

MARY'S HOME

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ONE

Mary Yoder drove Danny Boy toward Deacon Stoltzfus's place with Betsy on the buggy seat beside her. Spring had arrived in the valley, and the trees were draped in a fresh hue of green. The colorful Adirondack flowers would soon blossom and dot the roadsides in their brief display of glory. Tonight, the breezes from the foothills to the north bore the last memory of winter snows that had blasted the community with drifts along the road, four feet high in some places.

Betsy pulled her shawl tighter under her chin and muttered, "Why didn't I go to the *rumspringa* gathering with Enos tonight?"

Mary gave her younger sister a bright smile. "Because there's a load of young people coming in from Lancaster, and Enos changed his plans when he found out. Everyone will be at the volleyball game instead. Just think!"

Betsy's face darkened. "I don't want to meet any young people from Lancaster."

Mary didn't answer as Danny Boy's hooves beat a steady trot on the pavement. Betsy's attitude toward the community and the Amish way of life was a grave family concern. Lately, Betsy expressed her views with greater frequency—even in public, much to *Mamm*

and *Daett's* chagrin. They would have to pray that the Lord would see fit to draw Betsy's heart toward the right ways.

"You don't have to be so critical of me." Betsy gave her sister a sharp sideways glance, as if she had read Mary's thoughts. "I have my reasons."

"I didn't say anything," Mary protested. "And I do understand."

"How can someone with your plans understand me?" Betsy huffed. "I know why you are so excited. You plan to snag an Amish man, perhaps even tonight. I know that's why you left your *rum-springa* time early."

"I saw Jonas Troyer making eyes at you at the last hymn singing," Mary encouraged her sister. "I'm sure he'll talk to you soon. Jonas might even ask you home on a date—once you've both decided to settle down in the community."

"Jonas!" Betsy snapped. "The man has straw in his hair, and he goes barefoot in the winter—well, most of the winter. Stomps right through the mud! How would that look in a woman's home? He'd leave tracks all over the house, and not just in the kitchen. If I have to settle for that sort of man, I'm not settling."

Mary laughed in spite of herself. "I'm sure Jonas can be cleaned up a bit. If not, there will be others. You're a nice girl."

Betsy grunted and fell silent.

They had been over this ground before. Betsy bore the scars on her face from a childhood accident, but her saucy attitude did more harm than the burn marks on her skin.

Mary tried another tack. "I found a poem this afternoon in the old cedar chest upstairs that I wrote when we were in school. You like *Englisha* things. This one is about the Mona Lisa in Paris."

"See, you are more *Englisha* than you admit," Betsy said. "You know about such things, and you write poetry. We should jump the fence together."

Mary ignored the suggestion to quote by heart,

*The world is drawn to your face,
To your quiet beauty and your grace.
They hang your portrait in their lofty halls;
They captured you upon their walls.*

*Some man conceived with paint and brush
To touch your heart and show the hush,
Which sorrow wrote upon your life,
The peace that came amidst the strife.*

*For beauty does not rise in mortal eyes,
Unless the lines are written from the skies.
With pain you showed us heaven's touch,
And so your smile is loved so much.*

“Not bad,” Betsy allowed. “But my point stands.”

Mary didn't answer as they bounced into Deacon Stoltzfus's lane. Further conversation on the subject would get neither of them anywhere. She would have to think of something else to say. Ahead of them lantern light glowed in the windows of the barn, where the volleyball game would be held. Several boys stood chatting near the door. When they noticed the buggy, they came toward Mary and Betsy to help them unhitch.

“Those are Lancaster boys,” Mary whispered out of the corner of her mouth. “One of them might be your future husband.”

Betsy pretended not to hear as she hopped down from the buggy. She chirped, “*Goot* evening, boys.”

There was a chorus of *goot* evenings in response. Betsy could project a cheerful and happy attitude if she wished, but the subject of an Amish husband and her future in the community brought out her dark side.

Cousin Enos came toward them with a wide smile and made the

introductions. “These are two of our Yoder girls, Mary and Betsy. Both of them are charming, sweet, and available.”

Laughter rippled around the buggy, as two men from Lancaster nodded to Mary.

“Josiah Beiler and Ronald Troyer.” Enos waved his hand to include both of the girls. “They are staying for the weekend, and maybe for another week if things work out.”

Laughter filled the air again, and heat rushed into Mary’s face. Everyone knew what Enos referred to. If one of the Lancaster men found a love interest in the valley and took a girl home from the hymn singing, he would wish to stay another weekend to cement the relationship before being reduced to letter writing for communication.

Mary snuck a long look at the two men. The truth was, her decision to end *rumspringa* early was a risk. There were no unmarried men in the valley who had given her more than a passing glance, but faith was firmly fixed in her heart. Her dream of home and family in the community would be fulfilled. She believed the Lord would lead her to a man who would love her and hold her close to his heart, so she had stepped forward with confidence.

One of them, Josiah, caught her look. He was handsome enough. In fact, Mary thought him quite handsome. His eyes twinkled as he said, “So you are Mary Yoder.”

“*Yah.*” Her eyes met his, and shivers tickled her spine.

“You live far from here?”

“A little ways.” She sent a nod toward the Adirondack foothills. “Down Duesler Road, just outside of town.”

A smile filled his face. “Don’t know where that is. I’ve never been here before.”

“Are you staying over the weekend?” As she spoke, Josiah didn’t appear to notice the heat that rushed up Mary’s neck.

“Everyone’s staying over for Sunday,” he said, chuckling. “Longer

than that? Depends, I guess. You're not dating, are you? A girl like you?"

Now her whole face flamed red.

"Sitting on the edge of your *rumspringa*?" Concern had crept into his voice.

"No! Not at all. I..." The words stuck in her mouth. Was the Lord answering her faith this soon?

"Are you coming, Josiah?" Enos had his hand on Danny Boy's bridle.

Josiah grinned. "In a little bit. But don't worry. I'll bring Mary with me."

"Oh..." Enos cooed. "Has Cupid shot his arrow and hit the mark?"

Laughter rose again, but Mary kept her eyes on the ground. Thankfully, the others moved toward the barn as Betsy cast her a baleful glance. At least Betsy had engaged the other Lancaster man, Ronald, in conversation.

"Sorry about the teasing," Josiah said once the others were out of earshot. "Are you okay?"

"*Yah*, I'm fine." Mary caught her breath. She clearly wasn't, and Josiah noticed.

"What is life like here in the valley?" he asked, as if they were sharing a normal conversation on the couch in *Mamm* and *Daett's* living room. Dizziness swept over Mary at the image of Josiah seated in that familiar place with her beside him.

"Not much different than Lancaster," she managed. "The country is beautiful, but so is Lancaster."

"Do you visit often?"

Mary shook her head. "Most of our immediate relatives are here in the valley."

He regarded her for a moment as a buggy trotted past them and parked at the end of the line. "How old are you and Betsy?"

Mary rushed out the words. "I'm almost twenty, just coming off my *rumspringa*, and I took my first baptismal class two weeks ago. Betsy is a bit younger."

He appeared impressed. "That's exceptional. I joined last year. A little early, but I was ready to settle down." Josiah gave Mary a warm smile. "What does everyone do for *rumspringa* around here?"

Mary tried to breathe evenly. "There's not much going on. The biggest town nearby is Utica, which is still a good distance away. Most of the Amish boys don't get automobiles, so we'd have to drive with *Englisha* friends to get there."

"Pretty tame then?" His pleased expression didn't fade. "I broke down and got an automobile. I kept it hidden in *Daett's* barn, but cars aren't what they are cracked up to be. I guess that's what *rumspringa* is about, though. Finding out that the world doesn't offer what's advertised." He gave her a glance. "I was never one to dream of jumping the fence. Not many of our people do, I suppose, but there are some."

Mary looked away. What would Josiah say if he knew of Betsy's determinedness to find herself an *Englisha* husband?

"What happened to your sister's face?" His chin motioned toward the glowing loft windows. "Or was I seeing things?"

Mary shook her head. "Betsy's scarf caught fire when she was small. She was tending the stove, and *Mamm* didn't get there in time. There was scarring, as you can see..." Mary let the words hang.

Mary often wanted to tell Betsy that her scars were not that bad, but how could she say so when men like Josiah noticed them? Other men obviously did the same, which went to the heart of Betsy's complaint about Amish life.

"Such things happen." He shrugged. "There will be a man for your sister. Scars shouldn't scare them away."

"Betsy has her struggles," Mary managed.

Josiah would hear the truth from someone, perhaps even from Betsy's lips if he stayed in the community long enough. Better to

give the impression that she was not hiding the matter. Even if Josiah was an open door from the Lord straight into Mary's dreams, honesty was still the best policy.

"Should we go inside?" Josiah suggested.

Several young people from the other buggy had paused to stare at them. Who was this handsome young man Mary Yoder was speaking to? Mary could practically hear the question rippling through their minds, and heat tingled at the base of her neck again.

Josiah's clear blue eyes twinkled as if he had read their thoughts too. He turned toward the others, and she fell in beside him. The introductions were up to her if she could find her voice.

"Josiah Beiler from Lancaster," Mary heard herself saying as everyone shook hands.

Josiah stayed near her as they made their way to the barn loft. The other girls clearly noticed. They whispered to each other, and she could guess at their remarks.

"Did Mary know this would happen?"

"And he's so goot looking."

"How did she do it?"

"Snagged the handsome fellow with a twirl of her finger!"

She would not be proud, and this was not a sure thing. Josiah might leave after the Sunday services and not ask her home for an evening date. If he didn't, she would not allow disappointment to grip her heart or sow discouragement—but the wound would sting deeply. Very deeply!

As the group entered the barn, the light of the lanterns burst around them. Two buggies had been set up a short distance from each other with their wheels blocked up on hay bales, and a volleyball net was stretched between them. This was not the usual *rum-springa* gathering, but a calmer, approved community event. Here, both the young people who had joined the baptismal class and those still on *rum-springa* could attend.

Mary glanced at Josiah. She had no regrets about leaving her

running-around time behind. Risky experiences, such as local *Englisha* rock band concerts, did not compare to her dream of home and family with a man like Josiah Beiler. Thankfully, she had made the decision to join the baptismal class before Josiah appeared, so she would be assured for the rest of her life that the choice had been made for the right reasons.

“We want Josiah on our side!” Ronald Troyer hollered from his place beside one of the buggies. As a visitor from Lancaster, Ronald had been given one of the honored positions of team captain for the evening.

“Maybe he can’t play volleyball!” Enos retorted from his post beside the other buggy.

Everyone laughed. They could tell that Josiah Beiler knew how to play volleyball. Mary stole a glance at his limber frame and guessed he would be an excellent player.

“Well, I guess visitors have privileges,” Enos declared with a grin. “Let’s stop arguing and get to playing.”

“You’re playing by my side,” Josiah told Mary out of the corner of his mouth.

Mary’s knees weakened, but she managed to follow Josiah to their assigned places. Ronald gave Josiah a slap on his back as they passed, and whispered to Mary, “Looks like you are in the game.”

Which meant more than playing volleyball tonight.

Josiah must have overheard because he laughed good-naturedly, which turned her face the color of red beets. She kept her head down, wondering if she was nothing more than Josiah’s latest conquest. But what a horrible thought! She decided to banish it from her mind forever.

The game began with the ball flying back and forth across the net. The other men from Lancaster were also great volleyball players. They spiked and set up with abandon, and Josiah outdid the others with ease. He even gave Mary some chances to play. She

managed to hit the ball back over the net each time and avoid total embarrassment.

“You’re *goot* at this,” Josiah said as they caught their breath.

Mary stilled her protest and kept her gaze straight ahead.

“Can I take you home on Sunday evening after the hymn singing?” Josiah asked in a low tone.

Mary nodded as the ball arched in the air high above them.

TWO

On Sunday evening Mary drove into Deacon Stoltzfus's driveway with the buggy seat empty beside her. She stopped by the barn with a flourish and then hopped out as several Amish men loitering nearby hurried forward to help unhitch the buggy. Josiah was not among them, so she assumed he hadn't arrived at the hymn singing yet. At the church service this morning, he had sent warm smiles her way for the whole three hours. Her face had remained one solid flame of red, but no one had objected to the new couple's behavior. Rather, several of the older women had whispered kind words into Mary's ear while she served tables afterward.

Rachel, Deacon Stoltzfus's *frau*, had said, "The Lord has blessed you with a handsome young man."

"We wish you nothing but the best," another woman had added.

"You are such an encouragement to our young girls," said Annie, Bishop Miller's *frau*. "The Lord is smiling on you indeed."

Mary smiled now when Enos walked up to her buggy with Ronald Troyer, his new friend from Lancaster, by his side. "I see I started quite the thing," Enos teased. "Happy to see you settling down so early, Mary. But then, we expected that of you."

Ronald chuckled. "I didn't know Josiah was looking for a girlfriend, so you must have taken him right off his feet."

Mary bowed her head and scurried toward the house. She had heard enough compliments for the moment. The thought of her first date with Josiah had sent her heart pounding since the volleyball game on Friday evening. The only dark cloud over the occasion had been Betsy's reaction.

"You shouldn't have said yes to that man," Betsy had scolded on the way home. "Ronald Troyer would have been a much better choice."

"Please don't be so negative," Mary had begged. "If you were so impressed with Ronald, maybe he will remember you in the future."

Betsy had glared at Mary and fallen silent. They both knew that the pain in Betsy's heart was real, even if few in the community could understand.

Mary paused at the front door of Deacon Stoltzfus's house to catch her breath. The buzz of conversation inside grew louder when she opened the door. Mary made a beeline for the kitchen, which was filled with women. "Is there anything I can do to help with supper?" she asked Rachel.

"Give the mashed potatoes another whirl, and check them for seasoning," Rachel suggested. "We'll be ready to serve in a moment. With the Lancaster load here tonight, I'm running a little behind."

Mary nodded and grabbed the bowl of potatoes to stir them vigorously with a wooden spoon. That she was given this task was a great honor. Mashed potatoes were a staple in Amish meals and must be prepared to perfection, especially with the Lancaster visitors present.

"Here's the sample spoon," Rachel said in her ear.

Mary dropped a small glob of potatoes from the wooden spoon into a smaller utensil and tasted a bite. More salt was needed. She added a small amount plus two pinches of pepper from the cupboard.

Mary whipped the potatoes again, and Rachel appeared at her side. Mary handed her the spoon for another test.

“Perfect,” Rachel pronounced.

Two women behind Rachel descended on the bowl of potatoes to fill smaller dishes. Then they disappeared in the direction of the dining room.

“We’re ready to serve,” Rachel told Mary. “Thanks for the help. You are the best.”

Mary’s face burned again, and she tried to hide behind the warm stove. Why did everyone draw attention to her this evening? Thankfully, Deacon Stoltzfus called for the prayer of thanks from the kitchen doorway, occupying everyone for a moment.

“And now, gracious heavenly Father,” Deacon Stoltzfus prayed. “Let this evening be pleasing in Your sight. We give thanks for the bounty You have blessed us with and from which we are about to eat...”

Mary listened as Deacon Stoltzfus gave thanks for the visitors from Lancaster and prayed for their safe travels home. Would Josiah be staying for another week? Did she dare hope? Their first date hadn’t even begun. She had prepared coconut ruffles for their evening snack, and a party mix made with pretzels, Cheerios, and Cheetos. If Josiah stayed another week, she could bake a cherry pie for him, plus a few extra pies to pacify the family. Gerald would eat a whole pie by himself if *Mamm* didn’t keep an eye on the boy.

“Amen,” Deacon Stoltzfus pronounced, and Mary lifted her head as the buzz of conversation resumed.

With the visitors present, supper was served cafeteria-style at the dining room table, with a line on each side—one for the men and one for the women.

“Go!” Rachel ordered, and Mary fell in with the other unmarried girls who streamed into the dining room. Betsy should have come tonight, but she had refused. Enos was here, so there was no *rumspringa* gathering to attend. Instead, Betsy was probably brooding in her room, which wasn’t *goot* for anyone. They would have to pray even harder for Betsy’s full healing now that Mary was dating Josiah—or, at least, was going on one date with him.

Mary glanced up and caught Josiah's clear blue eyes fixed on her from across the food-laden table. The plate in her hand almost slipped out of her fingers. She had never been in love, but if this was what love felt like, they should be married in a few years. Mary took a deep breath and dared to glance across the table again. Josiah's smile was still there, and it dazzled her. The food dishes became blurry, and she had no idea what she put on her plate.

Josiah leaned toward her to whisper, "Can I sit beside you?"

Mary nodded, and they found chairs toward the back along the living room wall.

"Perfect!" Josiah declared.

He clearly referred to their secluded position in the room, but from his smile he could have been speaking of her too.

Mary's heart pounded in her ears.

Several of the girls with their boyfriends in tow gave them pleased glances as they walked past to find seats together. It seemed that everyone approved of Josiah Beiler and Mary Yoder. The only person with a scowl on his face was Stephen Overholt, a bachelor who rarely came to the hymn singings. Where had Stephen come from? Why would he choose tonight to attend the young folks' gathering? Likely he knew someone who had come in from Lancaster, but that didn't supply a full explanation. Was there a girl who had sparked his interest? If Stephen had spoken with her earlier in the evening, a rejection would explain his fallen face.

"Is that Stephen Overholt over there?" Josiah asked, his spoon moving just slightly in Stephen's direction.

Mary kept her voice low. "*Yah*. How do you know him?"

"My cousin Linda..." Josiah motioned with his spoon again.

Mary nodded. She'd met Linda Friday night after the volleyball game, but Josiah's face was all she recalled clearly from that evening.

"Linda came to me, but not for advice." Josiah grinned. "She already had her answer, and now I can see why. She said this Stephen Overholt talked with her outside the mudroom door after the

church services and asked her for a date this evening. When Linda said no, he wouldn't back down. He prattled on and on about the Lord's will, and how Linda should think long and hard before risking going against what the Lord wanted. I guess the man still hasn't given up."

"I'm sorry about that," Mary whispered. "I guess Stephen must be desperate."

Josiah grunted as if he totally agreed. "I'm thinking the man should ask some widow for a date. Don't you have any of those? Someone who would fit the man better than my cousin Linda?"

"I'm sure we do," Mary managed. "There's Sadie, for one, and Lavina has two small children."

"There you go." Josiah appeared satisfied with himself.

"I didn't know Stephen acted like that," Mary told him. "I knew he was a little strange."

"I thought you might know from experience," Josiah teased with a wicked grin.

Heat flamed into Mary's face, and she quickly took a bite of food.

"Am I right or not?" Josiah persisted. He was obviously drawing the wrong conclusions.

"Stephen has hardly ever spoken to me, let alone asked me for a date," she told him.

He tilted his head sideways. "Okay. Just sympathizing with you, that's all."

"Thank you," she told him.

What he said didn't make sense to her, but little did at the moment. Josiah couldn't be jealous, could he? Or did he think her the kind of girl whom Stephen would ask for a date?

"I've been waiting all day to spend time with you," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Was Josiah still teasing?

"I was," he insisted, as if he read her thoughts. "I wasn't expecting to find someone like you in the valley."

"Josiah, please," she managed. "I'm embarrassed enough. I am quite thrilled to say the least. I've...it's..." Words failed her.

"Did you think no *goot* could come out of Lancaster?"

She met his teasing look. "It sounds like you expected no *goot* to come out of the valley."

"That would be right," he agreed. "But look what I've found: a diamond at the foothills of the Adirondacks."

"Josiah...I...stop it, please," Mary sputtered.

His smile only grew. He obviously enjoyed her discomfort.

"Are you ready for dessert?" he asked.

She cleared the last of her plate and nodded. Thankfully Josiah knew when to break up an embarrassing conversation.

They stood, and he whispered, "You first."

Mary made her way through the crowd with Josiah at her shoulder. The smiles and nods sent their way were plentiful and sincere, and Mary noticed that Stephen Overholt appeared to have vanished.

"You have a nice community here," Josiah told her as he filled his plate with chocolate cake, rice pudding, and shoofly pie. "You even have Lancaster's best food." He bent his head low to draw a deep breath over the pie on his plate. "Ah, the smells of home!"

"Most of the people moved here from Lancaster," she reminded him. "We know how to make shoofly pie."

He grinned. "I know. Just making sure they still know how to bake."

Mary took a piece of pie for herself. Shoofly pie would be a staple in their home if Josiah and she were to wed. Lancaster might be miles to the south, but they were connected in so many ways by community, by the generations who had gone before, and by their desire to live a life that was pleasing to the Lord.

Josiah took a bite of his pie as they walked back to their seats. "I should have taken a second piece!" he declared. "This is amazing. Exactly like home."

"You can have mine," she offered.

"Thanks, but I have to watch the pounds." He patted his flat stomach.

They laughed together, the sound muffled by the voices that rose and fell around them. Already she felt right with this man, so comfortable, so at home.

"Can I see you again next Sunday?" he asked in between bites of pie.

"You haven't even taken me home yet," she retorted. "How do you know you'll want to see me again?"

"I know," he said. "Can I stay over the week?"

Mary nodded, not trusting her voice. Josiah wanted to continue their relationship. She couldn't believe he wanted another date before he had eaten the food she had prepared for him.

"I hope I'm not being too forward," he said. "I know we only met each other Friday night, but rarely have I been so certain of anything, Mary. I would like to see a lot more of you this week. Maybe we could sneak in an extra evening at your place, considering the circumstances. I'm not very good at letter writing."

Mary's voice trembled. "I'm sure *Mamm* and *Daett* would not object. *Mamm* wasn't totally sure this morning which one of you Lancaster men was Josiah, but she said you all seemed decent."

"Then we will have to work on your *mamm*'s poor impression of me," Josiah said with a broad smile.

"I didn't mean it that way," Mary protested. "*Mamm* just...well, she couldn't—"

"I understand," Josiah interrupted. "I will do my best to get your *mamm* on my side."

And he would. Josiah would succeed. He should be able to charm any woman he wished to impress. Mary was so grateful that Josiah had chosen her, and she wondered if maybe this was the answer to their prayers for Betsy. Her relationship with Josiah might bring healing to her sister's heart, if only Betsy would withhold her quick judgments.

Josiah finished the last piece of his shoofly pie and sighed deeply. “*Wunderbah!*” he said. “Absolutely, *wunderbah!*”

Mary leaped to her feet to hide another rush of heat up her neck. “Time to help with the dishes,” she tossed over her shoulder.

As she approached the dining room table, the girls in the kitchen began singing, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow!” Mary gathered up a handful of dishes and joined in the song. How could she praise the Lord enough for the blessing He had brought into her life since Friday evening? There seemed no way to fully express her joy, but the words of the song helped. Mary sang with her heart full. She deposited the dirty plates on the kitchen counter and returned to the dining room, where Josiah gave her a wink from across the table.