

One



Miriam Troyer guided the horse-drawn buggy into the lane that led to John Byler's home. She was lost in the beauty of the scene that unfolded before her. Wind ruffled the tall grasses about to be cut into hay. Livestock grazed in a pasture. The farmhouse itself was a rambling white wooden home that had been added on to by generations of Bylers as the family grew. The old house was the embodiment of Amish peace and tranquility.

John Byler sat on his front porch, his gray head bent as he wrote in a notebook.

How John loved writing letters, Miriam thought fondly. She hated to interrupt him, but when he glanced up and smiled at her, she could tell he didn't regard her dropping by as an unwelcome interruption.

And it wasn't just because he knew she brought baked goods. He had become a good friend, someone who listened and encouraged and offered wise counsel. They were a generation apart, but age had never made a difference in their friendship.

She waved and called for him to stay where he was, but he was already up and making his way to her. He was limping more than usual today. It had rained earlier and she knew his arthritis always acted up worse then. It had become more and more of a problem the last year or so. Still, he was determined to keep going each day and take care of his farm. "If you stop doing, you'll stop being," he'd say when she worried about him.

"It's *gut* to see you, Miriam."

"You, too, John."

He reached for the handle of the basket in her hands.

"I'm not some frail *maedel*," she told him. "I can carry this. I put it in the buggy."

They had their usual tug-of-war, which he won like always.

He grinned and laugh lines crinkled around his eyes, the color of faded denim. "We should help each other, shouldn't we?"

“Ya,” said with a sigh and a smile. His gentle charm and courtesy reminded her of her *grossdaadi* who had passed years ago.

Both qualities had seemed to be lacking in the men she’d dated.

He set the basket on a small wooden table on the porch and waved a hand at one of the rocking chairs flanking it. “Do you have time to visit a bit?”

Now it was her turn to grin. “And when, I ask you, don’t I have time to visit with you? So, how was your day?”

“*Gut.*” He gestured at the pad of paper and pen on the table. “Just sitting here writing my *grosssohn.*”

She didn’t need to ask which one. John had only one. Only one *sohn* as well. Most Amish families had many *kinner* and thanked God for them. John had never complained that he hadn’t had a larger family with his *fraa*, long dead now. But he reveled in the times his *grosssohn* visited.

Mark had visited many summers after he turned fourteen. Apparently he’d wanted to know his *grossdaadi*, and his *dat* had decided to let him. He and John had become close.

Miriam had been twelve and just noticing boys. And over the years, she’d developed a fanciful crush on Mark—one that no one but God knew about.

Mark was so different from anyone she knew. She’d been intrigued the first time he’d visited. Years before he became a high-powered attorney, he seemed to carry himself with a confidence the boys she knew lacked. He was outspoken, too, and had often had spirited discussions with John about the Amish faith and God.

He stood out with his dark good looks, too. His black hair shone like the wing of a raven when he stood hatless out in the fields with his *grossdaadi*. His eyes were a vivid blue, stronger in color and more direct than the older man. She hadn’t seen him for a year, but the memory of his face was as vivid as if he was standing right here in front of her.

“Miriam?”

She realized she’d been daydreaming and felt warmth flood her face. “Hmm? Oh, sorry, I was just thinking of an errand *mudder* wanted me to run on the way home.”

SEEDS OF HOPE

“You don’t have to leave already, do you?”

“Nee. So, you were saying you’re writing to Mark.”

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Ya. I’ve asked him if he’s coming home to help with harvest.”

“He usually does.”

John rested his hands on his knees. “The last time he wrote me, he sounded busy with his work at the law firm. But I’m needing his help more than usual.” He rubbed at his knee with his big, gnarled hand. “I don’t know how much longer I can take care of things. The doctor’s tried some of the new medicines on my arthritis, but I’m not getting much relief.”

John seldom talked about his age and his increasing problems with his arthritis, but Miriam and her *mudder* and other women in the community had noticed and tried to help out by bringing him food. The men in the community helped with chores, too.

“I just wish . . .” he trailed off.

“You just wish?” she prompted as he gazed off into the distance.

“I wish there was someone to hand it over to.”

“Hand it over?” She wasn’t following him.

“My *sohn* didn’t want the farm. And I doubt Mark wants it.”

She felt her heart leap at the thought and cautioned herself not to show her reaction. “Mark has his work in Philadelphia.”

John nodded and looked sad. “I know.”

He sat staring out at the fields he’d worked for more years than she’d lived. “There have been Bylers working on this farm for generations. All the way back to the time the Amish first came to Pennsylvania.”

“So you’ve said.”

“I don’t want it to stop with me.” He spoke with such passion she could only stare at him.

“I don’t want it to stop with me,” he said again, softer now, and he lapsed into silence.

“So you’re writing to Mark about harvest?” she prompted again.

John seemed to gather himself and stared at her. “Ya,” he said. “Ya. I was just finishing it.” He reached for the pad of paper on the table, ripped the top page off, folded it, and tucked it into an envelope. After

dashing the address across it—from memory—he looked at her. “All I need is a stamp.”

Miriam held out her hand. “I have one in my purse. I can mail that for you. I’m driving into town.”

He handed it to her. “*Danki*, Miriam.” He smiled at her. “Mark is a smart young man. A caring one. He’ll come and we’ll talk.”

She bit her lip, worried that John would be disappointed. Mark had a busy, successful career in the *Englisch* world. The last few years he’d visited, he’d driven a fancy, expensive *Englisch* car and worn fancy, expensive clothes. And although he appeared to love his *grossdaadi*, he was the last man she’d expect to be interested in a farm.

John, always the gentleman, walked Miriam back to her buggy, even though she could tell the effort of walking was hard on him.

“Don’t forget the basket,” she reminded him as she climbed into the buggy. “There’s baked chicken and potato salad and a big baked potato and a jar of the chow chow we made today. And a sweet treat that’ll be a surprise.”

“You make me a happy man,” he said. “I know you worry I don’t eat right.”

She knew his arthritis made it harder for him to take care of the farm, and what Amish man really liked to cook? But she wasn’t going to say either of those things. “I love visiting with you and talking. You know that.”

He smiled. “You make me happy when you visit.”

She sincerely hoped Mark would make him happy and visit soon, too.



“Mark!”

Mark Byler turned as his assistant rushed up to him. “This just came in the morning mail. I saw it was from your grandfather and knew you’d want to take it with you.”

Mark took the letter and slid it into his briefcase as he stepped into the elevator. Judge Patterson insisted on attorneys being on time, so he wasn’t about to risk stopping to read the letter right now.

SEEDS OF HOPE

He made the short trip to the courthouse, found a parking space, and headed inside. The district attorney was right behind him and both were relieved to see that they'd arrived in plenty of time.

His client was brought in a few minutes later. Mark watched as the man's leg chain was secured to a leg of the table where they sat. He could literally hear his client's nervousness as the chain rattled faintly.

"Chill," he whispered. "Everything's going to be fine."

"I hope you're right."

"I'm always right." Mark figured it wasn't arrogance if it were true.

Mark focused on Dan's closing statement, noting on a yellow legal pad an adjustment to a point he'd make in his own closing statement. When Dan finally finished, Mark was ready.

He walked slowly to the jury box, taking his time, making eye contact with each of the men and women sitting in it, measuring his words.

His favorite law professor had always said that cases were won by careful, steady work, relentless study, investigation, and the slow, careful laying out the defense in steps the often-tired and overwhelmed jurors could understand.

"And so, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, that's why you should acquit my client," he said. He made a final eye contact with each of them, nodded, then walked back to his seat at the defendant's table.

"Man, that was good," Maurice whispered in his ear as he sat beside him.

Maybe so, but Mark couldn't help noticing the poor man still shook as he sat beside him. He'd sat there shaking throughout most of the trial. The guy was built like a linebacker, yet he trembled like the frailest client Mark had ever defended. He was accused of being in a gang and gunning down a rival. Mark hadn't believed it from the time he met the gentle giant.

He hoped the jury would believe in Maurice's innocence as well.

Two hours later the case went to the jury.

"This is gonna be a quick one," Dan said as they rode down in the courthouse elevator. He wore a hangdog expression like he always did while the jury was out. He shot a sharp look at Mark. "Want to bet on the verdict?"

Mark shook his head.

"I'm going to the coffee shop. No point in leaving," Dan said.

And since Dan was almost always right about how long the jury took to deliberate, Mark replied, "I'll join you."

"Your treat?"

"Sure." Mark had a good feeling about this one, but wasn't one to gloat.

Two women who were assistants to Judge Patterson got on the elevator. One smiled flirtatiously at him. He tried not to notice. It wasn't a good thing to get too friendly with the staff from the judge's office. Someone could yell conflict of interest.

Besides, he was happy with Tiffany Mitchell, his fiancée. Well, happy wasn't exactly the right word—more like content. Tiffany was a little high maintenance, but she was beautiful, smart, and would make a great wife for an up-and-coming lawyer. Tiffany was a little wound up from all the wedding planning, but she hadn't become a bridezilla, and he'd felt a little distance between them lately.

They got out at the ground floor and headed for the coffee shop.

Dan checked his watch. "I figure we have time to split a BLT, if you're hungry."

"Sure." They ordered the sandwich and two coffees and found a table.

They'd just finished the BLT and Mark was thinking about getting out his grandfather's letter when they got the phone calls to return to the courtroom.

Dan stood and tossed his paper napkin onto his plate. "Here we go."

The courtroom was buzzing with excitement. Reporters lined the first row of seats. Behind them were members of the families and behind them, the regular contingent of senior citizens who attended trials as a form of entertainment.

Officers brought Maurice to his seat and secured his restraints. The chains shook even more than they had that morning. "A short time out's good, right? I heard the shorter the deliberation, the better the verdict."

"I'm afraid that's not always true."

Maurice gave him a desperate look. "Lie to me, man. Tell me a jury

SEEDS OF HOPE

coming back so quick means they found me innocent. Otherwise, I'm gonna pass out right here."

The bailiff called for all to rise as the judge walked in. He gave his traditional stern look at the assemblage and recited his admonition for the courtroom to remain calm when the verdict was announced.

"Have you reached a verdict?" the judge asked the jury.

"Yes, your Honor," the foreman said.

The bailiff took the square of paper from him and carried it to the judge. Mark stood with his client and waited for the judge to read the paper.

"Is this your decision?"

"Yes, your Honor."

"On the charge of first degree murder," the judge read aloud, "not guilty."

"No! You killed my son!" a man shouted.

Mark turned and saw two officers wrestling the father of the victim to the ground. He screamed threats as they dragged him from the courtroom.

Maurice stood still for a moment, then threw his arms around Mark and hugged him so tightly Mark was afraid he was going to end up with cracked ribs.

Grinning, he extricated himself and the officer in charge of security went to work releasing Maurice from his leg chains.

"There's some paperwork and then you're free," Mark told Maurice, slapping him on his shoulder.

"Can't thank you enough, man."

"No problem. Now I don't want to see you again, right?"

"You won't. Like I said, I gave up that life years ago."

Mark grabbed his briefcase, accepted the grudging congratulations from Dan, and headed out of the courthouse. He paused briefly in his car to text the verdict to Lani, his paralegal and assistant.

A brass bell clanged the minute he walked into the law offices. It was the celebratory greeting for an attorney when he or she won a case.

Mark thought it was kind of silly, but it was a tradition and law firms loved tradition. Especially staid, well-established firms like this one.

His boss came out of his office to clap him on the back and other attorneys joined him.

Mark finally extricated himself and went to see if his assistant had any messages for him. He took them into his office, scanned quickly, and then settled back in his chair. He was tired—a good kind of tired. Satisfied tired. There they had been a lot of long days and long nights preparing for this and other cases.

“You look exhausted,” Lani said.

“Gee, thanks.”

“Think about taking some personal time soon. You’ve earned it.”

He gave her a cool stare. She just laughed. Ten years older than he, she’d been with the firm for a long time and wasn’t intimidated by any of the attorneys. He was lucky she chose to work with him. She knew what he wanted and produced it.

“Let’s just say the rest of us could use the break,” she said as she collected the stack of work. “I’ll get these out right away.”

Mark glanced at the clock on the wall and decided to quit for the day. For once he didn’t have anything to take home and review, due mostly to Lani’s usual good work of keeping his calendar clear for a day or so after a case expected to wrap. He’d been careful not to plan anything with Tiffany so he could go home, find something to eat, have a glass of wine if he wanted, and relax.

His condo was blessedly quiet and spotless. The cleaning service had been there that day. When he looked in his Sub-Zero refrigerator, he found a couple takeout containers that looked like they were growing science experiments. The inside of the freezer was an arctic wasteland. He sighed. It looked like he was ordering in one more night. Tomorrow he’d make himself shop for groceries. But tonight it wasn’t going to happen.

He rooted through the takeout menus in a kitchen drawer and ordered his favorite baked spaghetti and Greek salad, then changed into sweats while he waited for delivery.

Later, he sat eating his solitary dinner on the coffee table in the

SEEDS OF HOPE

elegantly decorated living room—done with the help of an expensive interior decorator—and watched ESPN.

Such was the life of a successful big city attorney, he thought wryly.

Reaching into his briefcase, he pulled out the letter from his grandfather and ripped it open. “Dear Mark,” he read. “I need to see you to talk about an important matter. Can you come to the farm?”

That was it. Two sentences. Well, one sentence and one question. His grandfather was a man of few words, but this was very terse even for him.

He frowned. Was his grandfather ill? He pulled out his cell phone and dialed, then frowned again when the call went to voicemail. The call was being recorded out in the phone shanty, but who knew when his grandfather would check the answering machine. Phone calls weren’t a high priority in his grandfather’s world, unlike Mark’s own smartphone-driven life.

A couple hours later, Mark lay awake in bed, unable to sleep. He’d been in his line of work too long. His imagination ran wild with worry about the reason his grandfather wanted to see him.

He needed to go visit him right away.

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