled open the front door to find Ava and Sachia on the porch. He could discern by both their facial expressions—and Ava's red eyes and splotchy cheeks—that something was wrong.

"What are ye doin' here?" he asked, not impolitely but rather uncertainly.

"Ava needs to speak with Zechariah," Sachia said, meeting his gaze and giving an unspoken look.

Marcus's dark eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Is he here?" Ava asked, her tone urgent.

"Aye," Marcus said, nodding. "He's in the kitchen."

Without another word, Ava walked past him into the house, and Marcus turned to Sachia.

"What's goin' on?"

"Ava found the letter that Zechariah wrote her," Sachia explained in a lowered voice. "It was hidden in one of Asher's books."

"What?" Marcus said, his eyes bugging and jaw dropping in surprise. "Did ye read it? What did it say?"

"That he was in love with her and that he wanted her to wait for him to return to town so they could get married."

“And Asher kept the letter a secret?” Marcus guessed, utter disbelief dripping from his tone.

“He never opened it,” Sachia answered. “So he never knew what your *groosdaadi* had written.”

“Aye, but he must’ve kent the likes o’ what was in it. Otherwise, he’d never have hidden it,” Marcus reasoned.

Sachia sighed softly, and from the kitchen, they could hear Ava and Zechariah talking.

“Come on,” Marcus said, grasping her hand.

“What are you doing?” Sachia said as loud as she dared as Marcus led her around the side of the house.

Near the back door, Marcus stopped. The kitchen window above the sink was open.

“Marcus—”

Marcus raised a finger to his lips as he tilted his head towards the kitchen.

“We can’t eavesdrop,” Sachia hissed.

“Well, no one is forcin’ ye tae stay,” Marcus retorted in a hushed voice.

Sachia frowned, but she stayed rooted to the spot as Marcus pressed his back against the outside wall of the house, listening in through the open window.

“So you never got the letter?” Zechariah echoed, his voice wavering.

“I never got it,” Ava confirmed, her tone soft. “If I had, I would have waited for you.”

The room fell so silent that one would’ve been able to hear an army of ants marching through.

“All this time, I thought that you didn’t feel the same way,” Zechariah said, his voice breaking. “I thought you’d read the letter and chosen Asher.”

“*Nee*,” Ava said quietly. “I married Asher because I thought you didn’t love me, that if you did, you’d have stayed

and fought for me.”

Marcus and Sachia heard footsteps and the rustling of clothes.

“I am so sorry, Ava,” Zechariah said ruefully. “I shouldn’t have shut you out after I came home. If I hadn’t been so proud, so foolhardy, things might have been different...”

“I’m sorry, too.”

“Come on,” Sachia whispered as she tugged at Marcus’s jersey sleeve. “Let’s give them some privacy.”

Marcus sighed but allowed her to lead him away from the window.

“Yer such a killjoy,” he complained.

“Obviously, it’s not rude to eavesdrop where you *kumm* from,” Sachia retorted.

“Aye, it is,” Marcus replied. “But I have a vested interest in how this whole thing turns out.”

Sachia waited as they walked through the garden gate and out onto the street before responding.

“I can’t believe that the letter was there all this time, right under Ava’s nose.”

“Aye,” Marcus agreed.

“How could Asher do that to her?” Sachia wondered. “Keep such a secret.”

“If I’ve learnt anythin’ these past few weeks, it’s that love makes you do crazy things.”

“Is it justified, then?” Sachia probed. “If it’s motivated by love?”

“I dinnae ken,” Marcus said, shrugging. “I’ve never been in love.”

“You haven’t?” Sachia asked in surprise.

Marcus shook his head. “Have ye?”

“*Nee*,” Sachia admitted.

“No’ even with Daniel?” Marcus questioned curiously.
“Because I ken that he is very much in love with ye.”

Marcus glanced at Sachia, but she kept her eyes focused straight ahead.

“I dinnae mean tae pry—”

“*Nee*,” Sachia said, shaking her head and turning to meet his gaze. “It’s not that. Daniel is a *gut* person—”

“But he’s a wee bit vanilla?” Marcus teased.

Sachia opened her mouth, then closed it again, her cheeks flushing a rosy pink.

“I’m just pullin’ yer leg. I dinnae ken ye too well, Sachia, but ye’ve given me the run around these past couple of days, so ma guess is ye ken yer own mind.”

“And what about you?” Sachia countered. “I find it hard to believe you’ve never been in love.”

“Aye?” Marcus said, raising his eyebrows. “And why’s that?”

Sachia’s pink cheeks turned red, and Marcus smiled roguishly.

“Stop it,” Sachia chastised.

“Stop what?” Marcus asked innocently.

“Stop being you.”

Marcus smiled again. “I’m no’ sure that love is in the cards for me,” he finally answered.

“Why’s that?” Sachia asked, glancing at him curiously.

Marcus shrugged. “I ken that the price is too high.”

“You don’t mean that,” Sachia replied, her eyes widening in disbelief.

“Aye, I do. I’ve seen what a broken heart can do tae a person.”

Sachia shook her head in disagreement.

“Ye dinnae agree?”

“*Nee*,” Sachia said firmly. “For most of us, *Gott* wants us to love a life partner and to love fiercely.

“Those are strong words comin’ from an Amish lass,” Marcus said, impressed by the fervor of her conviction.

“*Ya*, well, despite what you might have been led to believe, we are allowed to speak our minds.”

Marcus smiled. “*Ye dinnae say?*” he teased.

Sachia smiled, and Marcus was stirred by the realization of just how pretty her smile was.

As Sachia took a step on the snow-slick ground, her foot slipped out from under her. Without conscious thought, Marcus grabbed her around the waist to stop her from falling.

“*Danki*,” Sachia breathed.

Marcus’s hands rested lightly on her waist as he looked into her brown eyes. He was so close that he could feel the warmth of her breath on his cheek and count every one of her long, dark eyelashes. His own heart was beating so loudly that he could hear the blood rushing in his ears. The world around them seemed to fade, and he leaned in to kiss her. His lips were less than an inch from hers when a bunch of children ran past, dragging a sled, and popped their little bubble.

“I’m sorry,” Marcus said, quickly lifting his hands from her waist and holding them up in the air.

“It’s fine,” Sachia replied, her cheeks flushed. “Maybe we should get back to the house.”

Marcus nodded mutely, and together, they made their way back in the direction from which they’d come. Neither of them spoke, but Marcus’s mind was racing a mile a minute.

I almost kissed her! But that would have been a mistake. Sachia and I are very different people from two very different worlds. And I don’ have feelings for her. We had a nice conversation, and I got caught up in the moment; that’s it.

When they arrived back at Zechariah’s house a short while later and approached the back door, laughter echoed

from inside. Marcus frowned as he looked at Sachia, whose brow was also furrowed.

“Laughing is better than crying,” she quipped.

“Aye,” Marcus agreed as he pushed open the back door.

Sachia stepped into the warm room, and Marcus followed. They found Ava and Zechariah seated at the kitchen table with steaming mugs of coffee. They were leaning toward one another as they talked animatedly, both smiling.

“*Gude daag*,” Zechariah said cheerfully.

“Would you both like some *kaffi*?” Ava offered equally as brightly.

Marcus glanced inquiringly at Sachia, who was also frowning.

“What’s goin’ on here?” Marcus asked.

“We’re drinking *kaffi*,” Zechariah answered.

“So you two have sorted things out?” Sachia asked.

Zechariah regarded Ava tenderly. “We’ve decided that we would like to get to know one another again,” he answered without breaking his gaze on her.

Ava nodded, reciprocating his smile. “There are still a lot of things we need to talk about,” Ava added. “But we don’t want to waste any more time.”

“I’m happy for you both,” said Sachia, a relieved smile on her face as her gaze bounced between them.

Sachia suddenly caught sight of the clock on the wall.

“*Ach*, I’d better get to work,” she stated. “I’m already late.”

“I’ll go with you,” Ava said, getting up from her chair.

“You’re leaving?” Zechariah asked, his face falling.

“I promised Mrs. Byler that I would drop off my stuffing recipe for her this morning,” Ava said. “She’s having her *Englischer* friends over for *Grischtdaag* and wants to impress them. I promise I’ll be back soon.”

Ava leaned over and kissed Zechariah on the cheek, eliciting a broad smile from him.

Marcus looked over at Sachia, but she didn't meet his eye, and he wondered if she felt uncomfortable about what had almost transpired between them.

"*Mach's gut*," Sachia said, turning and leaving the kitchen with Ava on her heels.

Marcus turned to his grandfather, who was staring at the doorway out of which Ava had just left.

"So?" Marcus said, taking an empty seat at the table. "Ye're good?"

Zechariah looked across at him and nodded happily. "As Ava said, there are still a lot of things that we need to talk through."

Marcus nodded. "Aye, and did ye talk about the letter? About how Ava's husband kept it a secret?"

"We did," Zechariah answered. "Ava is angry with him, but I'm hoping in time, she will realize that he was just afraid of losing her. And I cannot blame the *mann* for being in love with her."

"That's very big of ye," Marcus observed, raising an eyebrow.

"Asher is gone," Zechariah said. "And I cannot change what happened. He's not the only one who made mistakes."

"But he kept ye and Ava apart for fifty years."

"He kept the letter a secret," Zechariah said. "But I am the one who kept us apart. I let my pride get in the way, and I pushed Ava away. But now I have the chance to make things right, and I'm tired of living in the past."

Marcus sat back in his chair as his grandfather leaned forward in his.

"I owe you an apology, too, Marcus," Zechariah said. "It has taken me becoming an old man to realize just how dangerous pride is. Had I realized sooner, I could have made

things right with your *maem*, I could have learned about you, and perhaps we'd have had years to get to know one another."

Marcus met his grandfather's eyes.

"I just hope that one day you can forgive me for not being a better *groosdaadi*," Zechariah said, his voice wavering.

Marcus exhaled slowly, not breaking eye contact.

"After ma mother died, ma father changed. And in all his grief, there was nae room for me, so he sent me away. There were times, growin' up, when I longed for grandparents, the kind who sent birthday cards and care packages tae school. So when I found the letters, I was hurt and confused at first. I couldnae understand how anyone wouldnae want tae ken their own kin."

Marcus paused for a moment. "I almos' didn't come when ye invited me tae Whisperin' Pines," he continued. "But I'm glad I did."

"You are?" Zechariah said, his voice thick with emotion.

"Aye. If I didnae come tae Whisperin' Pines, I'd never have seen that life here is different. I dinnae pretend tae get all o' it, but I'm startin' tae understand it. Where I'm from, neighbors are the folk ye avoid in the hallway, but here, neighbors are yer kin. This town is built on the spirit o' community, and when someone chooses tae leave, the whole town feels that loss. Ma mother's choice tae leave hurt you all, and I didnae ken that at first, but I see now that I shouldnae have judged ye so harshly when I first arrived."

"I don't blame you for judging me," Zechariah said vulnerably.

"Aye," Marcus said. "As ye said, we've all made mistakes and done things that we cannot change, and while comin' here has no' been easy, I'm glad I did. And in the spirit o' Christmas, I think that maybe it's time tae leave the past where it is and move on. What do you say, Granda'?"

It was the first time Marcus had ever called Zechariah his grandad, but it just felt right.

“I’d like that,” Zechariah agreed, his eyes misty.

Marcus rose from his chair and put a hand on his grandfather’s shoulder. Zechariah reached over, placing his wrinkled hand atop Marcus’s, and for a while, grandfather and grandson neither moved nor spoke.

Marcus was no stranger to the shadow of regret; it had followed him every day since his father passed. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever be free of it, but his grandfather was right. He did not want to be an old man full of regrets. If the pandemic had taught them anything, it was that life is short, and, like Zechariah, Marcus was tired of living in the past.

“I’d better go and make myself more presentable before Ava gets back,” Zechariah said looking down at his nightshirt.

Marcus smiled to himself as Zechariah got up from the table and made his way out of the kitchen.

“Dinnae forget tae trim yer nose hairs,” Marcus called after him, and he heard his grandfather chuckling dryly from down the hall.

Marcus shook his head, grinning as he sat back down at the table. His plan had worked—by some miracle—and his grandfather and Ava were reunited. A mixture of relief and gratitude filled him, knowing he could now return home without worrying. As he sat back in his chair, Marcus promised himself he would make the most of his remaining time in Whispering Pines.

Chapter Eleven

“Sorry I’m late,” Sachia apologized as she hurriedly approached the charity shop.

Two women were standing outside waiting for it to open, and Sachia quickly unlocked the door and stepped aside so they could go in.

“Let me know if you need any help,” she said as she walked over to the desk and doffed her coat.

While the two women browsed, Sachia lit the small coal stove, and as she added fresh coal, she smiled to herself, remembering how ridiculous Marcus had looked the afternoon before.

She then walked back to the desk and counted out the float into the small cash register, and by the time she’d finished, the two women were waiting to pay.

“*Frehlicher Grischtdaag*,” Sachia said, handing the women their bags.

“*Frehlicher Grischtdaag*,” they replied in unison.

Sachia glanced around at some of the displayed items and slipped into the back room to fetch the feather duster. As she searched for it, the small bell above the door tinkled, announcing another customer.

“I’ll be right out,” Sachia called.

She scouted around a moment longer for the feather duster but then gave up. As she exited the storeroom, she spotted Daniel standing by the door. His hands were clasped in front of him, and he was twisting his long fingers nervously.

“Daniel,” Sachia greeted, smiling at him.

“*Gude mariye*, Sachia,” Daniel replied, his voice trembling slightly.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

Daniel nodded, but Sachia didn't miss the beads of perspiration above his top lip.

"Would you like to sit?" she offered.

Daniel nodded gratefully, and Sachia led the way over to the two chairs by the fire and took one seat, Daniel taking the other and resting his tightly clasped hands in his lap.

"I'm sorry we didn't meet you at the school yesterday," she said. "Ava wasn't feeling up to it."

Daniel nodded again but didn't speak, and Sachia frowned. He was not exactly a wordsmith on the best of days, but he was behaving rather strangely.

"Are you sure you are quite well?" Sachia pressed.

Daniel nodded as he exhaled shakily.

"Sachia," Daniel started, meeting her eyes for the first time. "I've *kumm* to ask you to marry me."

Sachia's jaw dropped as she stared at him, with her now being the one at a loss for words. She'd not been expecting that.

"I've spoken with Bishop Burkholder, and he's given us permission to marry in the spring, seeing as we missed the November weddings—"

"Wait, Daniel, slow down," Sachia said, her hand raised. "You've already spoken with the Bishop?"

"*Ya*," Daniel said. "I spoke with him yesterday at the school."

Sachia's mouth opened and closed again, words escaping her.

"I am in love with you, Sachia," Daniel declared, gaining confidence. "I've always been in love with you, and I want us to have a life together. Once we are married, I will build a house with plenty of rooms for all of our *kinner*."

"Daniel, I..."

"What is it?" he asked, his face falling.

“It’s... This is all just a lot to take in,” Sachia said slowly, her stomach in knots.

Daniel frowned. “But you must know how I feel about you?”

“I do,” Sachia replied. “It’s just that I have so much going on with the shop, and Ava—”

“So what are you saying?” Daniel pressed.

“That I just need a bit of time.”

Daniel nodded, but disappointment was written all over his face, and Sachia couldn’t help but feel guilty.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with that *Englischer*?” Daniel asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

“Marcus? *Nee*, of course not.”

Daniel regarded her wordlessly.

Since our almost-kiss this morning, I’ve been doing my best not to think about Marcus.

“I assure you, nothing is going on with Marcus,” Sachia elaborated. “We’ve been spending time together because his *groosdaadi* and Ava are old friends.”

Daniel’s shoulders relaxed a little. “Then why can’t you give me an answer now?” he asked. “We’ve known each other our whole lives, Sachia, and I can give you a *gut* life.”

“I just need a little time, please?”

“All right.” Daniel sighed. “I suppose there is no rush.”

“*Danki*,” Sachia said appreciatively.

Daniel stood and turned to go. “*Ach*,” he said, reaching into his pocket. “I made you this.”

He handed Sachia a small cross carved out of wood, hanging on a delicate gold chain. She held it in the palm of her hand, admiring the intricate craftsmanship.

“It’s beautiful,” Sachia breathed. “But it’s too much, Daniel.”

“*Frehlicher Grischtdaag*, Sachia,” he said, ignoring her protest.

Sachia was left alone, feeling queasy in the pit of her stomach.

For the rest of the morning, Sachia’s mind swirled with thoughts about Daniel’s proposal. She had known him her whole life; she knew he could give her a happy life, children, and security. Yet, as much as she tried to convince herself that she should agree to marry him, she could not ignore the fact that she wasn’t in love with him, which was an important factor for her. To make matters worse, thoughts of Marcus kept invading her mind. She could still feel his strong warm hands on her hips and his warm breath on her cheek. Yet, she needed to forget all of it, every exquisite detail, because he was leaving in two days, and what was more, he wasn’t Amish.

Just after midday, as Sachia was sitting at her desk fingering the small wooden cross in her hands, the shop door opened, and she looked up to see Marcus step in through the door. He smiled at her, and her traitorous heart skipped a beat.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, slipping the cross into her skirt pocket.

Marcus walked across the room and sat down on top of the desk.

“I needed tae get out o’ the house,” Marcus explained with a wry grin. “Ava and ma granda’ are in the sittin’ room, gigglin’ like a couple o’ high schoolers.”

Sachia smiled. “I think it’s sweet.”

Marcus grimaced.

“Well, you’re the one who wanted to reunite them, remember?” Sachia teased, smiling.

“Dinnae remind me,” Marcus quipped, rolling his eyes. “Have ye got any more o’ those sand tarts?”

Sachia reached into the bottom drawer and removed the cookie tin, handing it to Marcus. He opened the lid, humming

under his breath. She momentarily forgot herself, admiring his profile, but as soon as he turned to look at her, she quickly looked away again.

“You’re in a *gut* mood,” Sachia noted as she picked up a pen and pretended to scribble something down.

“Aye, I had a good conversation with ma granda’ this mornin’, and we cleared the air.”

“That’s great,” Sachia said, smiling out of joy for him.

“I’m actually gettin’ pretty good at this whole Amish thing, ye ken,” Marcus wisecracked as he helped himself to another sand tart. “I’m no’ sure I’m buyin’ what ye said about me no’ bein’ part Amish.”

“You’re not *Amisch*,” Sachia reiterated dryly. “And you’re getting crumbs all over my desk.”

“Sorry,” Marcus said with his mouth full.

He set the cookie tin down on the desk, swallowed the mouthful of sand tart, and looked across at her.

“I wanted tae talk tae ye about this mornin’,” he started. “With Ava and ma granda’ now joined at the hip, I dinnae want things tae be uncomfortable between us.”

“It’s all *gut*,” Sachia assured him. “We’re *gut*.”

She did her best to appear as nonchalant as possible, hoping Marcus couldn’t hear her racing heart.

“Good,” Marcus said. “Because ye and I are practically related now.”

Sachia frowned. “Huh?”

“Well, now that ma granda’ and Ava are back together.”

“You know I’m not actually related to Ava, right?”

Marcus shrugged again. “How about we do somethin’?”

“Like what?” Sachia asked.

“I dinnae ken,” Marcus said. “This is yer town.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m working,” Sachia reminded him dryly as she glanced at the small clock. “And I’m actually late—”

“Late for what?”

“Actually, I could use your help,” Sachia replied.

“With what?” Marcus asked, frowning.

“The *gmay* has been putting together *Grischtdaag* boxes for the *kinner* in the orphanage in the next town,” Sachia explained. “I offered to drop them off.”

Marcus wrinkled his nose. “It sounds a wee bit too Dickensian for me.”

Sachia swatted him playfully with her hand. “Come on,” she coaxed. “You can do the heavy lifting.”

With Marcus’s help, Sachia got all the boxes into the back of Mr. Blank’s buggy that she had borrowed. Once everything was loaded, Marcus hopped up into the passenger seat.

“What are you doing?” Sachia asked as though he had forgotten something.

Marcus frowned as he looked at her.

“You were trumpeting about being half *Amisch*, so you can drive,” Sachia declared with a glint in her eye.

“Och no,” Marcus said, shaking his head. “I dinnae even drive a car, and ye want me tae drive this thing?”

“It’s not that hard,” she affirmed. “Just hold the reins tightly with two hands, and the horse will do the rest.”

“Ye’re no’ serious?”

“I sure am,” Sachia said with an emphatic nod. “Now, scoot over.”

Marcus opened his mouth, then closed it again before he slid across the seat onto the driver’s side.

“Let’s go,” Sachia said.

“How do I make it go?” Marcus asked, looking somewhat unsure of himself.

Sachia resisted the strong urge to roll her eyes. She clicked her tongue, and the horse started moving—and Marcus almost lost his balance with the motion.

“Don’t they have horses where you’re from?” Sachia asked.

“Aye,” Marcus said, not taking his eyes off the horse. “But ma father was more o’ a dug person.”

Sachia smiled as they made their way down the main street, attracting the attention of some of the community members who were out doing their last-minute Christmas shopping.

Sachia kept a watchful eye on Marcus, and she couldn’t help but smile at the level of concentration on his face.

“You’d enjoy it more if you relaxed your shoulders a bit,” Sachia commented.

“Aye, I’m tryin’.”

She chuckled. “It’s not far to go,” she said. “About five miles.”

Marcus nodded, and for a while, they drove in silence. Sachia looked out at the snowy hills. The sun shone brightly, and the stark reflection stung her eyes.

“It’s bonnie here,” Marcus commented, looking around.

Sachia frowned, not comprehending the unfamiliar term.

“Pretty,” Marcus explained.

“It is,” Sachia agreed, nodding. “What’s it like in Edinburgh?”

“It’s a lot noisier,” Marcus said, smiling. “But where I work, it’s bonnie, too.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Aye. But I’ll be back tae it again before long.”

They fell into a comfortable silence again as they bumped along the road. They were seated close enough to one another that their arms would brush over the bigger bumps.

“Take a left just up ahead,” Sachia said, pointing to where the road forked.

“How do I do that?” Marcus asked in a mild panic.

“Just pull gently on the left rein,” Sachia instructed.

Marcus pulled, but the horse did not change course.

“Here,” Sachia said, leaning over and putting her hand over his. “Just a little harder.”

The horse veered to the left, but Sachia didn’t lift her hand from Marcus’s right away. His hand was warm and smooth.

“Sorry,” she said, quickly leaning back as she folded her hands in her lap.

“Nae bother.”

“There’s the town. Just ahead.”

“I see phone lines,” Marcus remarked, peering overhead. “I wonder if the phones are workin’ here.

“If they are, I am sure someone at the orphanage will have a phone you can use,” Sachia suggested.

Having seen the phone lines, Marcus unwittingly picked up the pace, and Sachia shook her head, smiling in amusement.

“What?” he asked, glancing at her.

“It’s nothing,” she replied. “But do you really think your life would be worse off without technology?”

“I think ma life would be much less convenient,” Marcus said after a second’s thought.

“Well, you’ve lasted a whole four days without your phone,” Sachia teased. “I’m sure you can survive a few more minutes.”

“Ha ha,” Marcus said dryly.

Sachia turned forward again as they drove into the town's main street.

"The orphanage is at the end of the street," Sachia directed.

They approached the brick building, with Sachia instructing Marcus on how to pull on the reins to bring the buggy to a stop. After a bit of a rocky coming to rest, Sachia disembarked, relieved to have her feet on *terra firma* once again. She stepped up to the side and hefted one of the large cardboard boxes from the back. Marcus raised his eyebrows.

"What?" Sachia asked.

"Nothin'," Marcus answered. "Ye're just stronger than ye look."

"*Danki*, I think," Sachia said with a half-grin as she turned and carried the box towards the open doors, with Marcus following behind, carrying another.

As they stepped into the large foyer, Mrs. Flaud, the director of the orphanage, came bustling towards them. She was a short, pudgy woman with rosy cheeks who always looked like she was run off her feet.

"Sachia," she greeted brightly. "You're here."

"Sorry we are late," Sachia apologized.

"No matter, you got here before *Grischtdaag*, and that's all we could have asked for—"

Mrs. Flaud suddenly noticed Marcus, and her green eyes widened in surprise.

"And who is this?" she asked as her eyes traveled from the tips of Marcus's toes to the top of his head.

"This is Marcus Duncan," Sachia introduced. "He's from Scotland and is here visiting his *groosdaadi*."

"Scotland?" Mrs. Flaud gushed. "My, how exotic."

"It's nice tae meet ye, Mrs. Flaud," said Marcus.

“And you,” she replied. “Why don’t you bring the boxes to my office.”

Sachia and Marcus followed Mrs. Flaud to her office, which was just off the foyer. As they stepped inside, Sachia spotted the phone on the desk, and she turned to see Marcus eyeing it. Mrs. Flaud busied herself with papers on her desk as Marcus and Sachia made another trip to the buggy and back.

After they had set the last of the boxes down on the floor, they turned back to Mrs. Flaud, and Marcus surreptitiously nudged Sachia in the ribs.

“Fine,” she whispered under her breath. “Mrs. Flaud,” she directed to the woman, “would it be all right if Marcus used your phone to make a call?”

Mrs. Flaud pursed her lips as she considered the request. “It’s only supposed to be for emergencies...” she answered, trailing off in her reluctance to disappoint them.

“Trust me,” Mrs. Flaud,” Sachia assured her. “To Marcus, this is an emergency.”

“*Ach*, all right,” Mrs. Flaud capitulated. “I suppose it will be all right this once.”

Sachia looked at Marcus, expecting him to rush for the phone, but he didn’t.

“Marcus?” Sachia prompted.

“Actually... I dinnae need tae make a call after all,” Marcus replied.

“Are you sure?” Sachia asked, puzzled by his sudden change of mind.

“Aye,” Marcus answered with a nod. “Perhaps, instead, Mrs. Flaud would be kind enough tae show me the rest o’ the orphanage.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Flaud agreed happily.

She delightedly showed Sachia and Marcus around the orphanage, and to Sachia’s surprise, Marcus did not seem bored; in fact, he asked perceptive questions and listened to

the answers. Their last stop was the library, where the children were engrossed in making paper decorations. Sachia and Marcus walked around admiring them all before Mrs. Flaud announced it was time for afternoon tea, and the children dropped everything and dashed to the cafeteria.

“*Danki* again for the *Grischtdaag* boxes, Sachia,” she said leading them out of the library. “It will make for a *Frehlicher Grischtdaag* indeed for the *kinner*.”

“I’m glad,” Sachia replied, smiling.

“I’d better go and help supervise the tea. You will be all right to show yourselves out?”

“Of course,” Sachia assured Mrs. Flaud.

“It was *gut* to meet you, Mr. Duncan,” Mrs. Flaud said kindly. “I hope you enjoy the rest of your visit.”

“Aye, thank ye, Mrs. Flaud.”

The sweet, rotund lady squeezed Sachia’s arm before she turned and headed in the direction of the cafeteria.

“I’m just going to use the restroom,” Sachia said. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Marcus nodded as she walked down the hallway to the restroom.

A few minutes later, once done, Sachia headed downstairs to the foyer. As she stepped into the large room, she saw Marcus talking to a group of young children; they were staring up at him, their eyes as round as saucers. As Sachia approached them, the children scurried off down the hall as if a ghost were chasing them.

“What did you say to them?” Sachia asked reprovingly as she rounded on Marcus.

“Och,” Marcus replied innocently. “I was just tellin’ them about the Belsnickle.”

“Marcus!” Sachia chastised.

“What?” Marcus said with an impish grin. “Ye’re the one who told me he wasn’t creepy.”

Sachia shook her head, trying not to smile. “*Kumm* on,” she said. “Let’s get home before you terrorize any more of the *kinner*.”

They headed back outside, Sachia shaking her head while Marcus’s mischievous grin only widened.

“I can’t take you anywhere,” Sachia grumbled as she climbed into her seat.

Marcus took the reins with a lot more confidence this time, and they set off back to Whispering Pines.

Chapter Twelve

Marcus brought the buggy to a stop behind Mr. Blank's general store, looking proud as a peacock with himself. He'd never even imagined before that he would one day drive a horse-drawn buggy.

As Marcus shifted to climb down, a gold glint caught his eye on the buggy bench: a wooden cross on a gold chain. He gently picked it up and stepped down.

"Is this yers?" he said, dangling it from his fingers before Sachia.

"*Ya, danki,*" she said, taking it from him and slipping it into her dress pocket.

As they made their way back to his grandfather's house, despite her previous jovial behavior, Sachia was unusually quiet. Marcus cast a sideways glance at her and could discern by her demeanor that something was troubling her.

"Penny for ye thoughts?" he asked.

"Hmm?" Sachia said, frowning.

"Is everythin' all righ'? Ye've hardly said two words since we got back tae town."

"Sorry," Sachia said with a heavy sigh. "I've just got a lot on my mind."

"Ye want tae talk about it? Among ma many talents, I'm also an excellent listener."

Sachia's attempted smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Come on, what's troublin' ye?"

"That necklace you found in the buggy... It was a gift from Daniel," Sachia explained.

"Aye."

"He came by the shop this morning and asked me to marry him."

“Did he now?” Marcus said, his raised eyebrows indicative of his surprise even though he kept his tone reasonably neutral. “What did ye say?”

“I told him I needed some time to think.”

Marcus nodded. “I didnae ken you liked him much.”

“I never said that,” Sachia contested. “I like him plenty. Daniel is very likable; that’s not the problem.”

“Aye,” Marcus said, nodding. “Ye dinnae love him, then?”

“*Nee.*” Sachia sighed. “I don’t.”

“Well, the answer seems simple enough, then: dinnae marry the man.”

“What, just like that?” Sachia questioned, frowning as she turned to look at him.

“Ye were the one spoutin’ on about love this mornin’,” Marcus reminded her.

“I know,” Sachia conceded. “But love can grow.”

“Aye,” Marcus agreed. “But is that the kind o’ love ye’d be satisfied with?”

“I don’t know...” Sachia sighed. “And I don’t know why I’m even talking about this with you; you don’t even believe in love.”

“I never said that,” Marcus corrected. “I ken that love is real.”

“So you don’t think I should marry Daniel?”

“I reckon’ that ye’re a lass who kens her own mind, ye ken what would make ye happy. Dinnae settle because it’s easy; go for what ye want from this life.”

Sachia contemplated in silence. Soon, Zechariah’s house came into view.

“Wait,” Sachia said as she touched Marcus’s arm. “Please don’t mention Daniel’s proposal to anyone. I’m already

confused enough without everyone adding their two cents' worth."

"But ye told me," Marcus said, grinning.

Sachia sighed.

"Och aye, I give ye ma word; I won't tell anybody."

"*Danki.*"

Marcus turned and headed up to the house with Sachia.

"Can I ask you something?" Sachia said as they climbed onto the porch.

"Aye."

"Why didn't you use the phone at the orphanage?"

Marcus shrugged. "It just didnae feel so important right then, ye ken."

Sachia nodded but did not comment as Marcus opened the front door and stepped aside. They found his grandfather and Ava right where they'd left them hours earlier—both seated in rocking chairs by the fire, holding hands.

"Have ye been here all day?" Marcus asked in disbelief.

"We've had a lot of catching up to do," Zechariah answered, smiling.

"How was your day?" Ava asked, looking brightly at Sachia.

"Fine," Sachia replied. "We—"

"I drove the horse and cart tae the orphanage," Marcus announced, diverting the attention away from Sachia.

"Did you?" Zechariah said, raising his eyebrows. "We'll make an *Amisch mann* of you yet."

Marcus smiled.

"I was just thinking, why don't we all go to the carols by candlelight at the church this evening," Ava suggested.

"Carols aren't really Marcus's thing," Zechariah explained.

“Usually, they’re no’,” Marcus agreed. “But someone told me no’ tae be such a Grinch, so aye, let’s go.”

Sachia’s quirked eyebrow showed her surprise.

“*Wunderbaar*,” said Zechariah.

A short while later, the four of them headed to the church for carols. Marcus and Sachia walked ahead of Zechariah and Ava, and Sachia kept throwing him suspicious glances.

“Why do ye keep lookin’ at me like that?” Marcus asked.

“Why are you suddenly full of *Grischtdaag* spirit?” Sachia shot back with a feigned suspicious look.

“If ye must ken,” Marcus whispered conspiratorially, “I’m only comin’ tae run interference in case wee Daniel tries tae squeeze an answer out o’ you.”

“That was a visual I didn’t need,” Sachia grumbled. “And I don’t need your help.”

Marcus smiled as he nonchalantly put his hands behind his back. They turned the corner to walk through the long avenue of white pines. Marcus slyly kept his eye out, and when they passed under a low branch, he reached up to yank it, raining a heap of snow down on Sachia.

“Marcus!”

Marcus doubled over, laughing. Sachia scowled at him, the snow in her dark hair and eyelashes only egging him on.

“You’re no better than your *groosdaadi*,” Ava chided affectionately, a fond smile on her lips. “He used to do that to me all the time when we were younger.”

“You remember that?” Zechariah asked in surprise.

“Of course,” Ava said, looking up at him. “I remember everything. But we’d better get moving if we don’t want to be late.”

Zechariah and Ava took the lead, while Marcus and Sachia followed behind.

“I’m sorry,” Marcus said as he fell in line with Sachia, unable to wipe the smile off his face.

“You don’t look it,” Sachia grumbled.

Marcus pursed his lips and sucked his cheeks in, trying his best to wipe any hint of humor from his face. As they made their way down the road, Sachia bent down as though to tie her bootlace; Marcus slowed his pace but still walked on ahead. After a few steps, when Sachia had not caught up, Marcus turned to check where she was, and a flying snowball hit him square in the face.

“Ha!” Sachia cried triumphantly, fist-pumping in victory. “Got you.”

Marcus wiped the snow off his face good-naturedly and smiled. “Ye’ve got a right good arm on ye.”

Sachia raised her eyebrows. “I grew up with an older *bruder*, remember?”

“Aye.” Marcus smiled. “I should have mindit (remembered) that.”

“*Kumm* on, you two,” Zechariah called back. “We’re going to be late.”

Marcus and Sachia picked up the pace.

“Marcus?”

“Aye,” Marcus said, turning to look at her.

“Why don’t you like *Grischtdaag*?”

“What gave you that impression?” Marcus quipped goofily.

“But seriously,” Sachia pressed.

Marcus sighed. “Christmas was ma mother’s favorite time o’ the year. But after she passed away, ma father didn’t see the sense in celebratin’ it anymore. So o’er time, that’s what Christmas came tae be, just another reminder that she wisnae here.”

“I’m sorry,” Sachia said compassionately.

Marcus shrugged. “It’s all right, ye ken.”

“Well, *Grischtdaag* is my favorite time of year, too,” Sachia said. “And this year, you are going to be part of a real *Amisch Grischtdaag*. I’ll even let you be first to look for the *Grischtdaag* pickle.”

“I’m sorry,” Marcus said, stopping dead in his tracks. “Did ye just say ‘*Grischtdaag* pickle’?”

Sachia giggled. “All will be revealed in time,” she said. “Now, *kumm* on.”

She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him beside her, and as they neared the end of the avenue, singing reached them.

“They’ve already started,” Sachia said.

They all hurried up to the church building and snuck in the back, filing into the bench, one by one, as they joined the congregation singing “O Holy Night.”

Marcus was at the end of the row, and as the last note was sung, Bishop Burkholder appeared carrying four candles, which he handed to Marcus.

“The three wise men were also late for the birth of Jesus,” he said, smiling. “But it did not matter that they were late, only that they came.”

The bishop laid a hand on Marcus’s arm, smiling benevolently before he turned and left.

Marcus smiled sheepishly after him just as the congregation began to sing “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.” Marcus passed out the candles as he joined in the singing.

To his surprise, he realized that he was actually enjoying himself. It was years since he’d sung carols—when he was still at school—but he remembered the words, which were etched into his soul but buried under years of hurt. He remembered his mother teaching him about Jesus’ birth and why it was so important; that God loved him enough to send His only Son to take people’s punishment for sin; that God had

a plan for Marcus's life. As the song drew to a close, Marcus glanced at Sachia, whose brown eyes shone in the delicate light of her candle. She caught his eye and smiled up at him, and he smiled back at her, feeling truly happy for the first time in a long while.

They continued with the carols repertoire, singing "Away in a Manger," followed by "What Child Is This?" and "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

When the last note of the final song was just fading, Bishop Burkholder rose and walked to the front of the church.

"What a joyous evening," he said, raising his hands. "All gathered together to celebrate the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ."

"*Aamen*," several voices called out.

"I am sure that after all that singing, you are in need of some refreshments," he said, smiling around. "Please join us for tea and cake at the back of the church."

The congregation began to disperse and make their way to the back of the small building. Marcus blew out his candle as he turned to the others.

"Shall we stay for some cake?" Sachia asked.

"Ava is quite tired," Zechariah said, "so I am going to walk her home, but you two should stay and enjoy yourselves."

"Ye sure?" Marcus asked.

Zechariah nodded. "I'll see you at home."

Ava smiled as she put a hand on Sachia's cheek. "*Gude nacht*."

"*Bis widder*," Sachia replied, smiling.

Marcus and Sachia stepped aside to let Ava and Zechariah out, watching them leave.

"You have a lovely singing voice," Sachia commended as she turned her gaze to Marcus.

Marcus raised his eyebrows. "Is that a compliment?"

"Don't get used to it," Sachia said, barely hiding her grin. "Come on, let's get some cake before it's all finished."

Marcus and Sachia joined the line, and as they enjoyed their cake and tea, they talked and laughed. Marcus had never been one for organized events, but as he looked around the room, he could not help but feel part of something in the Whispering Pines community.

"*Ach nee*," Sachia suddenly said in a low voice.

"What?" Marcus asked, following her line of sight.

Daniel, who was standing with his family, was glowering at Marcus. Marcus smiled at him, but Daniel did not return his smile; rather, he continued to scowl.

"Maybe we should go," said Sachia.

"Aye, if ye want tae go, let's go."

The duo put down their cups and headed towards the doors, stepping out into the cool night air.

"Sachia?" a voice called after them. "Can I talk to you?"

They turned in unison to see Daniel standing in the doorway behind them.

"Sure," Sachia said, catching Marcus's eye, silently asking him to give her a moment.

She turned and walked back to where Daniel was standing.

"I thought nothing was going on between you and the *Englischer*?" he said, his voice edged with bitterness and accusation.

"I already told you," Sachia replied, more than a hint of irritability in her voice. "We are friends."

"I don't believe you," Daniel said, shaking his head. "I heard about your buggy ride."

"Marcus was just helping me take the *Grischtdaag* boxes to the orphanage," Sachia explained in a low voice, trying to

infuse patience into her words.

“And tonight?” Daniel pressed, his tone hard. “You two looked pretty cozy in the candlelight.”

“You’re being ridiculous, Daniel,” Sachia said, shaking her head.

“And my guess is you’ve been too busy with your *Englischer* ‘friend’ to think about my proposal?”

Sachia sighed. “I told you that I needed some time.”

Daniel gritted his teeth as he exhaled sharply. “Well, don’t take too long,” he said. “There are plenty of other *maed* in this town.”

Without another word, Daniel turned and left. Sachia hesitated a moment, then turned and walked back to where Marcus stood a few feet away.

“I guess you heard all that,” Sachia said, her shoulders slumped and her previously buoyant mood somewhat subdued.

“Aye. I guess he’s not as vanilla as I thought,” Marcus replied, his heart heavy at her burden. “But is he really bothered by a buggy ride?”

“It means something to the *Amisch* when a *maedel* rides in a buggy with a *bu*.” She sighed. “I just didn’t think about it like that.”

“Aye, but I think it’s a slight overreaction on his part.”

Sachia shook her head and sighed. “Let’s just get home.”

They walked in silence out of the churchyard; every now and then, Marcus cast a sideways glance at Sachia.

“I wouldnae fash (worry) about him,” Marcus said reassuringly as they entered the avenue of towering pines. “He’s just tryin’ tae work out how ye feel about him.”

Sachia sighed. “He’s right, though. Plenty of *maed* in this town would jump at the chance for such a union. Daniel would make a *gut mann*, solid and dependable. He could offer anyone a safe and secure life.”

“Safe and secure?” Marcus iterated. “Disnae sound like a recipe for love tae me.”

“That’s because you’re not acquainted with our ways,” Sachia explained. “In our communities, people don’t always marry for love. Marriage is about tradition, and faith, and family, not just love.”

“And ye want tae follow tradition?” Marcus asked. “By marryin’ Daniel?”

“I want both love and tradition.” Sachia sighed, shaking her head.

“Sachia,” Marcus said earnestly, reaching for her hand. “If it’s love that ye truly want, then dinnae wed Daniel. Wait instead, and chances are, love’ll find ye.”

“How do you know?” Sachia asked, her gaze searching his.

“Because once a man gets past how argumentative and stubborn ye appear, he’ll discover that ye are kind and compassionate and that ye protect the people ye love. It doesn’t hurt that ye’re bonnie, too.”

Sachia’s cheeks pinkened. “Do *Englischers* always speak their mind?” she asked, smiling softly, her hand slipping from his.

“Aye,” Marcus replied with a soft grin.

Sachia laughed.

“*Kumm* on,” she said. “Let’s get home.”

They set off through the avenue of trees, the stars shining brightly in the dark sky overhead.

“Ye dinnae see the stars like this in Edinburgh,” Marcus commented, looking up. “There are too many lights.”

“My father used to love to study the constellations,” Sachia said, following his gaze.

“Ye dinnae talk about yer family much,” Marcus said, glancing at her.

“They were the greatest people on this planet,” Sachia said softly. “When we all got sick during the pandemic, my *daed* got it the worst. He died first, then my *bruder*, and then my *maem*.”

“I’m sure that must’ve been difficult,” Marcus said understandingly.

“It was,” Sachia admitted. “Sometimes, it still is, but sometimes the only way to carry a heavy burden is to share it.”

“Aye,” Marcus agreed, nodding.

“Did you lose anyone to the pandemic?” Sachia asked.

“No,” Marcus said, shaking his head. “I dinnae really have anyone tae lose.”

Sachia pursed her lips.

“I envy ye some, ye ken,” Marcus disclosed. “Tae belong tae a place like this. I didnae ken it at first, but there’s a peace here that dinnae exist where I am from.”

“It must be peaceful in the gardens?”

“Aye, that it is.”

They fell silent for a while; somewhere in the distance, a nightjar churrrred.

Soon, Zechariah’s house came into view. He’d left a candle burning in the window for Marcus.

“When do you leave?” Sachia asked as they approached the small gate.

“The day after Christmas. Boxing Day,” Marcus added.

“Boxing Day?” Sachia frowned.

“It disnae have anything tae do with actual boxing.” Marcus smiled. “It comes from the old days when the rich people would box up presents for the poor.”

“*Ach*,” Sachia said, nodding. “We call it Second *Grischtdaag*.”

“Aye, that has a nice ring tae it, too.”

Sachia nodded. “Would you like to *kumm* over for dinner tomorrow night?” she asked. “And Zechariah, too, of course. It’s always been a tradition in my *familye* to have dinner together on *Grischnacht*.”

“That sounds nice,” Marcus said, nodding. “And I dinnae think that ma granda’ will need much convincin’.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then?”

“Aye,” Marcus agreed. “It’s a date.”

Sachia hesitated for a second before she turned to go.

“*Bis widder*,” Marcus called gently after her.

Sachia turned and smiled at him over her shoulder, and Marcus’s heart somersaulted before kicking against his sternum with a thud. He could not pinpoint the exact moment he’d developed feelings for Sachia. The realization took him entirely by surprise. He had not planned on falling for her because he knew he could never have her. More than that, he’d sworn off love a long time ago.

Chapter Thirteen

Sachia woke and opened her eyes the following day to find Ava sitting at the foot of her bed; she jumped in surprise and all vestiges of grogginess fled.

“Sorry,” Ava apologized serenely.

“Is everything all right?” Sachia asked as she stifled a yawn.

“*Ya*,” Ava said. “It’s all *gut*.”

Sachia frowned as she sat up straighter, her back pressed against the headboard.

“I just felt that we haven’t had much time to talk,” Ava explained, “what with everything that’s happened the last couple of days.”

Sachia knew Ava well enough to know when something was on her mind and gave her the time and space to speak.

Ava shifted a bit closer to Sachia.

“I ran into Mrs. Kuhns last night,” Ava said, holding Sachia’s gaze. “When I was leaving the church. She mentioned that Daniel proposed to you.”

Sachia’s stomach sank to her toes, and she had the strongest desire to just pull the blankets over her head and go back to sleep.

“Are you going to tell me why you decided not to mention it to anyone?” Ava asked, tilting her head slightly.

Sachia sighed. “I was going to tell you. I just needed some time to think.”

“Okay,” Ava acknowledged. “And what have you been thinking?”

“I don’t know,” Sachia confessed. “I know Daniel is a good match, that he would make a *gut mann*, but I don’t love him, Ava.”

Ava put a hand tenderly on Sachia's leg. "When I was your age, my *eldre* wanted me to marry Asher even though I was in love with Zechariah. I did grow to love him, and we had a happy life together."

"So you think I should agree to marry Daniel?" Sachia asked.

"I think you know your own mind," Ava replied. "And you'll make the right decision, whatever it is."

"Marcus said I should wait," Sachia admitted. "That love will find me."

"Marcus?" Ava echoed, raising her eyebrows.

"He could see something was bothering me yesterday," Sachia explained. "So I told him about Daniel and the proposal."

Ava nodded, but there was concern in her blue eyes.

"What is it?" Sachia asked, leaning forward.

"It's just that seeing you and Marcus together last night reminded me of myself and Zechariah when we were your age."

"And that's a bad thing?" Sachia asked.

"*Nee*," Ava said, shaking her head. "But Marcus is leaving soon, Sachia, and you've already lost so many people. I just don't want you to get too attached—"

"I'm not getting attached to Marcus," Sachia defended.

"Okay," Ava accepted. "But I know the draw these Schwartz men can have."

"Marcus is not a Schwartz," Sachia argued. "He's a Duncan."

"Semantics. Just please be careful."

"You have nothing to worry about," Sachia assured her. "But I'll be careful."

Ava nodded. "*Gut*. Why don't you get dressed, and I'll make us some breakfast."

“Okay,” Sachia agreed easily as she pushed the blankets off.

Ava pressed up from the bed with a groan as she shuffled to the bedroom door. Sachia swung her legs off the side of the bed, wincing as her bare feet touched the cold floor. Just as she stood, Ava cried out, followed a few seconds later by a loud thud.

“Ava?” Sachia called as she raced from the room.

Ava lay in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the stairs.

“Ava!” Sachia screamed as she raced down the stairs and fell to the ground beside her. She pressed her ear to the older woman’s chest, searching for a heartbeat, and when she finally heard the faint *thump, thump, thump*, she whimpered softly.

“Ava?” Sachia said, putting a gentle hand on her face. “Can you hear me?”

Ava didn’t open her eyes, but she groaned softly.

“I am going to go and get help,” Sachia said.

She raced to the front door and out of the house. As she ran, she was oblivious to the icy snow beneath her bare feet or the freezing wind against her exposed skin. All she could think about was Ava.

“Marcus! Zechariah!” Sachia shouted as she hammered on their front door.

A moment later, Marcus opened it, his amber eyes widening.

“Sachia? What on earth?”

“I-I-It’s Ava,” Sachia said, struggling to catch her breath. “She fell down the stairs.”

“W-what?” Zechariah stammered, coming up behind Marcus, his face pale.

“I need your help,” Sachia said. “She’s breathing, but I have no idea how hurt she is.”

“Let’s go,” Zechariah said, grabbing his coat from the hook behind the door. He grabbed an extra coat and handed it to Sachia.

“*Danki*,” she said before turning to Marcus. “Can you fetch the doctor?”

Marcus nodded.

“He won’t be at his office,” Sachia said. “But he lives at the end of Acorn Lane, two streets down from here.”

“Okay,” Marcus said. “I’ll go righ’ now.”

Together, Sachia and Zechariah made their way back through the snow to Sachia’s house. As they hurried in through the front door, Ava was lying in the exact same place that Sachia had left her, but her eyes were open.

“Ava?” Zechariah said, struggling onto his knees. “It’s me, Zechariah.”

Ava turned her head and smiled at him.

“Where are you hurt?” Sachia asked, kneeling beside Zechariah.

“I don’t know,” Ava answered, the smile disappearing from her lips. “What happened?”

“You fell,” Zechariah said, stroking her face tenderly. “But don’t worry, I’m here now.”

Sachia and Zechariah did not leave Ava’s side until Marcus arrived with the doctor on his heels. The community had all gotten to know Dr. Lantz very well over the pandemic, and Sachia always appreciated how well he cared for Ava.

“Dr. Lantz,” Sachia said, looking up at him. “Ava fell. She was going to make breakfast and she just fell—”

“It’s okay, Sachia,” Dr. Lantz reassured kindly. “Let’s take a look.”

Sachia moved out of the way so Dr. Lantz could get closer to Ava, and she stood beside Marcus. Dr. Lantz removed his stethoscope from his bag to check Ava’s heartbeat

and breathing; he then examined her, checking for any broken bones. As he pressed her ribs with his fingers, Ava groaned.

“It doesn’t look like anything is broken,” Dr. Lantz diagnosed. “But you have bruised ribs, a sprained wrist, and quite a nasty bump on your head.”

“So, she’ll be all right?” Zechariah asked.

“You’ll need to watch her carefully in case there are any signs of a concussion,” Dr. Lantz instructed. “If she is confused or has trouble remembering things, you need to call me right away. Also, look out for nausea, slurred speech, and any kind of sensitivity to light or noise.”

Zechariah nodded as Dr. Lantz rose and turned to Sachia.

“We need to get her upstairs and in bed,” he said.

“I’ll do it,” Marcus offered.

“*Danki*,” said Dr. Lantz.

Marcus walked over to Ava and gently picked her up in his arms as if she weighed no more than a feather. Ava groaned softly as Marcus carried her upstairs.

“Call me if you are worried about anything,” Dr. Lantz said, looking at Sachia. “I know a fall like that can be scary, especially for someone Ava’s age, but she’s tough.”

“*Danki* so much for coming,” Sachia said gratefully.

Zechariah nodded in agreement. “*Danki*, Dr. Lantz.”

“Remember what I told you to look out for. And try to get her to drink water.”

“We will,” Sachia promised.

Dr. Lantz nodded as he turned to go, leaving Sachia and Zechariah alone.

“I’ll go up and sit with her,” Zechariah volunteered.

“I’ll get a glass of water and be right up,” Sachia said, turning towards the kitchen.

She walked down the hall into the kitchen and found a glass next to the sink, filling it with water, hands trembling. As

she turned around, the glass slipped from her hand and smashed to the floor.

A sob escaped her throat as shards of shattered glass scattered across the kitchen floor.

“Sachia?”

She looked up, tears streaming down her face, to see Marcus standing in the doorway. Without another word, he walked up to her and enveloped her in his arms, pulling her into his chest as she continued to sob.

“Dinnae fash, lass,” he said softly. “She’s going to be all right.”

Marcus held her for a long while, long enough for the tears to stop, and when he finally let her go and she stepped back, she noticed his dark navy sweater was damp.

“Your sweater,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’ll dry, dinnae fash yerself,” Marcus said kindly.

“I’m supposed to take some water up to Ava,” Sachia said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I’ll get it,” Marcus said as he walked over to the sink.

He filled a glass and handed it to Sachia.

“Be careful where ye walk,” he warned, glancing down at her bare feet.

Sachia nodded as she gingerly made her way across the kitchen floor, avoiding stepping on any glass shards.

She headed upstairs and found Zechariah seated on the edge of her bed. Ava was still awake, and they were talking quietly.

“How is she doing?” Sachia asked, carrying the glass of water to the bedside table.

“She’s doing okay,” Zechariah said, his loving smile never leaving Ava.

“I’d be doing better if you two stopped talking about me as if I weren’t here,” Ava rebuked sharply.

Sachia smiled. "I see the fall down the stairs didn't knock any of the sass out of you."

"It's certainly the last time I *kumm* over to make you breakfast," Ava retorted.

Sachia smiled as she leaned over to kiss Ava on the forehead. "I'm glad that you're okay."

"Me too," Ava agreed.

Suddenly, Sachia realized that she was still wearing her nightgown under the coat Zechariah lent her.

"I'd better get changed," she said self-consciously, looking at Zechariah.

"Don't worry, Sachia," he said. "You're adequately and modestly dressed, even for a hero who braved the cold. Go on, I'm not going anywhere."

Sachia smiled gratefully as she collected some clothes from her dresser and went into her parents' room to change. She emerged a short while later and found Marcus in the bedroom with Zechariah and Ava.

"She's just fallen asleep," Zechariah whispered.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Ava groaned, her blue eyes popping open.

"I think I'm going to be sick," she moaned.

Sachia hurried to the chest of drawers and grabbed the large cream porcelain washing bowl. She made it to Ava's side just in time.

"Should we fetch Dr. Lantz again?" Zechariah asked over Ava's retching.

"I'm on it," Marcus said, hurrying from the room.

A short while later, Dr. Lantz was back. Ava had not been sick again, but she was pale and clammy.

"Do you know your name?" Dr. Lantz asked as he shined a light first into the left pupil and then the right.

"Ava Albrecht."

“And what date is it today?”

Ava frowned for a moment. “December 24, 2020,” she said.

Sachia’s tensed shoulders relaxed in relief.

“And who is that?” Dr. Lantz asked, pointing at Zechariah.

Ava smiled softly. “I’d know that *mann* anywhere,” she said. “My *liewer* Zechariah.”

Dr. Lantz raised an eyebrow as he took a step back. “*Gut*,” he said. “Well, I don’t see any signs of a concussion. The vomiting was most probably a result of the shock from the fall. Still, keep an eye on her, and under no circumstances is she to get out of bed.”

“We will,” Sachia assured him.

Marcus showed Dr. Lantz out as Sachia pulled the chair from the corner of her bedroom right up next to the bed.

“I am not leaving your side today,” she said, taking Ava’s hand.

“But what about your dinner?” Ava said sleepily.

“It’s not important,” Sachia asserted. “You are.”

Ava smiled softly as she closed her eyes.

As she promised, Sachia did not leave Ava’s bedside. She sat, holding her hand, as the older woman fell in and out of sleep. Sachia’d had the fright of her life that morning when she found Ava all crumpled up at the bottom of the stairs. She didn’t know what she would do if she lost Ava, too.

Around noon, Bishop Burkholder stopped in to check on Ava. For over an hour, they sat together, praying and asking God to lay His healing hands on her. Sachia was aware of Marcus on the fringes. However, he was quiet and unobtrusive.

After the bishop left, Sachia was surprised to find Daniel standing at the bedroom door. She rose from her seat and walked over to him.

“I don’t mean to intrude,” he said as he removed his woolen hat. “I just wanted to *kumm* by and see how Ava is doing.”

“She’s okay,” Sachia said. “She’s had a bad fall, but for now, she’s doing okay.”

“*Gut*,” Daniel said, his eyes full of relief. “And how are you?”

Sachia exhaled shakily. “I got a fright,” she admitted. “For a moment this morning, I thought I’d lost her.”

Daniel nodded as he reached over and touched her hand. “Whatever happens,” he said, “whatever decision you make about the proposal, I want you to know that I’ll always be here for you; I’ll never stop being your friend.”

“*Danki*, Daniel,” Sachia said softly, smiling at him. “That means a lot to me.”

Daniel nodded as he turned to go, and Sachia waited until he’d disappeared down the staircase before she turned and walked back to her chair.

Sachia and Zechariah talked quietly as Ava slept the afternoon away.

“Where’s Marcus?” Sachia asked, realizing that Marcus had stepped out at some point but not returned.

“I don’t know,” Zechariah said, frowning as he turned to scan the room.

Outside, snow had started to fall, and the bedroom grew dim. Sachia walked over and lit the small paraffin lamp, casting a warm glow in the room.

It was late afternoon when Sachia left her vigil to go to the bathroom. When she returned, she found Zechariah lying on the bed next to Ava. They were both fast asleep and holding hands. Sachia watched them for a moment, smiling. It really was a miracle that after all this time, they’d made their way back to each other. For fifty years, they had led entirely separate lives, loved and lost, yet that friendship, the connection they shared when they were young, endured it all.

“Hey,” Marcus said softly from behind her. “How is she doin’?”

“Much the same,” Sachia said as she turned to look at him.

He nodded. “Can ye come downstairs?”

Sachia turned back to Ava and Zechariah, who were both now snoring peacefully, and nodded.

She followed Marcus down the stairs and to the kitchen. As she stepped through the doorway, she immediately noticed the table, which had been decorated with holly and white poinsettias. In the table’s center burned two dinner candles.

“What’s all this?” Sachia breathed, her brown eyes wide.

“Ye said that Christmas Eve dinner was a family tradition,” Marcus answered with a shrug. “So I made dinner.”

Sachia turned and gawked at him in amazement. “So that’s what you’ve been up to all afternoon?”

“Aye. Come and sit. I ken ye haven’t had anthin’ tae eat all day.”

He was right, and they both chuckled as Sachia’s stomach gurgled hungrily in agreement.

“What about Zechariah and Ava?” Sachia asked. “Should we wake them?”

“I think we should let them rest,” Marcus answered. “We’ll save them some.”

Sachia nodded as Marcus led her to the table, and she sat down. “So, what are we having?” she asked, now curious.

Marcus’s amber eyes twinkled as he turned to the stove and returned a moment later, setting a large platter on the table.

“Allow me tae introduce ye tae smash burgers,” Marcus presented, smiling.

Despite herself, Sachia grinned. She had to give it to him; they smelled amazing.

“Dinnae be shy,” Marcus encouraged. “Tuck in.”

Sachia reached for a burger and put it down on her plate, then reached for her knife and fork, but none were laid out on the table, so she pushed her chair back and got up.

“Where are ye goin’?” Marcus asked.

“There’s no cutlery—”

“Aye, I ken. Ye cannae eat a burger with a knife and fork. The only proper way is the *Englisch* way.”

Marcus lifted his burger to his mouth and took a huge bite; as he chewed, he reminded Sachia of a chipmunk, and she giggled.

“All right,” she agreed. “I’ll give it a go.”

She took her seat again and lifted the burger to her mouth, taking a bite every bit as big as the one Marcus had taken.

“So?” Marcus asked, smiling. “What do ye think?”

“*Appetitlich*,” Sachia approved, taking another bite.

In the space of fifteen minutes, Sachia managed to devour two huge burgers, and as she swallowed the last mouthful, she sat back in her chair and sighed in satisfaction.

“I don’t think I’ve ever eaten so much in my life,” she commented.

“Aye.”

Sachia smiled at Marcus. “*Danki* for doing all this.”

Marcus nodded. “I ken ye had a rough day. I just wanted tae do somethin’ tae make ye smile.”

They lapsed into silence. There was not a peep from upstairs, which meant that Ava and Zechariah were most likely still asleep.

“Ye’ve got a bit of burger sauce on your chin,” Marcus said, grinning at her.

“*Ach*,” Sachia said, reaching for a napkin and wiping her chin.

“It’s still there,” Marcus said, chuckling.

Sachia wiped her chin again.

“Here,” Marcus said, leaning across the table. “Let me.”

Sachia sat as still as a statue as Marcus reached over and wiped her chin with his thumb. Their eyes met, and Sachia’s breath caught. His thumb lingered on her skin, caressing her chin for a moment, setting her heart aflutter.

“There,” Marcus remarked in approval as he leaned back. “Perfect.”

Sachia said nothing for a moment, her heart still racing as she looked into Marcus’s eyes. Her mouth felt as dry as a desert as he smiled at her.

How could I not have realized it until now, until this moment? I promised Ava I’d be careful, but it snuck up on me without warning. I’ve fallen in love with Marcus Duncan.

Chapter Fourteen

Christmas morning dawned cool and clear. The snow, which fell throughout the night, had stopped, and the sun hung in the sky, a golden orb bathing the world in warmth. Marcus, who'd spent the night at Sachia's house on the old sofa just in case she needed him, stretched his arms above his head as he gazed out of the sitting room window.

He slowly rose, working out the crick in his neck with side-to-side head rolls, and walked down the hallway to the kitchen, where he found Sachia at the stove making coffee. She had her back to him, and her hair, which was usually pinned in a bun at the nape of her neck, hung in a long plait down her back. He studied her, reminiscing on how much he'd enjoyed their dinner, her company.

It's going tae be so hard tae say goodbye, but it's just how it has tae be; I dinnae belong in Whispering Pines.

"Merry Christmas," Marcus said brightly.

Sachia jumped, startled by his voice, and he grinned sheepishly.

"Sorry," he apologized.

Sachia smiled. "*Frehlicher Grischtdaag*. How did you sleep?"

"Well, believe it or not," Marcus said as he approached her. "How's Ava this mornin'?"

"She and Zechariah were up most of the night talking," Sachia said, sipping at her coffee. "They're asleep now."

Marcus smiled as Sachia turned, poured him a coffee, and handed him the mug. He was so happy and relieved that things had worked out for his grandfather and Ava. So much time had passed, but for them, it was as if no time passed at all.

"So, if I remember correctly, you mentioned something about a Christmas pickle," Marcus reminded her with a quizzical grin.

Sachia's smile morphed into a contemplative frown. "I've been thinking about that. I feel bad observing *Grischtdaag* with Ava stuck in bed upstairs. It doesn't feel right to celebrate without her."

Marcus looked thoughtful for a moment. "I think I might have an idea."

"I know that look," Sachia said half dubiously. "What are you thinking?"

Marcus wagged his eyebrows but said nothing as he took another sip of coffee, then placed the mug down on the table and left the kitchen.

"Marcus?" Sachia called after him. "Where are you going?"

"Out," Marcus called over his shoulder.

Marcus made his way out onto the snowy streets, a man on a mission. As he stepped onto the Kuhns' porch, he knocked on the door.

"What are you doing here?" Daniel asked in surprise as he pulled the door open.

"I need yer help," Marcus said.

Daniel raised an eyebrow but said nothing, waiting for Marcus to explain.

"Do ye have any brothers?" Marcus asked.

"I do," Daniel answered, now frowning.

Marcus nodded. "Aye, well, there's a bit o' heavy lifting that needs doin' at Sachia's house. Can ye all come and help?"

Daniel hesitated.

"Ah, come on," Marcus cajoled. "I know ye dinnae like me, but it is Christmas, after all."

"Fine," Daniel breathed out with a sigh. "But I am doing this for Sachia, not for you."

"Aye," Marcus said, smiling. "I ken."

Daniel turned and disappeared into the house briefly, returning with two teenage boys. They all made their way back to Sachia's house.

"What is going on?" Sachia asked in bewilderment as they all came trudging into the bedroom.

"Marcus said you needed help," Daniel stated simply.

"Marcus?" Sachia pressed. "What's going on?"

"Well, ye ken that Ava's on strict bedrest," Marcus explained, "so we're bringing Ava's bed to Christmas."

"You're what?" Sachia echoed, her eyes widening.

"Ye all ready?" Marcus asked, ignoring Sachia as he looked around at Daniel and his brothers.

They all nodded in agreement.

"We'll each take one corner," Marcus instructed.

"Marcus, I am not sure this is a *gut* idea," Zechariah interjected nervously.

"It'll be fine, Granda'," Marcus assured him.

"Marcus," Sachia said, raising her voice in her concern. "What if she falls again?"

Marcus sighed as he turned to Ava. "What do ye say, Ava?" he asked. "We cannae have Christmas without ye."

Ava looked around at all the faces in her room, then sighed.

"All right," she said, nodding. "Let's give it a go, but if you tip me on my head, we'll have words."

"Aye," Marcus agreed, smiling. "That's fair."

Marcus turned and walked over to the left bottom corner of the bed. Daniel took the opposite side, and his brothers took the two top corners.

"On three," Marcus instructed. "One, two, three, lift."

They lifted the bed off of the ground, and Sachia took a step forward, arms outstretched.

“Dinnae fash,” Marcus said, looking at her. “We won’t drop her.”

They carried the bed out the door and down the stairs with Sachia on their heels.

They had to tilt the bed slightly to get it into the sitting room, and Ava clung tightly to the headboard behind her.

“Let’s put it by the tree,” Marcus directed.

They carried the bed across the sitting room and set it down beside the small tree in the corner. The tree was modestly decorated with small wooden and paper ornaments; no flashing lights or tinsel were hanging from its narrow branches.

“Ye’re all righ’, Ava?” Marcus asked, slightly out of breath.

“Ya, I think so,” she answered.

Marcus smiled at her. “I can see why ma granda’ fancies ye. Ye’ve got a brave heart.”

Marcus turned to Daniel and his brothers. “Thank ye all.”

Daniel nodded courteously.

“*Danki*, Daniel,” Sachia said gratefully. “And *Frehlicher Grischtidaag*.”

“And to you,” Daniel reciprocated. “We’d better get home before our *maem* wonders where we’ve gone.”

Daniel and his brothers left, and Sachia turned to Ava again. Zechariah was sitting beside her on the bed.

“Are you sure you are all right?” she asked.

“I’m fine, Sachia,” Ava assured her. “Don’t worry.”

“Now, how about that pickle?” Marcus quipped.

“Pickle?” Zechariah repeated, frowning.

Marcus turned to Sachia expectantly, and she sighed. “It’s not really an *Amisch* tradition,” she admitted. “But my *daed’s familye*, generations ago, came from Germany, and the tradition was passed down from one generation to the next.”

“And what is the tradition?”

“Well, as the tradition goes, it is supposed to be a glass pickle,” Sachia explained. “Like a *Grischtdaag* ornament that was hidden among the other ornaments. But the glass pickle was broken years and years ago, so my *daed’s daed* came up with the idea of hiding a real pickle in the tree. So every *Grischtdaag*, since I can remember, my *daed* took a pickle from the pantry and hid it for us to find.”

“How interesting,” Zechariah said reflectively.

“Let’s get searchin’,” Marcus declared as he walked up to the tree.

“I haven’t had time to hide it yet,” Sachia confessed.

“Well, what are ye waitin’ for?” Marcus goaded, grinning at her. “Go and fetch the pickle.”

Sachia hesitated a moment, then turned and headed into the kitchen. When she returned a few moments later, she instructed, “Close your eyes, everyone.”

Marcus, Zechariah, and Ava closed their eyes as Sachia proceeded to hide the pickle.

“All right,” she said.

Marcus opened his eyes and looked over to where Sachia was standing beside the Christmas tree.

“Marcus,” Sachia said. “As a visitor to the town, you have the honor of looking for the pickle first.”

Marcus walked up to the tree, sniffing over the branches; using his keen sense of smell, he was able to locate the pickle in seconds.

“Got it!” he cried triumphantly, waving the pickle in the air.

Sachia smiled. “The person who finds the pickle is supposed to have *gut* luck all year,” she said.

Marcus smiled as he took a bite of the pickle. “So what’s next on the Amish Christmas agenda?” he asked, looking around.

“Well, usually, we exchange small gifts around the tree,” Sachia explained.

“My gifts are at home,” Ava chipped in.

“Mine, too,” Zechariah added.

“We’ll go and fetch them,” Marcus said with a happy clap.

Ava and Zechariah explained where Marcus and Sachia could find the gifts, and they each set off in opposite directions, returning a short while later. The presents were then doled out to their respective recipients.

“Now, everyone takes a turn opening one at a time,” Sachia instructed. “Marcus, you can go first.”

“All right,” Marcus agreed, fingering the small present wrapped in brown paper.

He carefully peeled away the paper to reveal a small ornament: a Belsnickle.

Marcus grinned goofily as he looked across at Sachia.

“I thought you could take him home with you,” she said softly. “Something to remind you of your stay.”

“As if I could forget,” Marcus retorted tongue in cheek, his eyes twinkling. “Okay. Who’s next?”

“Ava,” Sachia said.

Ava opened up her present, which was a beautiful woolen scarf knitted by Sachia.

“It’s *wunderbaar*. *Danki*, Sachia.”

Next was Zechariah’s turn. Marcus had bought him a book about gardening. Sachia then opened her gift from Ava, which was a set of beautifully embroidered handkerchiefs.

Marcus opened his gift from Zechariah next—his mother’s gardening book, the one he’d found in the sitting room. Marcus stared at the cover in awe for a long moment. He hardly had anything of his mother’s.

“She’d want you to have it,” Zechariah said softly.

“Thank ye, Granda’,” Marcus said, his voice thick with emotion.

Marcus met his grandfather’s eye, and the older man smiled at him.

“Ava?” Sachia said. “Your turn.”

Ava opened the envelope from Zechariah, and as she peeked inside, her hand flew up over her mouth. “You didn’t?” she said, shaking her head in disbelief.

“What is it?” Sachia asked.

Ava held up the Christmas card to reveal a crudely drawn picture of two elderly people holding hands as they walked down a snowy avenue of tall pine trees.

“Now, open yours,” Ava prompted Zechariah.

He opened his envelope to reveal an almost identical scene—although more skillfully drawn.

Marcus looked between Ava and Zechariah, who were gazing tenderly into each other’s eyes.

“Righ’,” he said, clearing his throat. “Sachia, should we go and make some tea?”

Sachia nodded, and together, they left the room. As they entered the kitchen, Marcus reached into his pocket and pulled out a small gift wrapped in tissue paper.

“Here,” he said, handing it to Sachia.

“You didn’t need to get me anything,” she said with a soft frown.

“I ken,” Marcus replied. “But I wanted tae.”

She took it from him and delicately unfolded the paper to reveal a small gold pendant in the shape of a thistle that hung from a thin gold chain.

“It’s beautiful, Marcus,” she breathed. “But it’s too much.”

“I ken you dinnae really wear jewelry in yer community,” Marcus said. “But it was ma mother’s, and I wanted ye tae

have it.”

“I can’t, Marcus—”

“Ye can,” Marcus assured her.

He reached over and gently closed Sachia’s fingers over the gift. “Think o’ it as somethin’ tae mind me by.”

Marcus held Sachia’s gaze, and as much as he wanted to lean down and kiss her, he fought the urge with every fiber of his being. He knew if he gave in to it and listened to his heart, they would only get hurt. And he didn’t want to hurt Sachia.

“We should probably put the kettle on,” Marcus said, sliding his hands into his pockets.

Sachia covered the gift Marcus had given her with the tissue paper again and slipped it into the pocket of her dress as she nodded. She walked over to the stove and put the kettle on to boil, and as they waited for the water to heat, Marcus helped Sachia prepare a tray. However, it was excruciating for Marcus to be near her, to inadvertently brush against her or touch her hand. All he wanted to do was take her into his arms and kiss her.

“I think I might go for a walk,” Marcus said suddenly, desperate to escape.

“Okay,” Sachia said, frowning slightly.

Without another word, Marcus left the kitchen via the back door and stepped into the snowy garden. He circled the garden and then walked out onto the street, the chilly air helping to clear his head.

In twenty-four hours, I’ll be back in Scotland—ma home. This here is not ma home; aye, I feel connections with ma granda’ and ma mother here, but it isn’t where I belong. Then, of course, there’s Sachia. We couldnae be more different, yet I’ve never met anyone like her. A few days ago, I’d never have even entertained the possibility of stayin’ in Whispering Pines, so how has so much changed? How has this tiny backward town gotten under ma skin?

Marcus sighed as he turned back towards the house. At the end of the day, he knew that as tempted as he was to stay in Whispering Pines, he had to go home. How could he ever belong in a place like that? He was an outsider.

As Marcus stepped back into the house, he heard muffled voices coming from the sitting room. He walked down the hallway and found Bishop Burkholder and other townspeople standing around Ava's bed. All had their heads bent in prayer.

Marcus stood by the door, and when the prayer was over, Sachia walked over to him.

"The Bishop came to do a small service," she explained. "Because Ava could not make it to the church this morning."

Marcus nodded. He wasn't surprised. In the past day alone, he'd seen how much the town came to the aid of anyone in need; it was refreshing to find humans who actually truly cared about other humans.

"Are you all right?" Sachia asked.

Marcus nodded. "Aye, I'm fine."

Marcus and Sachia stood together for the rest of the service after which the bishop and the other community members left. By this time, it was almost midday.

"Do you want to help me make lunch?" Sachia asked Marcus.

"I was actually thinkin' I should get home and pack," he replied. "My flight is pretty early tomorrow."

"*Ach*, okay," Sachia said, her tone laced with disappointment.

"I'll see ye later," said Marcus.

Sachia nodded as Marcus turned and left the sitting room. He returned to his grandfather's house and went straight to his bedroom. His bag, which he'd never completely unpacked, was on the floor beneath the window. Marcus sat on the end of his bed and stared out the window for a while. He hated the fact that he'd disappointed Sachia, but what was the alternative? He'd already gotten too close to her.

“Marcus?” Zechariah called. “Are you here?”

“I’m in the bedroom, Granda’,” Marcus called back.

A few moments later, Zechariah stepped into the doorway.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “Sachia said you came home to pack?”

“Aye,” Marcus answered.

Zechariah glanced at the untouched bag on the ground, then back up at Marcus.

“What’s going on?” he asked kindheartedly.

“Nothin’,” Marcus said with a shrug.

Zechariah sighed as he stepped over the threshold and sat down on the bed beside Marcus.

“Is this about Sachia?” he asked with keen discernment.

Marcus frowned. “How did ye ken?”

“I might be old, but I’m not blind,” Zechariah said with a wry chuckle. “I saw how you were looking at her this morning; Ava did, too.”

Marcus sighed as he leaned forward, his arms resting on his thighs. “It doesnae matter,” he said, shaking his head. “I am goin’ home tomorrow.”

“Have you ever thought that maybe this could be your home?” Zechariah asked.

Marcus frowned. “I dinnae belong here, Granda’. I dinnae fit in.”

“I am sure your *maem* thought the exact same thing when she left Whispering Pines and moved to Scotland,” Zechariah countered. “But she chose to follow her heart, and everything worked out in the end.”

“It’s different,” Marcus disputed. “I have a home, a job that I love. How can I just give that all up?”

“Your *maem* had a home, too,” Zechariah insisted. “But what I think it comes down to is looking deep into your heart

and figuring out what is really important to you.”

Marcus sighed. “I never wanted this,” he said, shaking his head. “I swore I’d never fall in love.”

“When it comes to love, sometimes you aren’t looking for it. It just happens.”

“So there’s naethin’ I can do? I dinnae have a choice?”

“You always have a choice, Marcus,” Zechariah affirmed. “You can choose to go back home, to walk away.”

“And what happens tae the love I feel for Sachia?”

“*Ach*,” Zechariah said, smiling sadly. “I cannot give you an answer to that—at least not the one you are looking for.”

Marcus sat, silent, as Zechariah got up from the bed and walked over to the door. He hesitated a moment, his hand on the doorframe, and looked back at Marcus.

“Whatever you decide, we will always be *familye*,” Zechariah said. “That will never change.”

“Aye,” Marcus said, nodding.

Zechariah turned and exited the room, leaving Marcus alone with his thoughts.

I never wanted this, tae be in love. I was there when love destroyed my da’, so how can I now just throw caution to the wind and run right into it?

Chapter Fifteen

“Where’s Zechariah?” Sachia asked as she stepped into the sitting room. “Lunch is ready—”

“He went to find Marcus,” Ava explained.

Sachia nodded as she entered the room and sat down on the bed beside Ava. The older woman was looking better; her cheeks had some color, and her blue eyes were brighter.

“Are you all right?” Ava asked.

Sachia nodded wordlessly.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Ava pressed gently.

“Not really,” Sachia answered miserably, shrugging.

Ava leaned forward and put her hand on Sachia’s. “You fell in love with him, didn’t you?”

Sachia nodded, blinking back tears. “I didn’t mean to,” she protested. “I didn’t even realize how I felt until last night.”

Ava nodded sympathetically. “Sometimes it can happen overnight,” she said. “Zechariah and I were friends for years before I fell in love with him, and it was not as if anything notable happened to change my feelings; I just realized one day they were different.”

Sachia nodded, sniffing and wiping her cheek with the back of her sleeve. “But you and Zechariah made sense; Marcus and I don’t make any sense.”

“You two make complete sense,” Ava countered.

“What do you mean?” Sachia asked, looking up at Ava with a frown.

“Marcus challenges you, he surprises you, he pushes you to be a better you,” Ava explained. “He makes you feel as if the whole world is bigger, brighter, somehow.”

Sachia listened to Ava’s words, and she knew her wise friend had hit the nail on the head. That was exactly how Marcus made her feel.

“How do you know all of this?” Sachia asked.

“Because Marcus is just like his *groosdaadi*,” Ava said. “I’d almost forgotten what Zechariah was like as a young *mann*, but he had the same disarming charm, that unpredictability that always kept you wondering what he would do next. No one made me laugh more than he did.”

Ava smiled to herself.

“But Zechariah was also stubborn and proud, and I see those qualities in Marcus, too,” Ava continued. “In fact, Grace was the same.”

“Marcus’s *maem*?”

Ava nodded. “What I’m trying to say, Sachia, is that it’s not your fault you fell in love with Marcus. I can understand better than most. The question now is what you are going to do about it?”

Sachia frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, are you going to tell him how you feel?” Ava asked.

“*Nee*,” Sachia said, shaking her head. “I can’t tell him.”

“Is it because you’re afraid he might not feel the same way?”

Sachia shook her head. “It’s not that. If he didn’t feel the same way for me, I could tell him how I feel without worrying.”

“So what is it, then?” Ava pressed.

“I’m not sure where he stands now in his relationship with *Gott*. I would have to be certain of that before allowing him to court me, for I would not want to be unequally yoked. But anyway, I couldn’t ask him to stay for me,” Sachia added. “He loves his home and his job. It wouldn’t be fair to expect him to give that all up.”

“What if he wanted to?” Ava reasoned.

“I don’t think he would,” Sachia admitted with a sigh. “I think he would miss his world, the comforts.”

“Perhaps,” Ava said. “Perhaps not. But Sachia, Zechariah and I were lucky. We got our second chance. I don’t want you to one day regret not telling Marcus how you truly feel.”

Sachia ruminated over Ava’s words for a long moment.

“Think about it, okay?” Ava encouraged. “You still have some time.”

Sachia nodded as Ava squeezed her hand, and just then, Zechariah stepped into the room, followed by Marcus.

“Something smells *gut*,” Zechariah exclaimed as he walked over to Ava and kissed her on the cheek.

Sachia got up from the bed and walked over to where Marcus stood.

“I didn’t think I’d see you again today,” she said.

“It’s Christmas,” Marcus reasoned. “And ye did promise me the best Christmas o’ ma life.”

Despite the knots in her stomach, Sachia smiled.

“I did promise that, didn’t I?” she said. “Well, *kumm* on, you can help me carve the chicken.”

A short while later, they were all gathered around Ava’s bedside with their plates on their laps. Zechariah was reminiscing about Christmas when they were children, and Sachia’s jaw ached from smiling so much. Every now and then, when she caught Marcus’s eye, she smiled at him, and he smiled back. But as much as she yearned to tell him how she felt, she just couldn’t. Even if he determined in his heart to put God first, it was selfish to ask him to give anything up for her. Sachia was no expert at love, but she knew that love was never selfish.

After lunch, Ava and Zechariah lay down together to take a nap, and Marcus helped Sachia with the washing up.

“Would ye like tae go for a walk?” Marcus asked as they finished the last of the dishes. “Walk off some o’ the mountain o’ food we’ve just eaten?”

“Sure,” Sachia agreed. “Let me just get my coat.”

A few minutes later, they set off together through the snow towards the lake. They didn't talk much as they walked, but Sachia kept close to Marcus, knowing she'd want to relive these moments when he was gone.

"How's Ava doin'?" Marcus asked, breaking their easy silence. "Has she mentioned anything about Asher or the letter?"

"Not really," Sachia answered. "She told me she's been dreaming of Asher and that she thinks it's *Gott* telling her to forgive him, to let it go."

Marcus nodded. "I think that's been one o' the best parts about me comin' here—bein' able tae finally start lettin' go o' the past."

"Do you think you'll ever *kumm* back to Whispering Pines?" Sachia asked hopefully. "To see your *groosdaadi*?"

"I dinnae ken," Marcus answered honestly.

Sachia nodded, and they fell silent again just as the lake came into view.

"What's this place like in the spring?" Marcus asked.

"Absolutely beautiful," Sachia answered without needing time to give it much thought. "The willows are the first to get their leaves, and in the spring breeze, their branches dance across the water like fingers on a piano. As you walk around, all you can smell are the bluebells and hear the constant hum of the bees as they collect pollen from the wild bergamot."

"It sounds braw (splendid)."

"You could stick around a while longer and see for yourself," Sachia quipped, elbowing him playfully in the ribs.

"Aye," Marcus said. "But I think if I stayed any longer, it'd just make it harder tae leave."

Sachia frowned. "I thought you were looking forward to returning to Scotland," she posited.

"Aye, so did I," Marcus acknowledged. "I didnae expect tae fall in love with this place."

“That’s the thing about love,” Sachia sighed. “It sneaks up on you when you least expect it.”

“I think ye’re right, lass. I think ye’re right.”

They walked around the entire lake. Not another soul was in sight, and it felt as if the whole world belonged to just the two of them. As they passed the bare willows, Sachia’s boot caught on a root, and she fell face-first into the snow, her hands bracing her fall but not stopping it.

“Sachia?” Marcus said, concerned. “Are ye all righ’?”

“Ya,” Sachia said, laughing.

Instead of getting up, though, Sachia rolled onto her back and put her arms and legs out in a star shape; she then proceeded to move them up and down in unison.

“Are ye daft?” Marcus asked incredulously. “What are ye doin’?”

“Making a snow angel,” Sachia said as if it were obvious. “Have you never made one?”

“No,” Marcus said, shaking his head. “I dinnae care for frozen buttocks.”

Sachia sat up and reached for his hand. When he took it, thinking he was going to help her up, she pulled hard, and he fell in the snow beside her with a grunt. “*Kumm* on,” she urged. “It’s fun.”

Grumbling, Marcus lay down beside her and started to move his legs and arms up and down, mimicking Sachia.

“See?” she said, turning her head to smile at him. “Fun.”

Marcus raised an eyebrow. “I think I pulled a muscle!”

Sachia chuckled as they stopped moving their arms and legs to catch their breath. As they lay on their backs in the snow, looking up at the sky, their hands were less than an inch apart. As Marcus brushed her fingertips with his in a caress, her heart began to race. Still, she did not turn to him or move. In that moment, the feeling of his fingers on hers and the silence between them said more than words ever could. They

loved one another, but he was leaving. They didn't need to talk about it; all they needed was to be there in that moment, to create a memory that would serve them for the rest of their days.

The laughter of children broke the moment, and Sachia looked up to see a group of schoolchildren with their skates arriving at the lake.

"We should probably get back," Marcus said.

"*Ya*," Sachia agreed although she did not want the moment to end.

He pushed himself up to a crouched position, then stood, helping Sachia to her feet. They walked back around the lake toward home. Every now and again, Sachia cast a furtive glance at Marcus, but he looked lost in his thoughts.

"Do you want to *kumm* in for hot cocoa?" Sachia asked as they stepped onto the front porch.

"I would," Marcus said, "but I really do have tae get packed. Will ye tell Zechariah I've gone home?"

"Sure." Sachia nodded. "So I guess this is goodbye, then?"

Marcus took a step forward, reaching for Sachia's hand and holding it tenderly in his.

"Thank ye, Sachia," Marcus said, his intense gaze holding hers. "For remindin' me what Christmas is truly about. God, family, and friends, and caring for and loving those around us."

Sachia nodded. Her throat felt like she'd swallowed a cactus.

"I'll never forget these past few days," Marcus said, his amber eyes tender. "Or ye."

"Neither will I," Sachia said sadly.

Marcus smiled tenderly, but as much as she wanted to, she could not bring herself to return it.

"Ye'll keep an eye on ma granda'?" Marcus asked.

“Of course.”

Marcus nodded. “Well, I guess this is goodbye, then.”

Sachia nodded, doing her best not to cry.

“Ye look after yerself, Sachia Bachman.”

Sachia nodded mutely as Marcus turned to go, descending the porch steps.

“Marcus, wait.”

Marcus turned, and Sachia walked over to him, feeling as though she were in slow motion. She leaned up on her tippy-toes, and closing her eyes, she touched her lips to his in a soft kiss. For a moment, nothing else existed but her and Marcus.

“I couldn’t let you go without doing that,” Sachia whispered, leaning her forehead on his chin.

“Aye,” Marcus said tenderly. “Ye ken, if things were different—”

“I know,” Sachia said, reaching up and cupping his cheek in her palm. “But...what if I go with you?”

“What?” Marcus said, his eyes widening in surprise.

“What if I go to Scotland with you?” Sachia repeated.

Marcus considered her proposal for a moment, then smiled softly at her. “Ye cannae come with me, lass. Yer home is here.”

“Your *maem* did it; she left Whispering Pines for love,” Sachia contended.

“Aye, she did,” Marcus agreed. “And part o’ me would like nothin’ better than tae sweep you off yer feet and take you back with me. But ye’re too good for my world, Sachia. You belong here with Ava and Zechariah. Yer home is here, in Whisperin’ Pines.”

Sachia’s throat was swollen with emotion, and she nodded, unable to speak. Marcus was right; Whispering Pines was her home. As much as she wanted to be with him, she knew, deep down, she’d never fit in anywhere else.

Marcus closed his eyes as Sachia scrutinized his face, trailing it with her fingers, committing each freckle and line to memory.

“I should go,” Marcus said reluctantly.

Sachia nodded as she dropped her hand and took a step back.

“Goodbye, Marcus,” she said softly.

“*Bis widder*, Sachia.”

She smiled as he turned to go, and as she watched him walk away, snow began to fall.



Sachia woke up the next morning and rolled over in bed. She stared at the ceiling for a long moment, her stomach hollow.

Marcus is gone; this must be what heartbreak feels like. No wonder he did his best to swear off love.

Eventually, Sachia got up and dressed. As she left the bedroom, she stopped in to check on Ava. Zechariah wasn't there because he'd taken Marcus to the train station.

“How are you feeling?” Ava asked, her eyes full of concern.

Sachia shrugged. “I think I'm going to go into the shop. Try and keep busy.”

“Are you sure?” Ava pressed. “No one expects the shop to be open today; you could stay home and wallow...”

“*Nee*,” Sachia sighed. “I need to try and distract myself.”

“Okay,” Ava agreed. “If you're sure.”

“Do you need anything before I go?”

“*Nee danki*. Zechariah brought me breakfast before he left for the station.”

Sachia nodded. “I'll see you a bit later, then.”

Sachia retrieved her dark wool coat from behind the door and headed outside. The day was bright, but she hardly noticed as she trudged through the snow.

All the shops in town were closed as she made her way down Main Street. As she approached the charity shop, she reached into the pocket of her coat for her keys, and her fingers brushed against something small and cold. She pulled the gold chain with the thistle pendant out from her pocket and held it between her fingers, her heart aching. Impulsively, she undid the clasp and slipped the chain around her neck, tucking it safely under the collar of her dress. The cool metal warmed almost instantly against her skin.

Inside the shop, the air was chilly, so she walked over to the coal stove and lit the fire. As she walked past the table of ornaments, she stopped and stared at the place where the Belsnickel once sat.

Sachia sighed, frustrated and aching at all the reminders of Marcus. She walked through the shop to the storage closet and resumed her search for the elusive feather duster. As she searched, the small bell out front above the door tinkled.

“I’ll be there in a sec,” she called.

Sachia turned and left the storeroom, closing the door behind her, and as she turned to the door, she stopped dead in her tracks.

“Hi,” Marcus said, smiling.

“What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be on a train to the airport.”

“Aye. But when I got there, I realized there really was no sense in leavin’ the place where my heart is.”

Without thought, Sachia raced across the shop and threw herself into Marcus’s arms. He dropped his bag at his feet as he leaned down to kiss her, filling Sachia’s heart with so much joy she was sure it would burst.

After a moment, she let him go and took a step back.

“So what does this mean?” Sachia asked. “Are you staying for *gut*?”

Marcus nodded, and Sachia frowned.

“But what about your job? What about Scotland?”

Marcus sighed as he took her hands in his. “I was leavin’,” he explained. “I’d made up ma mind tae go, ye ken. But the further I got from this town, from ye, the worse I felt. By the time we got tae the train station, I kent I’d made a mistake, so we turned righ’ around and came back.”

“I don’t know if I can let you do this for me,” Sachia said. “Give up your world.”

“Ye can,” Marcus insisted. “I love ye, Sachia, and I’ve also fallen in love with this town and its ways. It’s the first place that’s ever truly felt like home tae me, and here, I can feel ma mother. I dinnae have anyone in Scotland, not really, but here, I have ye and ma granda’ and Ava. I ken it’s a whole different life, but if I’m bein’ honest, I dinnae have much o’ a life back in Scotland. I like the simplicity here; it helps one tae focus on God and the people that matter more.”

“But you have your job in Scotland,” Sachia reminded him.

“Aye. But I reckon’ I can grow things here well enough, too.”

Sachia’s heart soared as she looked into Marcus’s eyes.

“So you are sure you know what you’re giving up?” Sachia asked with a coy grin. “No more smartphone?”

“Aye,” Marcus said, smiling as he kissed her on the nose. “And I ken it’s worth it.”

Epilogue

“Marcus?” Sachia reprimanded. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Marcus turned away from the Christmas tree and grinned sheepishly.

“I was just admiring the ornaments, ye ken?”

Sachia raised an eyebrow. “So you weren’t trying to find the *Grischtdaag* pickle?” she asked.

“Of course not,” said Marcus, feigning shock.

“*Gut*,” Sachia said. “Because you got to go first last *Grischtdaag*, and it was only because you were a visitor. This year, we are drawing straws to see who goes first.”

Ava was sitting on the old rocking chair by the fire watching Sachia and Marcus, and she smiled to herself. They’d come such a long way in the last year though it had not been without its challenges. But here they all were, twelve months later and unbelievably happy.

On the mantelpiece behind Sachia and Marcus sat the little Belsnickle ornament and the gardening book that had belonged to Grace, Marcus’s mother. From a nail, hung the delicate gold thistle pendant, which every so often caught the light from the fire and twinkled prettily.

“I’m back,” Zechariah called as he entered the sitting room. “It’s getting cold out there; we can expect snow soon.”

Zechariah walked over to Ava and kissed her on the forehead.

“Marcus?” Zechariah said, reaching into his pocket. “There was a letter from the gardens.”

“Thank ye,” Marcus said, taking it from him.

“How is Blair doing?” Sachia asked.

After Marcus had relocated to Whispering Pines, he agreed to be available to help his assistant, Blair, take over his job at the Botanic Garden in Edinburgh.

“She’s learning. I dinnae believe she will have tae write with questions for much longer.”

Ava suspected that a part of Marcus missed his old job although he never said anything.

“Shall we get going?” Sachia prompted. “We don’t want to be late again, like last year.”

That year, the carols by candlelight program was being hosted on Christmas Eve.

“Ya,” Ava agreed. “Let’s go.”

They collected their coats and headed out of Sachia’s house. As they crossed the porch, Ava slid her arm through Zechariah’s and pulled herself close to him.

“I’m looking forward to my *Grischtdaag* card this year,” Ava said with childlike anticipation.

“So am I,” Zechariah agreed.

Ava smiled as she rested her head on his arm. The past year had also brought its challenges for her and Zechariah. It took Ava months to recover from her fall and even now, some nights, she was woken up by the aching in her ribs. Not only had Ava struggled to recover physically but also emotionally. Discovering Zechariah’s letter after fifty years changed everything. It was the very thing that had brought them back together, but it also left Ava reeling. All that time, Asher kept the letter a secret. He’d lied to her, and for a long time, she struggled to forgive him for what he’d done. But with God’s help, Ava was beginning to come to terms with Asher’s actions and to understand that although he’d lied, he acted out of love and fear. No man or woman was perfect.

Despite the hardships of the past year, Zechariah stood by her side, and every day, she fell in love with him all over again. She and Zechariah had been married for almost a year now. The bishop married them on New Year’s Day, with no

one but Sachia and Marcus in attendance. The day she married Zechariah would always be one of the happiest of Ava's life.

"You okay?" Zechariah asked, smiling down at her.

Ava nodded. "I was just thinking about everything that's happened this year," she said.

"It's been a busy year, that's for sure," remarked Zechariah.

Up ahead, Sachia and Marcus were walking hand in hand.

"How is Marcus doing?" Ava asked.

"Fine, I think," Zechariah answered. "Daniel said he can have the greenhouse ready by spring."

"That's *gut*," Ava said, smiling. "I often wonder if he misses Scotland and his old life."

"I think a part of him will always miss it," Zechariah said. "But I think his commitment over the past year has shown that he really wants this life and to be a part of this *gmay*."

Ava nodded. Marcus had given up a lot to be with Sachia. He'd followed his heart, but he'd had to work to become a part of their community. After Marcus made the decision to remain in Whispering Pines, they'd gone to speak with Bishop Burkholder, who agreed to let Marcus join their community as long as he was willing to convert to their faith. Only after Marcus was Amish would they be permitted to marry.

So, that was the path they followed, and Sachia had walked with him every step of the way, holding his hand, coaching him, encouraging him. Although it was hard, Marcus stuck to it, and Ava watched them grow stronger as a couple.

Six months later, in July, Marcus was baptized into the community and had sworn to abide by the rules of the *Ordnung*. He promised to uphold their community, their beliefs, and their values. He'd meant what he said, and the community of Whispering Pines accepted him as one of their own.

A few months later, in early November, Bishop Burkholder married Marcus and Sachia along with the other young couples. After Sachia and Marcus were married, Marcus moved out of his grandfather's house into Sachia's house.

Ava spotted the small school come into view. Its roof was covered in snow, and the candlelight shining through the windows made it look invitingly warm and cozy.

"*Frehlicher Grischtadaag*," Bishop Burkholder greeted as they approached the church doors. "How *gut* to see you all."

"And you, Bishop Burkholder," said Ava.

"There are candles in the basket inside," he said.

They all filed into the school and took their seats on a bench near the middle. As Ava looked from Zechariah, to Sachia, to Marcus, it was hard to believe how much had changed in a year.

"*Guder owed*, Schwartzes, Duncans."

Ava looked up to see Daniel Kuhns standing at the end of their row.

"*Guder owed*, Daniel," Ava said. "It's lovely to see you."

"And you, Mrs. Schwartz."

"Marcus tells us the greenhouse is going well," Zechariah commented.

"Indeed," Daniel said, nodding. "I think it will be some of my best work yet."

"Well, Marcus is very grateful for your help," Sachia added.

"Aye," Marcus said, nodding. "I am."

"Well, I'd better go," Daniel said. "My *fraa* will be wondering where I am. A very blessed Christmas to you all."

"And to you," wished Zechariah.

Ava smiled at the young man as he turned and walked away. She knew it was not easy for Daniel when he lost

Sachia; however, he'd kept his promise and stayed friends with her. He was now married and was by all accounts happy.

A few moments later, Bishop Burkholder came inside, closing the doors behind him, and a hush fell over the congregation.

"*Guder owed to you all,*" Bishop Burkholder said, smiling around the room. "*Danki* all for coming to tonight's carols by candlelight. Now, let us begin with an old favorite, 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.'" "

The congregation began to sing together, their voices weaving together like a rich tapestry. Ava looked around the room, grateful that she'd been blessed with another Christmas to celebrate with her family and her community.

A while later, Bishop Burkholder got up and stood in the front of the church again. "*Danki* again for braving this cold, cold night to *kumm* and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ," he said brightly. "As per tradition, refreshments are available at the back of the school, so eat and be merry, and I hope that each and every one of you has a *Frehlicher Grischtstag*."

"Would you mind getting me some tea?" Ava asked Zechariah.

"Of course," he said, getting up from the bench.

"I'll help you," Sachia offered.

Ava and Marcus were left alone together, and for a moment, neither spoke.

"I was just thinking on the walk over here how much has happened this year," Ava mused aloud.

"Aye," Marcus agreed. "It's been busy."

Ava nodded. "Are you happy, Marcus?" she asked.

Marcus turned to look at her. "Aye," he said, nodding. "I think I am happier than I've ever been in ma whole life."

Ava smiled as she reached over and put her hand on his arm.

"I'm glad," she said, patting him gently.

“What about ye?” Marcus asked. “Are ye happy?”

Ava looked across the room where Zechariah was struggling to keep the teacup steady as he poured the milk. She didn't know how much time they still had together, but this was their second chance, and Ava was determined not to waste even one second.

“I am,” Ava said, looking back at Marcus. “I love your *groosdaadi* and our little *familye*.”

Sachia and Zechariah arrived then, carrying tea and cake, and they all sat together, eating, drinking, and talking. When they were finished, they made their way out of the school and back to Sachia and Marcus's house for dinner.

“I've done most of the cooking already,” Sachia said as she and Ava walked into the kitchen. “It's just the gravy and the peas left.”

“Okay,” Ava agreed. “I'll put some water on to boil.”

Later that evening, they were all seated around the table, eating roast chicken, potatoes, and peas. In the center of the table, a platter piled high with smash burgers sat in honor of Marcus.

“Maybe you should have some more peas,” Sachia noted as Ava helped herself to another burger.

“I am an old *fraa*,” Ava argued. “I can eat what I like.”

“You know what Dr. Lantz said about your blood pressure,” Sachia chided. “Red meat is not your friend.”

Ava pouted.

“Come on, Sach,” Marcus prompted with a smile. “It's Christmas. Let her eat the burger.”

Ava shot Marcus a grateful look.

“Fine,” Sachia said with a sigh. “But tomorrow, it's back to peas.”

Ava bit into her burger happily, and the conversation moved on.

“Supper was *appetitlich*,” Zechariah said, sitting back in his chair. “*Danki*, Ava, Sachia.”

All the plates around the table were empty.

“I am glad you enjoyed it,” Sachia said, pleased, as she leaned over and collected and stacked their plates.

She walked over to the sink, but no sooner had she set the plates down, when she moaned softly before rushing from the room with her hand over her mouth.

Marcus immediately rose from his chair, but Ava gently put her hand out to stop him.

“I’ll go and see if she’s all right,” Ava said.

Marcus nodded as he sat down again, and Ava shuffled out of the room and down the hall to the bathroom.

“Sachia?” Ava called, knocking on the bathroom door. “Are you all right?”

There was no reply, so Ava reached for the handle and pushed the door open.

Sachia was perched on the edge of the bathtub.

“Are you all right?” Ava asked again as she sat down beside Sachia.

Sachia nodded. “Was it something that you ate?” Ava asked. “Maybe too many peas?”

“It wasn’t the peas...” Sachia said, looking pointedly at Ava and smiling.

“Really?” Ava said, her blue eyes widening in surprise and delight. “You’re expecting a *boppli*?”

“I wasn’t sure,” Sachia confessed. “But I’ve been throwing up every night, and there have been other signs.”

Ava slipped her arm around Sachia’s shoulder and pulled her close. “This is *wunderbaar* news,” she exclaimed, her voice full of emotion. “I am going to be a *groossmammi*.”

Sachia turned and smiled at Ava, whose heart felt ready to burst at the seams. She’d never been able to have children

despite how hard she and Asher tried, and Ava never thought she'd ever get the chance to be a grandmother.

“*Gott is gut,*” she said, blinking back tears.

Sachia smiled, her brown eyes watery as she leaned her head against Ava's.

“We're going to have a *boppli,*” she whispered.

Ava and Sachia sat together in the bathroom for a long while before Marcus finally arrived to check on them. Ava stood up and shuffled out, giving them a moment alone. The kitchen was empty now; Marcus and Zechariah had cleared the dinner plates. Ava walked back down the hallway and into the sitting room, where she found Zechariah standing by the fire.

“Is she all right?” he asked, his tone concerned.

“She's fine,” Ava said as she walked up to him. “In fact, she's better than fine. She's having a *boppli.*”

“She is?” Zechariah said, his face breaking into a bright smile.

“*Ya,*” said Ava as she wrapped her arms around his waist and looked up at him. “Can you believe that?”

Zechariah shook his head in amazement.

“Despite all the challenges that we've had, this has been a *gut year,*” Ava declared. “*Gott* has blessed us in so many ways.”

“He has,” Zechariah agreed, kissing her on the top of her head. “He really has.”

Through the house, they heard Marcus's cheering and guessed that Sachia had broken the good news to him.

“I'm goin' tae be a father,” Marcus said proudly as he came rushing in through the sitting room door. “Can ye believe it?”

“It's *wunderbaar* news,” Ava said, as she walked up to him and hugged him affectionately. “Congratulations, Marcus.”

As she let him go, Zechariah pulled him into a tight hug.

“I’m going to be an *urgroosvadder*,” Zechariah stated proudly.

“Aye,” Marcus agreed. “Ye are.”

Sachia joined them in the sitting room, looking a bit pale and tired but otherwise well. She smiled around the room at the scene before her.

“So I guess everyone is caught up on the *gut* news, then?”

Zechariah walked up to Sachia and hugged her tightly. “You okay?”

Sachia nodded before she turned and looked at Marcus. “I think I might go for a walk,” she said. “I’m still feeling a bit nauseated, but I think the fresh air might help.”

“I’ll come with ye,” Marcus stated.

“I’m just walking around the block,” Sachia said. “You don’t need to *kumm*.”

“If ye think I’m lettin’ ye out o’ ma sight, ye’ve got rocks in yer head!”

“Fine,” Sachia said with a chuckle. “*Kumm* on, then.”

They exited the room, leaving Ava and Zechariah alone again. The couple took their seats by the fire in the old rocking chairs. Zechariah automatically reached over for Ava’s hand. She looked into his eyes, which were still as green as they’d been when he was just a boy.

“I always imagined what it would be like to grow old with you,” Ava said lovingly. “Two oldies sitting in their rocking chairs by the fire.”

“And?” Zechariah asked, smiling. “Is this as good as what you imagined?”

“It’s even better.”

Thank you, readers!

Thank you for reading this book. It is important to me to share my stories with you and that you enjoy them. May I ask a favor of you? If you enjoyed this book, would you please take a moment to [leave a review on Amazon](#) and/or [Goodreads](#)? Thank you for your support!

Also, each week, I send my readers updates about my life as well as information about my new releases, freebies, promos, and book recommendations. If you're interested in receiving my weekly newsletter, please go to newsletter.sylviaprice.com, and it will ask you for your email. As a thank-you, you will receive several FREE exclusive short stories that aren't available for purchase!

Blessings,

Sylvia

Books By This Author

[The Christmas Cards: An Amish Holiday Romance](#)

Lucy Yoder is a young Amish widow who recently lost the love of her life, Albrecht. As Christmas approaches, she dreads what was once her favorite holiday, knowing that this Christmas was supposed to be the first one she and Albrecht shared together. Then, one December morning, Lucy discovers a Christmas card from an anonymous sender on her doorstep. Lucy receives more cards, all personal, all tender, all comforting. Who in the shadows is thinking of her at Christmas?

Andy Peachey was born with a rare genetic disorder. Coming to grips with his predicament makes him feel a profound connection to Lucy Yoder. Seeking meaning in life, he uses his talents to give Christmas cheer. Will Andy's efforts touch Lucy's heart and allow her to smile again? Or will Lucy, herself, get in his way?

The Christmas Cards is a story of loss and love and the ability to find yourself again in someone else. Instead of waiting for each part to be released, enjoy the entire Christmas Cards series in this exclusive collection!

[The Christmas Arrival: An Amish Holiday Romance](#)

Rachel Lapp is a young Amish woman who is the daughter of the community's bishop. She is in the midst of planning the annual Christmas Nativity play when newcomer Noah Miller arrives in town to spend Christmas with his cousins. Encouraged by her father to welcome the new arrival, Rachel

asks Noah to be a part of the Nativity.

Despite Rachel's engagement to Samuel King, a local farmer, she finds herself irrevocably drawn to Noah and his carefree spirit. Reserved and slightly shy, Noah is hesitant to get involved in the play, but an unlikely friendship begins to develop between Rachel and Noah, bringing with it unexpected problems, including a seemingly harmless prank with life-threatening consequences that require a Christmas miracle.

Will Rachel honor her commitment to Samuel, or will Noah win her affections?

Join these characters on what is sure to be a heartwarming holiday adventure! Instead of waiting for each part to be released, enjoy the entire Christmas Arrival series at once!

[The Bridge of Dreams \(Lancaster Bridges Prequel\)](#)

Available for FREE on Amazon

Discover a world of love, faith, and community in this prequel to an exciting Amish romance series. Follow the Lancaster County Amish as they navigate the challenges of balancing their beliefs with the allure of the wider world.

In a world where expectations and traditions are highly valued, eldest daughter Hannah Fisher's dream of attending college creates a rift within her Amish community. As Hannah struggles to find a balance between her Amish faith and her desire to explore the outside world, tensions rise, and relationships are put to the test. To complicate matters further, Samuel Stoltzfus, Hannah's childhood friend, has his heart set on courting her, making it even harder for her to choose her path.

Meanwhile, younger sister Ruth struggles to reconcile her own

dreams with the expectations of the community. Follow Hannah and her sister Ruth through their journey of self-discovery as

they navigate the conflict between tradition and change with unexpected twists and turns along the way.

The Lancaster Bridges series explores a close-knit Amish community in Pennsylvania as they navigate the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Experience the beauty and simplicity of Amish culture, while also witnessing the characters' journeys of self-discovery, personal growth, and community building. Overall, the series offers a rich and heartfelt portrayal of a community that is both deeply traditional and open to change, and celebrates the enduring values of family, faith, and love.

[Sarah \(The Amish of Morrissey County Prequel\)](#)

Available for FREE on Amazon

Welcome to Morrissey County! This fictional region in Pennsylvania Amish country is home to several generations of strong-willed Amish women who know what they want in life, even if others disagree. Join these women on their search for love and acceptance.

Morrissey County, 1979

Sarah Kauffman has always abided by the Ordnung, and not only because her father happens to be the town's bishop and would, she feels, disown her if she didn't. But when her mother passes away, she longs to escape the clutches of her father and run away to the Englisch world. When her father wants her to marry someone she doesn't love, Sarah becomes even more desperate to leave.

Jacob Renno, on the other hand, is happy with life on his farm. It keeps him so busy that the older bachelor has no time for love, but on lonely nights, he finds himself longing for a companion.

When Sarah and Jacob meet, there's an instant connection, but things get complicated. Jacob offers to help Sarah with her dilemma, but Bishop Kaufmann insists that she obey his wishes. Will Sarah run off to join the Englisch, or will the handsome farmer give her pause? Will her father disown her or give her his blessing? Find out in this sweet Amish romance as you become immersed in the lives of these Morrissey County residents.

Sarah is the prequel to the Amish of Morrissey County series. Each book is a stand-alone read, but to make the most of the series, you should consider reading them in order.

[The Origins of Cardinal Hill \(The Amish of Cardinal Hill Prequel\)](#)

Available for FREE on Amazon

Two girls with a legacy to carry on. A third choosing to forge her own path.

Welcome to Cardinal Hill, Indiana! This quaint fictional town is home to Faith Hochstetler, Leah Bontrager, Iris Mast, their families, and their trades. Faith, Leah, and Iris are united in their shared passion for turning their hobbies within nature into profitable businesses...and finding love! Find out how it all begins in this short, free prequel!

Other books in this series:

The Beekeeper's Calendar: Faith's Story

The Soapmaker's Recipe: Leah's Story

The Herbalist's Remedy: Iris's Story

The Origins of Cardinal Hill is the prequel to the Amish of Cardinal Hill series. Each book is a stand-alone read, but to

make the most of the series, you should consider reading them in order.

[A Promised Tomorrow \(The Yoder Family Saga Prequel\)](#)

Available for FREE on Amazon

The Yoder Family Saga follows widow Miriam Yoder and her four unmarried daughters, Megan, Rebecca, Josephine, and Lillian, as they discover God's plans for them and the hope He provides for a happy tomorrow.

The Yoder women struggle to survive after Jeremiah Yoder succumbs to a battle with cancer. The family risks losing their farm and their livelihood. They are desperate to find a way to keep going. Will Miriam and her daughters be able to work together to keep their family afloat? Will God pull through for them and provide for them in their time of need?

A Promised Tomorrow is the prequel to the Yoder Family Saga. Join the Yoder women through their journey of loss and hope for a better future. Each book is a stand-alone read, but to make the most of the series, you should consider reading them in order. Start reading this sweet Amish romance today that will take you on a rollercoaster of emotions as you're welcomed into the life of the Yoder family.

[Amish Love Through the Seasons \(The Complete Series\)](#)

Featuring many of the beloved characters from Sylvia Price's bestseller, *The Christmas Arrival*, as well as a new cast of characters, *Amish Love Through the Seasons* centers around a group of teenagers as they find friendship, love, and hope in the midst of trials. ***This special boxed set includes the entire series, plus a bonus companion story, "Hope for Hannah's Love."***

Tragedy strikes a small Amish community outside of Erie, Pennsylvania when Isaiah Fisher, a widower and father of three, is involved in a serious accident. When his family is left scrambling to pick up the pieces, the community unites to help the single father, but the hospital bills keep piling up. How will the family manage?

Mary Lapp, a youth in the community, decides to take up Isaiah's cause. She enlists the help of other teenagers to plant a garden and sell the produce. While tending to the garden, new relationships develop, but old ones are torn apart. With tensions mounting, will the youth get past their disagreements in order to reconcile and produce fruit? Will they each find love? Join them on their adventure through the seasons!

Included in this set are all the popular titles:

Seeds of Spring Love

Sprouts of Summer Love

Fruits of Fall Love

Waiting for Winter Love

“Hope for Hannah's Love” (a bonus companion short story)

[Jonah's Redemption \(Book 1\)](#)

Available for FREE on Amazon

Jonah has lost his community, and he's struggling to get by in the English world. He yearns for his Amish roots, but his past mistakes keep him from returning home.

Mary Lou is recovering from a medical scare. Her journey has impressed upon her how precious life is, so she decides to go on rumspringa to see the world.

While in the city, Mary Lou meets Jonah. Unable to understand his foul attitude, especially towards her, she makes every effort to share her faith with him. As she helps him heal from his past, an attraction develops.

Will Jonah's heart soften towards Mary Lou? What will God do with these two broken people?

Elijah: An Amish Story of Crime and Romance

He's Amish. She's not. Each is looking for a change. What happens when God brings them together?

Elijah Troyer is eighteen years old when he decides to go on a delayed Rumspringa, an Amish tradition when adolescents venture out into the world to decide whether they want to continue their life in the Amish culture or leave for the ways of the world. He has only been in the city for a month when his life suddenly takes a strange twist.

Eve Campbell is a young woman in trouble with crime lords, and they will do anything to stop her from talking. After a chance encounter, Elijah is drawn into Eve's world at the same time she is drawn into his heart. He is determined to help Eve escape from the grips of her past, but his Amish upbringing has not prepared him for the dangers he encounters as he tries to pull Eve from her chaotic world and into his peaceful one.

Will Elijah choose to return to the safety of his family, or will the ways of the world sink their hooks into him? Do Elijah and Eve have a chance at a future together? Find out in this action-packed standalone novel.

Finding Healing (Rainbow Haven Beach Prequel)

Available for FREE on Amazon

Discover the power of second chances in this heartwarming series about love, loss, and a fresh start from bestselling author Sylvia Price.

After the death of her husband, Beth Campbell decides it's time for a fresh start. When she returns to her hometown in Nova Scotia, she discovers a beautiful old abandoned home by the seaside and imagines it as the perfect spot for her to run a bed and breakfast and finally have the chance to write a novel. But when she discovers that the house belongs to Sean Pennington, a man with whom she has a painful history, she begins to doubt her dream.

With the encouragement of her friends and newfound faith, Beth takes a chance on the dilapidated home and hires Sean as a skilled carpenter to help her restore it. As they work together to bring the old house back to life, Beth and Sean's shared history resurfaces, forcing them to confront unresolved feelings and past mistakes. Will they be able to forgive each other and move on, or will their complicated history keep them apart?

Join Beth on her journey of self-discovery and forgiveness. This inspirational series will touch your heart and remind you that it's never too late to start again. It is perfect for fans of uplifting women's fiction and readers who enjoy stories of finding hope and joy in unexpected places.

[Songbird Cottage Beginnings \(Pleasant Bay Prequel\)](#)

Available for FREE on Amazon

Set on Canada's picturesque Cape Breton Island, this book is perfect for those who enjoy new beginnings and countryside landscapes.

Sam MacAuley and his wife Annalize are total opposites. When Sam wants to leave city life in Halifax to get a plot of land on Cape Breton Island, where he grew up, his wife wants nothing to do with his plans and opts to move herself and their three boys back to her home country of South Africa.

As Sam settles into a new life on his own, his friend Lachlan encourages him to get back into the dating scene. Although he meets plenty of women, he longs to find the one with whom he wants to share the rest of his life. Will Sam ever meet “the one”?

Get to know Sam and discover the origins of the Songbird Cottage. This is the prequel to the rest of the Pleasant Bay series.

The Crystal Crescent Inn Boxed Set **(Sambro Lighthouse Complete Series)**

Amazon bestselling author Sylvia Price’s Sambro Lighthouse Series, set on Canada’s picturesque Crystal Crescent Beach, is a feel-good read perfect for fans of second chances with a bit of history and mystery all rolled into one. Enjoy all five sweet romance books in one collection for the first time!

Liz Beckett is grief-stricken when her beloved husband of thirty-five years dies after a long battle with cancer. Her daughter and best friend insist she needs a project to keep her occupied. Liz decides to share the beauty of Crystal Crescent Beach with those who visit the beautiful east coast of Nova Scotia and prepares to embark on the adventure of her life. She moves into the converted art studio at the bottom of her garden and turns the old family home into The Crystal Crescent Inn.

One of her first visitors is famous archeologist, Merc MacGill, and he’s not there to admire the view. The handsome bachelor believes there’s an undiscovered eighteenth-century farmstead hidden inside the creeks and coves of Crystal Crescent, and Liz wants to help him find it.

But it’s not all smooth sailing at the inn that overlooks the historic Sambro Lighthouse. No one has realized it yet, but the lives of everyone in Liz’s family are intertwined with those first settlers who landed in Nova Scotia over two hundred and

fifty years ago. Will they be able to unravel the mystery? Will the lives of Liz's two children be changed forever if they discover the link between the lighthouse and their old home?

Take a trip to Crystal Crescent Beach and join Liz, her family, and guests as they navigate the storms and calm waters of life and love under the watchful eye of the lighthouse and its secret.

About the Author



Sylvia Price

Now an Amazon bestselling author, Sylvia Price is an author of Amish and contemporary romance and women's fiction. She especially loves writing uplifting stories about second chances!

Sylvia was inspired to write about the Amish as a result of the enduring legacy of Mennonite missionaries in her life. While living with them for three weeks, they got her a library card and encouraged her to start reading to cope with the loss of television and radio, giving Sylvia a new-found appreciation for books.

Although raised in the cosmopolitan city of Montréal, Sylvia spent her adolescent and young adult years in Nova Scotia, and the beautiful countryside landscapes and ocean views serve as the backdrop to her contemporary novels.

After meeting and falling in love with an American while living abroad, Sylvia now resides in the US. She spends her days writing, hoping to inspire the next generation to read more stories. When she's not writing, Sylvia stays busy making sure her three young children are alive and well-fed.

Subscribe to Sylvia's newsletter at newsletter.sylviaprice.com to stay in the loop about new releases, freebies, promos, and more.

As a thank-you, you will receive several FREE exclusive short stories that aren't available for purchase!

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