



— THREE AMISH NOVELLAS —

An
Amish Miracle

BETH WISEMAN,
RUTH REID,
& MARY ELLIS

An Amish Miracle

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An Amish Miracle

MARY ELLIS

RUTH REID

BETH WISEMAN



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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Mary: This story is dedicated to my parents who adopted me from the Berea Children's Home (originally called the German Methodist Orphan Asylum) through Cuyahoga County Children's Services in Ohio. Thanks for all your guidance and love . . . and thanks especially for picking me.

Ruth: For their unconditional love and godly guidance, I dedicate Always His Provision to Paul and Kathy Droste. I love you, Dad. Kathy, you've been so helpful and influential in my writing. Thank you so much.

Beth: To Danny Kaspar

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Glossary

ab im kopp: off in the head, crazy

ach: oh

aenti: aunt

appeditlich: delicious

Ausbund: Amish hymnal

ausleger: undertaker

bauch: stomach

boppli, bopplin: baby, babies

bruder: brother

daadi, grossdaadi: grandfather

daed: dad

danki: thank you

Das Loblied: Amish hymn of praise, sung in every Amish worship service

Derr Herr: God

dochder: daughter

dumm: dumb

Glossary

dummkopp: dunce

ehemann: husband

Englisch, Englischer: non-Amish

fater: father

fraa: wife

freind: friend

freinden: friends

fremm: strange

frob: happy

gegisch: silly

gern gsehne: you're welcome

Gott: God

grank: sick

grossvader: grandfather

guder mariye: good morning

gut: good

gut nacht: good night

batt: hard

haus: house

biya: hello

Ich liebe dich: I love you

kaffi: coffee

kalt: cold

kapp: prayer cap worn by all Amish women

kichlin: cookies

kind, kinner: child, children

kinskind, kinskinner: grandchild, grandchildren

kumm: come

lieb: love

maed: young women, girls

maedel: girl

mamm: mom, mama

mammi, grossmammi: grandmother

mei: my

mudder: mother

narrisch: crazy

nau: now

nee: no

net: not

Ordnung: the written and unwritten rules of the Amish; the understood behavior by which the Amish are expected to live, passed down from generation to generation. Most Amish know the rules by heart.

rumischprunge: running around period when a teenager turns sixteen years old

schee: pretty

schtupp: family room

schul: school

schweschder: sister

schwester/schwestern: sister/sisters

Sei se gut: please

The Budget: a weekly newspaper serving Amish and Mennonite communities everywhere

Was iss letz?: What's wrong?

wedder: weather

welcum: welcome

Glossary

Wie bischt?: How are you?

Wie gebt's: How do you do? or Good day!

willkumm: welcome

wunderbaar: wonderful

ya: yes

yummasetti: a classic Amish hot dish made with spaghetti, cheese,
and hamburger

Always in My Heart

MARY ELLIS

Chapter One

Paradise, Pennsylvania

Stephen Bowman switched off the generator, swiped his brow with a handkerchief, and straightened his spine. Not even nine o'clock and the July day was already sweltering.

Since dawn he had milked, fed, and watered the animals and turned them out to pasture. The milk was now stored in the cooling room, awaiting pickup, and he was ready for breakfast.

He headed for the house, his stomach rumbling. What might his *fraa* have made this morning? Buttermilk pancakes swimming in maple syrup? A mushroom omelet covered with melted cheddar? Maybe a thick slab of ham with an over-easy egg on the side?

He entered the kitchen to find a box of cornflakes on the table, along with a banana. The pot of coffee had grown cold on the stove.

After thirteen years, he knew his *fraa* well. Hope usually only served a cold breakfast when pressed for time or when—

Stephen bolted toward the front room. “Hope?”

His wife sat in the rocking chair with her sewing basket at her

feet. Sweat beaded at her hairline. The tiny white *kapp* she'd been crocheting lay abandoned in her lap.

"When did the contractions start?" He tried to keep his voice calm so as not to frighten his daughters. The three girls sat on the couch staring at their mother and holding hands.

Hope said nothing for at least half a minute. Then she spoke through gritted teeth. "A few . . . hours ago."

"Why didn't you send Josie to the milking parlor for me?" His glance flickered to his eldest *dochter*, who peered up at him through thick lashes.

"Thought I had plenty of time to finish this *kapp* and pair of booties." Her speech improved as the contraction loosened.

"You know what the doctor said. Things move along faster with each new bundle of Bowman joy." Stephen chucked his youngest child under the chin. Little Greta's green eyes sparkled as she giggled.

"True enough, but I still thought I had enough time. No sense dragging Jane Beachy out too soon." Hope's voice returned to normal, and her fingers released their grip on the chair. "She has her own family to tend."

"Midwives are accustomed to being called out at all hours of the day or night. At least she's not sleeping at this hour. I'll leave now to fetch her."

"May I ride with you, *Daed*?" asked Josie. She scrambled from her position on the couch to land on the floor near Hope's feet. "I could help Jane carry in things."

"*Nee*." Stephen gave her *kapp* ribbon a pull. "You stay and help *mamm* get things ready." He felt himself blush. Discussing

babies-on-the-way was not a proper topic between father and daughter. "You understand God is bringing us another *boppli*?" He peered at one pair of rounded eyes after another.

"Of course I do," she said, as though mildly insulted.

"*Ya*," replied the younger two, heads nodding. "*Mamm* said so. *Bruder* this time?" asked seven-year-old Emily.

"We'll soon find out." He buzzed a kiss across his wife's *kapp*. "I'm off. Put down your sewing, *fraa*. I believe you should start moving in the direction of our bedroom. But don't pick up a paintbrush to give the kitchen a fresh coat."

Stephen smiled at the memory of a woman in their district who decided to paint a room during labor. Things happened so fast she gave birth in their bathtub, assisted solely by her eldest daughter. By the time the midwife arrived, the mother had been bathed and was resting comfortably with her new son sleeping in the crook of her arm.

Suddenly, Hope grabbed his sleeve, her brown eyes huge. "I've prayed all morning for this one to be a boy." She turned her face up to him.

Stephen patted her hand. "We shall be grateful for another healthy child, whether boy or girl." He gazed at his family, then strode from the room. Within minutes Stephen hitched his fastest gelding to the buggy and raced down their lane. Not much traffic crowded the country roads, no speeding cars that could panic a skittish horse. And so far, no buses with tourists leaning out of windows snapping pictures.

He used the time to say his prayers and count his blessings. God had smiled upon the Bowman family. His wife and daughters

were healthy; he'd inherited a fertile, productive farm from his father, and his large herd of Holstein cows supplied an abundance of milk. Even the new bulls had drawn decent prices from the veal producers, providing necessary cash to pay taxes, and medical bills, and to buy diesel fuel.

At thirty-five, Stephen Bowman was content.

But a son would be nice.

It would be good to have help with the harder farm chores. Although Josie could already plant a straight row of corn and pick more than her weight in beans in a day, he didn't want women riding dangerous equipment. Some chores like plowing, harrowing, and harvesting remained men's work. Growing up, he'd witnessed firsthand his father's challenge of having only one son. His sisters eventually married and moved to other parts of Lancaster County or to different states altogether. Stephen remained on the farm helping his *daed* until a heart attack took him to the gates of heaven.

Would an early death be his destiny? Only God knew the future, and whether this coming child would be another girl. He didn't feel comfortable praying for one over the other.

"Still, a son would be nice, Lord."

He whispered the words against his better judgment and added a hasty, "But Thy will be done."

Turning into the Beachy yard, a red-cheeked Nathan Beachy hurried to greet him. "Come for Jane, *ya*?" Nathan shielded his eyes from the glare of a hot July sun.

"We'd be obliged if Jane could lend a hand, if she's not too busy." Both men spoke in even tones as they marched quickly toward the house.

"Fraa?" called Nathan. "Stephen Bowman has come." They waited less than a minute before the experienced midwife bustled down the stairs into the kitchen.

She carried her black satchel, a diaper bag, and a sleeping infant. "Time has come, then." Jane issued a statement rather than asked a question. "Our *kinner* are dressed and fed," she said to Nathan. "They should be fine while you're in the fields since the oldest aren't back to school yet." A shy teenager peeked around her *mamm*. "No telling when I'll be home." Jane kissed his cheek, then hurried out the door with Stephen at her heels. Flanked by his brood, Nathan remained on the porch, waving.

"Might be home sooner than you think," murmured Stephen once they'd climbed into his buggy. With another man within ear-shot, it would have been embarrassing, but he didn't mind discussing the delicate topic with a professional midwife.

Jane pivoted toward him. "Why? How far along is she?"

Stephen shook the reins and released the brake. "Can't say in terms of minutes between pains, but from what I could gather, I should have fetched you at first light, if not sooner."

The midwife picked up the seldom-used crop and slapped it lightly on the horse's broad back. "Git up, there," she commanded. "Save the meandering for the trip back. We've got a *boppli* on the way!"

Stephen Bowman felt his excitement ratchet up a notch to match her enthusiasm. Another one of God's miracles was about to take place, right in his own family.



Hope experienced a moment of panic when the door closed behind Stephen. She was alone with three little ones with a fourth about to make a grand entrance.

I will never leave you or forsake you.

God's promise gave her strength as she struggled to her feet and dropped her crocheting into the basket.

"Come, Josie, we must prepare. Emily, Greta, I want you to stay in your room. You may play or read, but do not come downstairs until Josie calls you." Hope touched each of their cheeks tenderly. "Mamm will be fine."

Emily hugged her around the waist, then took Greta's hand and scampered up the steps. Greta glanced back at Hope but left obediently with her sister.

"What should I do?" asked Josie. Her dark eyes glowed with the eagerness of new responsibility. At twelve, the girl was ready for all but the most delicate portion of childbirth.

"Fill both kettles and the soup pot with water. Then bring them to a low boil. Jane will need plenty of warm water to bathe the *boppli* and me." She walked gingerly toward their ground-floor bedroom, her belly feeling impossibly heavy. "First, help me put the rubber sheet on the bed and set out the towels. And we'll need blankets to keep the baby warm. Jane will bring whatever else is needed."

By the time the next contraction stole her breath, the birthing room was ready. Josie went to prepare the kitchen while Hope climbed into bed, covering herself with their oldest sheet. "Won't be long now, Lord," she whispered.

Hope squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated on not screaming as a contraction hit. Just when she was about to call Josie to

help, Jane Beachy bustled into the room, her sleeves rolled up and her hands still wet from scrubbing. A grin stretched across her face.

“Did you figure to pull this off alone to save yourself my fee?” Jane said. “Nothing doing, Hope Bowman. Nathan and I plan to use that money to visit Paris, France, in the springtime.” She pulled long gloves up to her elbows.

The joke distracted Hope from counting breaths. “Please don’t make me laugh until this is said and done.” Josie retreated from the room, and Hope positioned herself for examination.

“From the looks of things, you won’t have to wait long to appreciate my sense of humor.” Jane rushed to prepare for the final stage. “You cut this one a bit close to the wire. Did you think that I charged by the hour?”

Her quip almost sent Hope over the edge. She had to wait several minutes to retort. “Remind me to come to the birth of your next baby. Between now and then I will save up a bag of jokes.”

And so, together the two longtime friends brought a life into the world. The newest little girl to the Lancaster Amish community.

Hope swallowed down an initial pang of disappointment when Jane announced, “Looks like we have a fourth daughter for the Bowman family. All ten fingers and toes with plenty of hair—she looks perfect to me.” A loud wail signaled a strong pair of lungs as well. “I’ll get her cleaned up and warm and be back in a jiffy.”

Jane disappeared from the bedroom, leaving Hope alone. “Thank You, Lord,” she whispered, “for the smooth delivery and another healthy child.” She didn’t put words to her dissatisfaction and hoped God would overlook her discontent.

This is nobody’s fault but mine.

Jane bathed Hope and helped her into a fresh nightgown, then she took the baby into the kitchen to examine, weigh, and bundle into a warm quilt. Hope could hear Jane instructing Stephen and Josie on their tasks for the next few days. When she returned to the bedroom, Hope reached for her hand, forcing a smile. “*Danki* for all you’ve done.”

“All in a good day’s work.” Jane pushed damp hair off the new mother’s forehead. “You’ve been blessed, Hope Bowman.”

“*Ya*, but not as much as you and Nathan, with three sons.” The words escaped Hope’s mouth before she could stop herself. She felt a hot flush rise up her neck into her face.

Jane bundled the laundry and tidied the bedroom. “*Ya*, sons are helpful, but who’s to say what your next one will be? The next dozen or so might be boys.” She winked and plumped an extra pillow behind Hope’s back.

Hope pressed a palm on her still-swollen belly. “Let’s not talk about the next dozen quite so soon.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow to check on you. The paperwork has been filled out except for the baby’s name.” In a rare display of affection, Jane leaned over and kissed Hope’s cheek. “You and Stephen put your heads together and come up with something *gut*.” Then she bustled from the room.

But Hope had no chance to wallow in self-pity. Just as she finished feeding her infant, her best friend, Rosa Hostetler, marched into the room with a broad smile stretched across her face. “I heard from Jane Beachy on her way home you might have someone new to show off.”

“Goodness, word travels fast.” Hope pulled back the coverlet to

reveal a pink face. "Meet the youngest Bowman *dochter*." She lifted the baby for inspection.

"May I hold her? Oh, she's just perfect. I'll bet she'll be a cheerful *boppli* too." She took the infant in her arms and strolled around the room explaining doors, windows, and vases of flowers as though the newborn were ready for language instruction.

"Let that *boppli* sleep. You can start the lessons next week." Throughout Rosa's fussing, the littlest Bowman slumbered peacefully.

"What do you suppose you'll call her?"

Hope's smile faded. "I'd selected David or Joseph—names of strength and fortitude. I was so sure this one would be a boy." Unbidden, tears streamed down her face.

"*Ach*, the next one will be." Rosa kissed the infant before settling her into the crook of Hope's arm.

As Hope tucked the blanket beneath the tiny chin, her tears fell unchecked. "You don't understand," she whispered. "There'll be no boys for me—not after what I have done." The words strangled in her throat. "God is punishing me just as He punishes all who disobey Him."

Rosa perched on the edge of the bed. "I doubt He would punish a sixteen-year-old girl. You had no choice." She slipped an arm around her friend's shoulder.

Hope shook her head violently. "We always have a choice. I could have refused. I could have run away. Now, because of my shame, I'll never give Stephen a son."

"Hush," Rosa demanded. "Stop those tears. You don't know what God has planned. No more worrying. You must have faith."

Faith. Hope looked into Rosa's eyes. The woman had lost so

much. She had been married for five years without the blessing of a child. And then, two years ago her husband, Uriah, had died and left her alone. Alone and struggling, both financially and emotionally.

And yet here she was talking to her best friend about faith. About trusting God, no matter what the circumstances. If Rosa could have faith, Hope certainly could.

She nodded and swallowed hard. “You’re right. There’s no place for wallowing in self-pity. You’ve given me the perfect name for our new little one—Faith.” She brushed a kiss across the downy head. “And faith is what I shall have.”

Always His Provision

RUTH REID

Chapter One

Rosa Hostetler rolled to the other side of the mattress and gazed out the window next to her bed. In the clear October sky, a faint halo of light surrounded the full moon and cast a soft glow over the rolling pasture.

Since Uriah's death two years ago, and more recently, since discovering he had let the property taxes default, sleep came intermittently at best. Tonight was no exception. She couldn't stop thinking about the future, about the looming threat of the tax sale.

Rosa yanked the wool blanket over her head. She missed Uriah's comfort, the reassuring warmth of him beside her. Now whenever her foot drifted over to his side of the bed, she felt only the chill of loneliness.

But tossing all night accomplished nothing. Rosa pushed the covers aside and crawled out of bed. She padded barefoot down the squeaky wooden stairs and into the kitchen, and struck a match against the cast-iron stove. She lit the lamp, and a soft yellow glow filled the empty kitchen.

Sometime during the night, the fire in the stove had gone out. Rosa wadded a few pages of newspaper, laid on the kindling, and touched a match to the crumpled paper. Occasionally she wished she had one of the fancy propane ovens like her friend Hope had. But as it was, Rosa had only herself to cook for, and it seemed pointless to want something so extravagant.

Coveting material items wasn't a problem for Rosa. She struggled with more basic issues: the battle she had fought throughout five years of marriage to accept her childless state and, more recently, the loss of her husband. Now widowed at age thirty, it seemed she would never experience the fulfillment of motherhood.

Rosa set the glass jar of cookies on the table, plopped down on one of the ten empty chairs, and waited for the water in the kettle to boil. The *tick-tick-tick* of the clock on the wall broke the silence. One a.m. Gorging on cookies in the middle of the night had become a routine.

Propped against the saltshaker, the latest letter from the Tax Claim Bureau caught her attention. Marked DELINQUENT in a bold red stamp, the property taxes listed not only the current tax lien but the amount due from unpaid taxes and accrued late fees from the previous years.

She scanned the document. *Notice is hereby given that the Lancaster County Tax Claim Bureau will hold a continued tax upset sale on . . .* The November date and time blurred as tears welled. She had less than a month to settle the lien. On her egg money that would be impossible.

Boiling water erupted from the kettle's spout and sizzled on the cast-iron stovetop. She dropped the letter on the table, grabbed the hissing kettle with a potholder, and poured water over the herbal tea bag. The wafting lemony scent soothed her senses.

Somewhere outside a dog barked, then others joined the chorus. She lowered the kettle and leaned over the sink to peer out the window. But even with a full moon, she couldn't see into the darkness.

The barking grew louder. Rosa jerked her cape from the hook and opened the door. The hens had gone wild, clucking and flapping frantically. She bolted back inside and grabbed her husband's shotgun.



Adam Bontrager slowly opened his eyes. His mind vaguely registered the sound of dogs barking, but he closed his eyes and slid back toward sleep.

Moments later the racket roused him again. This time he shot out of bed and went to the window that faced the Hostetler house. Light illuminated the kitchen window. The same disturbance must have awakened Rosa too.

A small shadowy figure stepped onto Rosa's porch. He couldn't understand the muffled words, but the angry tone carried through the night.

Adam pulled on his clothes and rushed out of the house without tying his boots or grabbing his hat. On his way across the yard, he snagged the heavy metal rake leaning against the utility shed. Above the panic of flapping wings and the fierce growl of an animal, he could hear Rosa shouting—something about leaving her chickens alone.

"Rosa?" he called. He didn't mean to startle her, but he also didn't want to be clubbed in the head with whatever it was she had in her hand.

"It's after *mei* chickens!" He heard a mechanism click and a half sentence about hoping the shell was loaded right.

"Don't shoot!" he yelled.

She lowered the gun. He crossed in front of her and struck the large dog with the rake. A hen thudded to the ground, and the yelping dog bolted for the corral, where it crawled under the fence and slipped into darkness.

He bent a knee next to the motionless chicken.

Rosa leaned over his shoulder. "Is she dead?"

Probably, Adam thought. It was difficult to tell if the bird was dead or in shock because of the large oak blocking the moonlight. "I don't know. I can't see."

"I'll get a lantern." She turned and sprinted toward the house.

"Hey." Adam waited for her to look his way. "Don't run with a loaded gun in your hand."

Rosa slowed.

Once she disappeared behind the door, he resumed his inspection of the chicken. If it wasn't already dead, he had a notion to put it out of its misery before she returned with the light. The other hens kept their distance yet continued to cluck.

The screen door snapped. Unarmed, she trotted back with the lantern.

Rosa dangled the lamplight over the lifeless bird. "That rotten dog killed her."

Adam reached down and picked up the chicken by its neck. "I guess you'll be making dumplings to go with this."

"That's *nett* funny. That was Penny." Her voice cracked.

He wasn't sure why, but it surprised him that she named her

chickens. He cleared his throat. "At the risk of sounding insensitive, where do you want . . . Penny?"

She sighed. "In the *haus*."

At least she wouldn't let the meat go bad. Carrying the mangled chicken, he followed her up the porch steps and into the house. He'd barely crossed the threshold when he heard a loud gasp.

"What's wrong?" Adam thought he might have trailed chicken blood on her floor. Then his eyes met hers, and he understood immediately.

She stood before him clutching the woolen cape closed at her neck. Adam's gaze traveled downward, over the hem of her night-dress, to her bare ankles and curled-under toes. Without waiting for direction from Rosa, he took the hen into the kitchen, crossed the room to the sink, and plunked it into the basin.

She snatched a folded paper from the table and shoved it into a nearby drawer.

"I'm sorry to get you out of bed at this hour," she said.

"That's all right. I wanted to make sure you were safe." He turned the tap on and rinsed his hands. "I didn't realize you knew how to shoot a gun."

She shrugged slightly, reached under the sink, and handed him a bar of soap. "I'm *nett* so sure I do. I've never shot one."

The woman was more dangerous than he thought.

"*Danki*," he said, accepting the towel she offered. "Maybe I better unload the gun so you don't try to shoot something else in the middle of the night." He finished drying his hands and handed her back the towel. "Where is it?"

She led the way to the sitting room.

He spotted the shotgun propped up against the wall and groaned under his breath. She hadn't set the safety either. Clearly she had a lot to learn about firearms.

"It's best to unload it outside." If she joined him, he would demonstrate the proper technique, but she didn't. It was probably just as well; she didn't need a lecture tonight. One dead chicken to pluck was enough to deal with at this late hour. He opened the 12-gauge barrel and dislodged the shell. Adam flipped the safety lever to the locked position even though the gun was no longer loaded.

She wasn't in the sitting room when he reentered the house. He placed the gun on the rack and slipped the shell into his pocket. Pots and pans clanged in the kitchen. Adam ducked his head into the room. "Hopefully the dog won't bother your chickens again."

She looked up from filling a large pot with water. "I hope you hit him with the prongs of that rake."

He frowned. He had overheard her plenty of times talking lovingly to her animals. "Rosa, you don't mean that."

"Ya, I do." She placed the oversized pot on the stove to boil. "That dog's attacked *mei* chickens before. Penny laid the most eggs—the biggest too. I found several double yolks from her box. I can't afford to lose any egg sales."

"Don't worry about tomorrow, for—"

"For tomorrow will worry about its own things." She opened a drawer and removed a butcher knife. "It's after midnight. This *is* tomorrow—and I am worried."

She nudged the drawer closed with her hip. "And I will shoot that dog."

Always Beautiful

BETH WISEMAN

Chapter One

Becky stood on the bank of the creek, her bare feet clutching the rocky ground beneath her, knowing that with one more step she'd plunge into the rushing rapids and be carried away from her troubles. Forever.

As tears streamed down her cheeks, she wondered how different her life might have been if she hadn't always been so fat. She knew what people said about her. She had heard it again just this afternoon when Annie Lapp and two other girls were standing at the counter of Byler's Bakery.

"She's huge," Annie whispered, but loud enough for Becky to hear. "And she just keeps getting bigger and bigger. She's never going to get a husband." Annie laughed. "Maybe she needs to stop working at the family bakery and do something else."

Everyone talked about her. It had started the first day of school. *Fatty, fatty, two by four, Becky can't get through the old barn door.* Her mother had always said that Becky was just healthy, and during her younger years, she'd tried to ignore the finger-pointing and snickering. But

now, at eighteen, she was as big as a house, and the whispering still hadn't stopped.

People were nice enough to her face, but she didn't have any real friends. Only Elam. He was her best friend, and his self-image wasn't any better than Becky's. Elam wore thick, gold-rimmed glasses. His eyeballs rolled around all over the place, often making it hard to tell where he was looking. Becky was so used to it, she didn't think that much about it, but Elam was self-conscious. The eye doctor had said he couldn't have surgery on his eyes until they'd quit changing.

Becky thought Elam was incredibly handsome, even though she'd never had a romantic interest in him. He was tall and thin with dark brown eyes and wavy black hair that curled on the ends when it got too long. She loved Elam—the same way she loved her brother. Besides, even Elam couldn't possibly want to spend his life with someone who took up three times as much space as the average person.

Trembling, she watched as each wave crashed against the boulders below. Occasionally a small limb or twig was carried by the current and over the steep drop-off, submersing for a few moments before popping up downstream. But the real threat was around the bend. Any time it rained more than a couple of inches, the creek filled and the rapids thrashed along a bank filled with jagged rocks. No one ever went near the rapids, and Becky usually avoided the creek altogether since she couldn't swim.

A part of her wanted to jump, to stop the pain that overwhelmed her these days. She was tired of standing out in a crowd, tired of people whispering about how big she was, tired of the painful reality that she was never going to have a husband. The bishop might

preach against pride and vanity, but even Plain people were human like the rest of the world, and physical attraction was important.

But taking the easy way out would destroy her parents—and Ruben and Lena. Her younger siblings loved her unconditionally, as did her parents, but Ruben and Lena had always been thin, and neither of her parents struggled with their weight either. She really couldn't blame it on the family business, since *Mamm* and Lena both worked at the bakery with Becky.

Why me? Why do I have to be so big?

More tears fell as she shivered on the bank, feeling alone and hopeless. Taking her own life would be a great sin. But to jump and survive would be the greatest humiliation of all. She couldn't possibly face the community, never mind facing herself in the mirror, knowing that she had failed even at this. And despite her suffering, she was sure she couldn't do it.

She looked up at the sky and lifted her arms. "Please, Lord. I beg You. Make me thin. I don't want to live like this anymore. Please, dear God . . . I want to be skinny and beautiful."

As she spoke the words aloud, she could almost feel God frowning. It shouldn't be important how she looked. Heaven knows everybody had told her enough times. But it was easy for folks who weren't overweight to say it didn't matter.

Becky lowered her arms and in that split second of inattention, lost her footing. She teetered out over the edge, glimpsed the blur of the rushing water below her, and braced herself for the fall. Just when she knew she was doomed, she slipped backward and collapsed on the bank. She sat there for a long time, gasping for breath, terrified at how close she'd come to doing something stupid.

"God, help me," she whispered. "Please."

She sat there another few minutes until her tears dried up. Then sun rays eased through the clouds and lit the water below, glistening in a way that Becky hadn't noticed before. A peaceful feeling settled over her.

God had heard her plea. She wasn't sure how she knew, but He was going to answer her prayer.

She'd never been so certain of anything in her life.



Elam ran full tilt toward Becky and slid up beside her. He cut it close, just short of accidentally pushing her into the water. But he could hardly be blamed for being distracted. Her beautiful face was aglow with a smile—the same smile he thought about even when she wasn't around.

He fought to catch his breath and struggled to focus as he stared at her.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked "What if you had fallen in and no one was out here to help you?" He pulled off his hat and ran a hand across his forehead. "Look at the water, the way it's rushing. And the falls are just around the corner. I'm not sure I could have saved you if you'd fallen in."

"I'm fine, Elam." Becky clasped her hands in front of her and raised her shoulders, dropping them slowly. "I'm actually better than fine." The warmth in her smile echoed in her voice. "I'm great!"

"Ya, well, get away from the creek."

Elam gently guided her a few feet from the water's edge. He shuddered to think what would have happened if she'd fallen in.

He'd already lost someone dear to him a few years ago. A car had slammed into his father's buggy and killed him instantly. Becky Byler was the most special girl in the world, and he couldn't bear losing her too. He'd loved her since they were kids. Someday he planned to marry her if she'd have him. But she'd been so depressed lately about her weight that Elam hadn't considered encouraging anything more than friendship.

Becky was gorgeous, but he wanted her to see that for herself. He didn't know anyone who was better with children than she was. No one could cook as well. She grew the biggest, tastiest vegetables in their district. And he'd been told that she could sew circles around even the elderly women.

For Elam, those were all just bonuses. Becky was a gentle soul who loved everyone, and more than once Elam had been pushed to come to her defense when someone poked fun at her weight. Fighting wasn't their way, but twice Elam had gotten physical on the school grounds when they were young. Fortunately things didn't turn violent these days, but the whispering behind Becky's back continued, and Elam fought to control his temper when he could tell Becky's feelings were hurt. He'd marry her today if he could.

They started walking back to where both buggies were tied to the same tree.

Becky turned to him, still smiling. "How'd you know I was here?"

"I didn't. I was on my way to Rosa Hostetler's *haus* to get some eggs. *Mamm* says it's easier to get 'em from her than to mess with chickens ourselves."

Becky was quiet for a few moments, then she slowed down, stopped, and turned to him. "I know it's hard—just being you and

your *mamm*. I've told you a hundred times that *mei* family can help out more." She paused, sighing. "I know you're busy tending the fields by yourself, and with no other *kinner*, your *mamm* is bound to be plumb tired all the time."

Elam forced a smile, knowing Becky was right. He often wondered how his mother would fare when Elam got married and moved out some day. "We do all right, and going to get eggs ain't no big deal."

"Well, Rosa drops off eggs at the bakery every day. I can always get extra and cart them to your *haus*." Becky untied her horse from the tree.

"Maybe I'll take you up on that offer." It would be a good excuse to see her.

He offered her his hand and helped her into her buggy. "I was worried about you being out here. I mean, it wondered me why you came out to the creek all by yourself like this." He paused, forced his eyes forward, and studied her face—her rosy cheeks, dark hair, and amazing deep brown eyes. She was still glowing and smiling, but Elam was worried about how depressed she'd been.

"I'm *gut* now. I had a talk with God, and I know He heard my prayers." She pulled her dress inside the buggy, and Elam shut the door. "I know you've been concerned about me, and I love you for that. But everything is going to be just fine."

She picked up the reins, flicked them gently, and started away. Elam was still reeling.

Did Becky Byler just say she loved him?