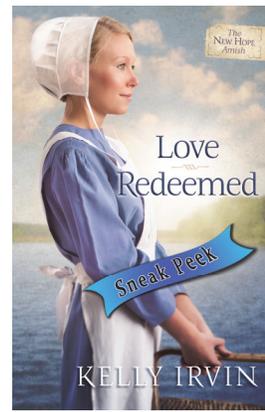


Special Sneak Preview
Love Redeemed
By Kelly Irvin



The bench was a fallen tree. Shyness descended on Phoebe. She never felt shy. Not in her life. Now she was alone with Michael for the first time. She'd thought of this moment, imagined this moment, so many times, it didn't seem real now. It happened so quickly. Hoped for. Wished for. Prayed for. And now it was here in a place far from home, far from the barn and the horses and the creek that ran through their farm. Far from the familiar where she knew what the rules were. What were the rules here? She swallowed. "What now?"

He seemed to consider. "We sit. Just for a minute. I know you have to get back." He sat as if to show her how. "Right here."

He patted the tree log. "Sit."

She sat.

They were both silent. Their breathing mingled with the sound of birds overhead and the rustling of leaves in a soft breeze. A dragonfly buzzed close by and a butterfly flitted among the bushes. Shafts of sunlight burst into the clearing as the oak and hickory branches bobbed above them. It was perfect.

"I—"

"We should—"

Michael laughed, a husky sound that sent another chill up her arm. "I wanted to ask you something."

She nodded, afraid to breathe, afraid to move for fear the moment would be lost and the question would never come.

"If I were to shine my flashlight in your window, would you let me take you for a buggy ride sometime?"

Hallelujah times ten. Or twenty. She gripped her hands in her lap to keep from clapping or doing something silly like grabbing his. "I would like that."

He exhaled a gusty, noisy breath.

She couldn't help it. She laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" He frowned. "This courting business—it's painful."

"It's not that bad." She giggled again. "It's a simple question. How hard can it be? You didn't have to bring me out here. You could ask anytime."

He growled like an angry bear, but he smiled, that dimpled smile that displayed white, even teeth. "A girl would say that. You don't have to do the asking."

"Nee, you have to wait to be asked. That's worse."

He picked up an maple tree leaf from the ground and smoothed its wrinkled edges. It seemed to be the most interesting thing in the world to him, such did he study it. He tilted his head to one side and peeked at her. "Have you been waiting for me to ask you?"

"Maybe."

“Maybe. That’s the best you can do?”

“Truth be told.” Now she was the one ducking her head and studying the ground and looking for her own leaf. “Truth be told I’ve been waiting all my life for you to get the nerve to speak up.”

“All your life? Huh.” His hand touched her chin. She looked up at him. “Since you were a baby? That’s what you’re telling me?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

His hand dropped. He leaned in and kissed her. She saw it coming, but couldn’t move to meet him, even though she wanted to more than anything. The kiss was soft, tentative, at first, then stronger, almost fierce. Her first kiss. It couldn’t be more perfect. The shade of the trees, the smell of bark and leaves. The smell of him, light, breathless, sweet.

He wrenched away, his face the color of a radish. “I’m . . . I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. I didn’t mean any disrespect.”

Feeling as if she’d been dropped from the hay loft, Phoebe grabbed his hand. “I’m not sorry. I’ve been waiting for that forever too.”

“You have?”

“You must be blind as a bat. Do you need glasses?”

He laughed, an uncertain, dumbfounded sort of laugh. “You are a firecracker, Phoebe Christner.”

“Ach.” She slapped her hands to her hot face. Had she sounded too forward? “Sorry. My daed says I never know when to close my mouth. I can’t help it. It’s just the way I am.”

“I like the way you are.”

“I sure hope so. You just kissed me.”

“It seems you kissed me back.” His gaze somber, he rubbed both big hands on his pant legs. “I don’t think we’re supposed to do that. Not yet anyway.”

Phoebe ducked her head. He was right. “That’s the thing about me. I do everything double time. You’ll learn that about me. That’s what my mudder says. I do everything in a hurry.”

“I’m a little slower on the uptake.” He took her hand and caressed the soft skin along the back of her knuckles. “I like to take my time and figure things out. Is that a problem?”

“Nee. Just don’t wait too long.”

He kissed her again, this time short and sweet, then he let go. “I won’t.” He stood. “We should get back. I don’t want to leave your sister alone with the kinner too long.”

“We should—”

“Phoebe! Phoebe, where are you?”

Hannah’s voice, high and shrill, shattered the beautiful soft quiet of the forest. It severed the bond that held them still, staring at each other, lost in those first few moments of beginning to learn just how achingly special someone could be.

“I need you! Phoebe!”