

KELLY IRVIN

Mary's
Garden

A NOVELLA



Mary's Garden

Kelly Irvin

Glossary*

aenti: aunt

bopli(n): baby

bruder: brother

daed: father

danki: thank you

dochder: daughter

Englischer: English or Non-Amish

Fehla: sin

fraa: wife

Gott: God

guder mariye: good morning

gut: good

jah: yes

kapp: Prayer cap or head covering worn by Amish women

kinner: children

mann: husband

mudder: mother

nee: no

onkel: uncle

Ordnung: written and unwritten rules in an Amish district

rumspringa: period of running around

schweschder: sister

wunderbarr: wonderful

*The German dialect spoken by the Amish is not a written language and varies depending on the location and origin of the settlement. These spellings are approximations. Most Amish children learn English after they start school. They also learn high German, which is used in their Sunday services.

Chapter 1

Inhaling the spicy scent of basil, oregano, and onion, Mary smiled and dipped the wooden spoon into the homemade spaghetti sauce bubbling in a pan on her gas range. The steam rising from the boiling water for the noodles felt good on her face after the blustery northern winds that had brought more snow earlier in the day. A Kansas January in all its glory made her glad for central heat. She blew on the sauce and then tasted. *Perfect*. Just the right amount of garlic. Alex, in keeping with his Italian ancestry, loved garlic. She preferred less rather than more. One of the many compromises of married life. Mary loved her married life more than she had thought possible when she'd agreed to marry Alex before she finished her doctoral degree. If anyone could handle a husband and a dissertation committee at the same time, it was her—if she did say so herself.

She laid the spoon on the ceramic rest and peeked into the oven. Homemade French bread toasted to a golden brown. Another lovely aroma. It reminded her of home. Of Haven. Flipping her long, blonde braid over her shoulder, she straightened and pushed the thought away. Not tonight. Tonight, it smelled like contentment with her lot in a life she'd built from scratch all on her own. Some things, she could admit to herself, she'd brought with her. Like the ability to cook and bake and sew. Those things were engrained. Others, like faith in a God who never seemed to come through, she'd left behind.

“Annabelle! Elisa! It's supper time.” She leaned over the granite-topped counter that ran the length of the country-style kitchen, separating it from the living room. Her daughters were playing “tea” on the massive oak coffee table, their petite, pink teacups strategically lined up in front of an impressive array of dolls and stuffed animals. They looked so cute in the matching blue dresses Mary had sewn for them. “Tell Daddy to come and get it.”

Annabelle, her chubby cheeks dimpled in a smile, hopped up from the floor pulling at the black tights she wore to keep her legs warm. At four, she was the older girl, but also the more timid one. "Me, me, I tell Daddy, me."

"Me." Little sister Elisa, who was three and the intrepid adventurer, frowned and slapped her hands on her hips in a fair imitation of Mary when she was irritated with the girls. "I tell Daddy."

Their English, nonexistent when Mary and Alex met them for the first time at the orphanage in Korea, improved daily, but Mary could still hear the faint cadence of their mother language so sweet in their soft voices.

"Go together, you two. Now, before the food gets cold." It would take both of them to pry Alex from his office. He'd always been dedicated to his burgeoning medical practice, but lately he'd been entrenched in his office until all hours of the night. His normal free-flowing tell-all approach to his day had been strangely absent from the fleeting moments she shared with him as they filled coffee travel mugs in the morning or after they tiptoed from the girls' bedroom at night. "Tell Daddy it's his favorite so he better hurry before I eat it all."

The girls giggled, their round faces, the black, shiny hair cut in a cap around their heads, and brown eyes so alike they could be twins. As she always did, Mary marveled that they were her girls. Hers and Alex's. When the doctor said she couldn't have children herself, she'd pictured a life bereft of all things sweetly childish. Visits to specialist after specialist simply delivered one crushing blow after another.

Nothing could be done.

Alex's faith had seen them through when she couldn't find an iota of her own.

Now she had these two with their inquisitive natures and babbling, silly songs and whispered *I love you mommy's*. She couldn't take her gaze from them as they trotted away, obviously trying not to run in the house, but barely containing themselves.

When their giggles faded and they disappeared from sight, Mary returned to her preparations for her favorite time of day. Family supper. She carried the bowl of spaghetti sauce in one hand and the noodles in the other to the dining room where she'd set the table for four, a booster seat on Elisa's chair and extra napkins piled at each plate. Spaghetti could be a messy affair with three and four-year-olds, but the girls were learning how to twirl the fork against the spoon with dexterity born of determination to do what Daddy did.

Alex loved demonstrating his spaghetti technique, something he claimed he learned from his Italian great-grandma, who came over to the states from the old country, as he liked to call it. He also loved slurping up the noodles with puckered lips in the old-fashioned, time-honored way of all children. Shaking her head at the memory of their last spaghetti supper, which had ended with more sauce on the girls' faces and dresses than in their tummies, Mary strode back to the kitchen for the green beans, salad, and bread. Glasses of milk all around would complete the meal.

“Mommy, Mommy!”

Annabelle's shriek startled Mary into dropping the breadbasket on the counter. The girl's voice held a note of fear—something Mary hadn't heard there in almost a year. It had taken time for the girls to trust their new parents and acclimate to their adopted country.

“What is it, sweetie? Is Daddy refusing to leave his computer again?” Mary wiped her hands on her apron and started down the hallway. Alex probably had enlisted the girls to play a

practical joke on her. He loved jokes, the more elaborate the better. “Tell him I said most of the spaghetti is gone and I’m starting on my second plate—”

“Daddy, get up!” Elisa didn’t sound as if she liked this joke. “What’s the matter, Daddy?”

Mary broke her own rule and ran the length of the hallway that led to Alex’s office. The double French doors stood open. Her husband sprawled, head back, eyes closed, on the carpet between his chair and the pine roll-top desk he’d inherited from his father.

Chapter 2

Mary dropped to her knees. She patted her husband's ashen face. "Wake up! Alex, wake up!"

His eyelids fluttered, then closed again.

With shaking hands, Mary fumbled in her apron pocket for her cell phone. 9-1-1. She needed help. "Alex, please, wake up."

His eyelids fluttered again. This time, they stayed open. His expression uncertain, Alex winced. One hand went to the back of his head. "What happened?"

"You tell me."

"I stood up . . . I felt dizzy."

"You were on the floor. You passed out."

Alex wiggled upright, forcing Mary to back away. Color rushed into his face. "It's all right. I'm fine."

"It's not all right." Mary, aware of the girls pressing against her, seeking comfort, forced her voice back into its normal range. "Did you hit your head?"

"Easy, easy." He held up his big hand. His long fingers—surgeon's fingers—shook. "I probably just stood up too quickly. I must've hit my head on the leg of the chair. It's no big deal. I'm just clumsy."

The last thing Alex could be called was clumsy. He made a living with his precise surgeon hands. He'd played college basketball and still ran seven miles a day. Mary swallowed back sudden fear. "No big deal? You hit your head. You were unconscious." She ran her fingers through his thick, black hair, probing. "There's a huge lump. We need to take you to the ER."

“I was only out for a second. I don't need a doctor.” His voice choked. His gaze swung to the girls, who clung to Mary's skirt, their faces hidden, their chubby fists wrapped in the cotton material. “No more doctors.”

“What do you mean, no more doctors?” The beseeching expression in his huge coffee colored eyes made Mary's heart squeeze. “What's going on?”

Alex grabbed his chair and pulled himself to his feet. He teetered for a second. His hands went to the desk. He stared down at her. Pain etched white lines around his full lips. “We need to talk.”

A vise gripped Mary's chest. She'd lost so much already. Too much. Alex was ten years older than she, but still young. Only thirty-eight. He ran every day. He golfed. He was the one who insisted on two percent milk and no fried foods. He'd even nixed her favorite shoofly pie because of the lard and sugar. He was the healthiest man she knew.

Wasn't he?

“So talk.”

“Later. When we're alone.” He scooped up Elisa and settled her on his hip. “Right now I have a date with three beautiful women and a plate of spaghetti.”

Something in his tone forced Mary to play along. She grabbed Annabelle's sticky, plump hand. “I'll have to heat it up, I imagine.”

“That's okay. We have all the time in the world.”

The words said one thing, but his tone implied something completely different.

An odd shiver traipsed up Mary's arm and curled itself around her neck. When did they start running out of time?

Together they traipsed down the hallway to the kitchen where supper was full of the usual chatter and laughter. Alex had seemed determined to entertain the girls and allow for no discussion of what had occurred in his office. He ate two servings of spaghetti and asked for seconds on the bread, something he never did. Then he built a fire in the fireplace and proceeded to stretch out on the couch with a pile of picture books. The girls climbed into the crook of his arm and listened, mesmerized, to story after story.

Mary was glad they had no idea how unusual his behavior was. She did the storytelling, she entertained, while Alex worked in his office most nights. He updated patient files and reviewed medical records in preparation for the next day's surgeries. She'd always counted herself lucky he came home to do these chores. He ate supper with her and the girls every night. He even helped with the dishes and jumped in to lead baths and bedtime rituals. But then he strode back to his office, his mind already strategizing on the next day. In the last few months he rarely came to bed before midnight and when he did, he kept to his side of the bed.

Gone were the nights of snuggling and whispering their dreams into the cozy darkness. Any attempt to talk about it had met with a quick rebuff that started with *not now* or *we'll talk later*.

Tonight he stretched out the bath ritual to include bubbles and finished out the evening by hearing two exhausted little girls' prayers. He brushed past her without a word and left her to say her goodnights. The girls were asleep before she left the room. She made sure the nightlight was on, turned off the lamp, and closed the door.

And leaned against the wall for a second to catch her breath. A disconcerting sense of unreality pressed on her. She sighed and pulled herself upright. Time to face the music. Whatever it was, it couldn't be that bad. Thanks to Alex's trust fund and his successful practice,

they could afford the best medical care—whatever he needed. She shook her head. *Stop imagining the worst and go find out what's wrong.*

Shoulders squared, Mary straightened and marched into the living room. She stopped by the couch, unable to take her gaze from the somber-faced man who knelt, welding a poker to stir glowing embers. Even after three years of marriage, he still affected her the same way. It wasn't just his dark good looks, the thick black hair, enormous eyes, and regal nose or his gorgeous smile. He had something. . . something she couldn't name. He'd captured her heart from the day they'd reached for the same gardening book at a used bookstore on the edge of the university campus where he'd been a guest lecturer. He'd taken her heart captive and never let it go.

“Alex?”

He glanced up. A neutral expression slid over his face. “Don't stand over there like you're afraid I'll self-combust or something.” He stood and motioned toward the couch. “Come here.”

Mary sat. To her surprise, he chose the easy chair on the other side of the coffee table. He leaned forward, head down, elbows on knees, hands clasped so tight his knuckles turned white. “I'm just going to say this. There's no easy way to do it, so I'm just going to say it.”

Was he leaving her? Cheating on her? Or dying? “Alex—”

“I have early-onset Parkinson's disease.”

Mary closed her mouth. Parkinson's disease. She scrambled to remember anything she knew about the neurological motion disorder. Her thoughts cartwheeled, scattered, then regrouped as she tried to absorb the notion that her young, vibrant, spectacularly healthy husband had a disease that most often struck people over sixty.

“I don't understand.” That wasn't true. She did understand. She'd spent the last three years waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for the bottom to fall out on her happiness. Tonight, it had, with a loud, ugly thud. God would never let her be happy for very long. “That can't be right. You're too young. We have to go to the doctor. I'm sure it's something else. It has to be something else.”

Alex rose and shuffled around the coffee table where he eased onto the couch at her side. He sat close, but still, he didn't touch her. “It's true that Parkinson's is difficult to diagnose. That's why I sought a second opinion from one of the best neurologists in Kansas City.” His voice cracked. He stopped, his jaw working. His Adam's apple bobbed. “I'm a doctor. I recognize the cardinal symptoms, the shuffling, the resting tremor, not being able to move as quickly as I did before. I've gone from running to walking and now I have trouble picking up my feet.”

“You've been going to the gym and running four or five times a week.”

“I gave up running months ago. Swimming works . . . better for me.”

“You've been hiding it from me.”

He nodded but didn't try to explain.

Mary clutched his arm, so solid with muscle, and leaned into him. She rested her forehead on his shoulder so he couldn't see her face. She didn't want him to see the terror his words invoked “Falling out of the chair? That's part of this . . . disease?”

“It is.”

“The problem with the buttons this morning?” It had seemed so innocuous at the time. He'd been running late—something that had been happening often to her once super punctual

husband—when he'd given up and walked out the door with his white dress shirt only half buttoned. She'd laughed at the time, thinking it a joke. "You couldn't button your shirt?"

"No, I couldn't."

"How long have you known?" A spurt of anger burned through her. It felt good. It gave her something to hang onto in the midst of this upheaval. "You've been to a doctor—doctors—and you didn't tell me. I'm your wife. I should've been there with you."

"I told you, Parkinson's is hard to diagnose and I didn't want to worry you until I had something definitive."

"You didn't want to worry me? I'm your wife. It's my job to worry about you." Mary grappled with her voice, trying to bring it down before she woke the girls. "Do you hear yourself when you say things like that? I know you're a doctor, but that doesn't mean you fix everything by yourself. Sometimes you need help."

"I know that." He slid his big hand with long, tapered fingers—surgeon's fingers—around Mary's. "It's taking me some time to get used to the idea. I couldn't tell you when I couldn't even figure out how to believe it myself. I'm so angry. I had to do a lot of praying to get to a place where I could even think the words, let alone say them aloud."

Alex never backed off from talking about his faith with Mary. Even though he knew she wanted no part of it. The only place he drew the line was with the girls. They went to church as a family and every night, together, he and Mary heard their prayers. "You prayed. Did it help?"

"I don't understand why this is happening to me, but I'm working hard to believe that He does. He'll be there with me through this. I know that, I just can't understand why it's happening."

"You have me. I'll be there with you."

“I don't want this to be on your shoulders. You have enough to deal with.”

“In sickness and in health, period.” Mary caught a glimpse of her future as wife and caregiver. She knew enough about the disease to know how it manifested, but not how it was treated. “What's the treatment and when do you start.”

“I already have a treatment plan. The drug therapies treat the symptoms, but that's all they do. It can't be cured.”

That, she knew. “So what now?”

Alex wrapped his arm around her and tugged her close. She closed her eyes and gave herself over to that familiar scratch of his five o'clock shadow on her cheek and the spicy scent of Paco Rabanne. His heart thumped. She moved so she could see his face. His pulse pounded in his temple. His jaw worked.

“Alex? What is it?”

“I have to close my practice.”

Alex had poured heart and soul into establishing his own practice. He'd spent years in medical school, internships, and residencies, all with the goal of one day following in his father's footsteps. Mary tightened her grip on him, wanting to soothe away his pain somehow. “I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Are you sure? Can't you . . . get help? Add another surgeon. Oversee surgeries.”

“I don't have any business in an operating room.” Alex pulled away from her and stood, his back to her. “It has to be done. I should've done it sooner.”

She rose and placed a hand on his back. “What will you do?”

He shook his head. “I haven't figured that one out yet.”

“Alex, look at me.”

After a few seconds, he swiveled. Everything about the set of his shoulders and the lines around his mouth spoke of how hard he worked to control his emotions. She gripped his cold hands in hers. "We'll figure it out together."

"I'm sorry." His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "You've been through so much. After what we went through with the infertility, I didn't want you to endure this too. All I ever wanted to do was take care of you. I never wanted you to have to worry about anything ever again."

"Life doesn't work that way." If anyone knew that Mary did. The blows kept raining down. "We take what comes."

They had no choice.

"You didn't sign on for this."

"I took the vows, same as you, remember?"

Alex let his hands slide from hers. "I'll let you off the hook."

"Stop it. Stop talking like that."

He stumbled across the room toward the front door.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm sorry." He paused, hand on the doorknob. He didn't look back. "I need some air. Don't wait up for me."

Mary stood in the middle of the room, not moving, after the door closed behind him. Her breathing sounded loud in her ears. The tick, tick of the grandfather clock reverberated. She wanted to cover her ears to block out the passage of time. She did something she hadn't done in a long time. *God? God! God?*

Nothing. *God, please. For Alex.*

If she couldn't pray for herself, she could pray for Alex. He believed. He needed to believe, now more than ever. She wanted him to have every weapon possible in his arsenal against this disease. As his *fraa* . . . the German word slapped her in the face. His *fraa*. In moments of duress, her first language slipped up on her. There had been a time when she loved the sound of the word *fraa*. She'd wanted to be a *fraa* in the worst way.

Then *Mudder*, *Daed*, and her little *bruder* Joseph had died in a buggy accident a few feet from where she stood, leaning against the wooden counter of the produce stand, enjoying the July sun on her face. Her world had slid from its axis, never to recover its balance until Alex walked into her life in that used bookstore.

Alex had been her second chance at happiness. There wouldn't be another, she was certain of that. She wouldn't let this one slip away. For Alex's sake. For the girls' sake. For her sake.

Chapter 3

An endless string of buggies made its way toward a cemetery following a casket. Daed's casket. No, Alex's casket. A shrill sound like a bird screeching hurt Mary's ears. *Nee, Nee.*

Her cellphone rang. Mary bolted upright on the couch. The strident sound released her from her nightmare.

The fire had died, leaving the air chilled in the living room, but Mary's blouse clung to her damp, sweating skin. Shivering, she fumbled for the phone she'd left on the coffee table in hopes Alex would call her back. She'd texted him twice and called three times, but he hadn't responded.

"Alex, is it you?" In her haste, she didn't look at the caller ID. "Are you all right?"

"Ma'am, this is Officer Randolph, Kansas City PD."

Police Department. Mary rubbed her eyes with her free hand, trying to think through a pounding headache. "*Jah*, I mean yes. Yes, what is it?" She stumbled to her feet and flipped the light switch so she could see the grandfather clock. Twelve-thirty a.m. "Is this about my husband?"

"Are you Mary Romano?"

Mary Miller Romano, but she didn't correct him. Keeping her maiden name had been a small salute to *Daed* and *Mudder*, who couldn't be at her wedding or see the life she'd made for herself. They wouldn't approve of her choice for a husband, but they'd be happy she was loved.

"Yes."

"Ma'am, your husband has been in a car accident. Doc says he'll be okay, but you need to come down here to Memorial Hospital. He's in the ER now. He's going to be admitted when they have a room available."

“Was he . . . did he . . .” She cleared her dry throat and licked cracked, chapped lips. She couldn't order her thoughts. Alex didn't drink more than an occasional glass of wine on special occasions, but what else could he have been doing out on the streets at this hour. “What happened?”

“Swerved off the road and hit a light pole.” The officer's gruff voice held sympathy. “We've ascertained no alcohol was involved. He may have fallen asleep. The doc says it may have been some sort of medical episode.”

The Parkinson's? “I'm on my way.”

Mary disconnected and stumbled to her feet. Thankful she'd fallen asleep fully clothed, she raced down the hallway, her mind speeding ahead. The girls. She couldn't take them with her. Children weren't allowed past the lobby area because of the COVID-19 restrictions. She'd be fortunate to get in to see Alex herself. As much as she hated to wake them, she would take them to their part-time nanny Dani Jo. A college student paying her own way, she never turned down the opportunity to work.

Family would be better but Alex had none. Mary had three sisters and two brothers. Not one could she call. Even if they had phones, which of course, they didn't. Nor would they come, if they had.

That's what *meidung* meant. They shunned her. For life.

It didn't matter. She'd been on her own a long time. She could handle it. She punched in Dani Jo's number, explained her predicament to an instantly alert young woman, who immediately agreed to take them. Neither girl fussed when she woke them and bundled them into their winter coats over their pajamas.

Ten minutes she handed over two bewildered toddlers. Dani Jo didn't bat an eye. "Take your time, I'll work things out on my end. Tell Mr. Romano, I'm praying for him."

Her throat aching with the effort to hold back tears, Mary nodded and headed to the hospital. Donning the cloth mask she'd made herself, she pushed through the double doors and hit the smell of bleach and betadine and sick people so strong she almost staggered back. After answering the requisite questions regarding the virus, a masked nurse took her temperature, stuck a sticker on her blouse, and allowed Mary to enter. She made a beeline past the rows and rows of green plastic chairs crowded with all sorts of folks waiting to see a doctor and went straight to the desk. A sleepy looking nurse in thick-lens glasses listened to her stuttered request, studied a computer screen Mary couldn't see, and then pointed toward the double doors. "Mr. Romano has been admitted. Third floor. Dr. Lewis is with him now. I'll let him know you're on your way up."

Embarrassed by the quiver in her voice, Mary managed a nod and fled. Outside Alex's door, she swallowed against the nausea that threatened to close her throat, took a deep breath, then another, and entered the room.

His head, dark against the white of his pillow, was turned away from the door. A doctor stood at the foot of the bed, his gaze intent on a chart in his hand. They both looked up when she let the door slide shut behind her.

"Mary." Alex raised his head, winced, and let it drop back against the pillow. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Alex." She rushed to his bedside. "What happened? Are you all right?"

"I'm so sorry to put you through this." His voice was sandpaper rough. Bruises were already turning purple and black across his cheeks and his swollen nose. "Where are the girls?"

“With Dani Jo. Are you all right? What happened?”

“I’ll live.” His sardonic tone belied his words. “The car’s a mess, though. So is the light pole I hit.”

Cars meant nothing to Mary. She’d spent her first few years in Kansas City learning the bus system. On campus, she’d used a bicycle. Only at Alex’s insistence had she learned to drive. He wanted her to be able to take the girls to the hospital in the event of an emergency. The irony of that plan would not be lost on him.

Still, when she turned the key in the ignition, she never failed to think of the damage these massive machines could do to frail human bodies. She shivered and tugged the front of her coat tighter, chilled despite the dry, heated air that permeated the hospital room. “It’s just a car. We’ll get it fixed or get another. What happened?”

“This is Dr. Lewis.” Alex’s failure to answer her question spoke volumes. “He’s the neurologist I told you about. The ER doc called him.”

Dr. Lewis gripped Mary’s hand in a sure, firm handshake. “Your husband has broken ribs, a fractured wrist, and a broken nose. Some bruises and contusions. Most of the damage is from the airbag. He’s fortunate he suffered no internal injuries.”

“What happened?” Mary tried again, keeping her gaze on her husband’s face. “You’d been gone for hours. Where were you?”

Alex’s lips twisted. “Driving. Just driving around. Trying to think. Think what to do.”

“For hours?” Mary teetered between wanting the doctor to leave so she could have it out with her wayward husband and wanting him to stay so she could have a conversation with him about her husband’s condition. “I texted you. I called you. You didn’t answer.”

As if he didn't know that. He would've seen her name on the screen. Seen the number of missed calls. He'd been intentionally ignoring her.

"I stopped . . . at a bar. I didn't have a drink, if that's what you're thinking. I'm not the type to drown my sorrows. Or to drink and drive."

"Then why go there?"

"I don't know." He sounded as confused as she felt. "I needed . . . to be lost in a crowd of people who didn't know me. Who had no expectations of me."

"You'd rather be among strangers." Mary glanced at Dr. Lewis. He studied the chart as if it contained important secrets he needed to commit to memory. "You could've come home."

"I couldn't. Not until I figured it out."

"What out?"

"What to do."

"Isn't that something we should figure out together?"

Dr. Lewis cleared his throat and closed the folder. "You two have a lot to discuss. The diagnosis of a major disease like Parkinson's places a great deal of pressure on a relationship. The most important thing you can do right now is talk to each other. Communication is critical. Two things, Mrs. Romano, we're keeping Alex for a day or so for observation. I may want to adjust his meds. Secondly, Alex, no more driving. Not for a while."

"No driving." Alex struggled to sit upright. His skin went white under the brilliant colors of his bruises. "You can't do that to me. I need to be able to get around."

"I'm sure your wife will be happy to drive you." Doctor Lewis's tone was kind, but firm. "You weren't badly hurt this time, but you might not be so lucky next time."

“I was tired, that’s all.” The desperation in Alex’s voice flooding Mary, taking her breath, giving rise to her own sense of desperation. “I may have fallen asleep, that’s all. That’s bad enough, I know, but it’s not a product of the Parkinson’s.”

“This disease affects your mobility. It affects your response time. I’m sorry, but I need for you to accept my medical judgment on this.” To Dr. Lewis’ credit, he did sound sorry. As an adult male, he had to know what taking Alex’s car, his independence, meant to him. And so soon after conceding the loss of his medical practice. “No driving.”

“It’ll be fine.” Mary reached for Alex’s hand. “We’ll face this together.”

Alex jerked away from her touch. “I’m the one who’s losing my career. I’m the one who won’t even be able to drive—something every sixteen-year-old kid learns to do.”

Stung, Mary let her hands rest on the bed railing. “You’re not alone in this. I took the same vows you did.”

“I know. I know.” Alex’s dark eyes begged her to understand. “I know I’m being a selfish, self-pitying jerk right now. I just need a minute. Go home. Hug the girls for me. We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“That’s a good idea.” Dr. Lewis cocked his head toward the door. “Could I have a word with you outside before you go?”

“Certainly, but I’ll be back in to check on you, Alex, before I go.”

“I’m tired. I need to sleep.”

Mary leaned over and kissed his forehead. He turned his head away. She swallowed a fresh wave of tears. “I can sit with you until you fall asleep.”

Alex didn’t respond.

In the hallway, Dr. Lewis pushed wire-rimmed glasses up his skinny nose and gave Mary a long, level look. "I'd be lying if I said this is going to be easy, but I want you to know there are many resources at your disposal. Support groups for the patient and for the caregiver. You're not alone."

"Of course not. I have Alex."

"Sometimes you'll need to talk to someone else." Dr. Lewis's kind expression nearly undid Mary. "So will Alex. He will go through a period of depression. How long it lasts will depend mostly on him, but also on you."

"What do you mean?"

"Make sure he gets help if the depression lasts too long or becomes too overwhelming. At some point, he needs to snap out of it and be prepared to live his life as fully as he can for every moment he's on this earth."

"I'm getting my PHD in psychology—in counseling—"

"Even if you had your degree, which it sounds like you don't, you can't treat a family member."

"I understand that, but I surely will recognize the symptoms and will know when to seek help."

"Sometimes we close our eyes and our minds to what's happening to those dearest to us because it hurts too much to admit what we're seeing."

Dr. Lewis was a wise man. Mary swallowed hard against tears. "What do I do then?"

"Get him help. It's different for everyone, but he's your husband. You know him better than anyone else. And he's more likely to listen to you." He squeezed her hand. "Don't neglect

your health, Mrs. Romano. Give yourself a break now and then. Do something fun. I'll be back in a few hours to check on your husband."

"Thank you." She managed to sound calm, despite the rising tide of fear that threatened to take over. She texted Dani Jo who assured her the girls were sleeping and not to worry.

The calm before the coming storm.

Forcing a smile on her own face, she marched back into Alex's room. He lay with his back to the door. She walked around the bed and slid her hand over his. His skin was cold to the touch. His eyes were closed. "I'm back, Alex. I want you to know it'll be fine. We'll work through this."

He didn't answer. He didn't move.

She sat on the edge of the bed and leaned over him, trying to get close, to give him her warmth. "It'll be all right. I promise."

His eyes opened. "No, I don't think so."

"You can't give up."

"I don't want to go home."

"To our home?"

"I can't stay here."

She hugged him against her chest, trying to understand. "You'll be released tomorrow."

"Not the hospital. Kansas City."

It took a second or two for her to follow the thread of his thoughts. He didn't want to be reminded of all he'd lost and would lose as his disease progressed. He didn't want his peers and their friends to see his physical condition deteriorate. Her strong, proud husband didn't want to be seen as weak.

“They’ll understand. They’ll want to support you.”

“They’ll pity me. I don’t need their pity . . . or yours.”

“I don’t pity you. I love you.”

“I know. I just need time. I need time to figure out the new me.”

Mary grasped for something to offer him, something to give him hope. They rarely traveled, with two little girls, a busy business practice, her studies. Where could they go? She tried to think of the last place Alex had seemed interested in beyond his immediate home, which he had so loved up until this very moment. Her throat tightened.

No. Not there. Yes, there.

The last place had been a place she never expected to live again. “Do you remember when you when you went with me to Haven so you could see where I grew up? How you talked about loving the idea of living in the country?”

“I remember. It smelled good. And everyone smiled and said hey when you walked by.” He sounded sleepy. He curled his body around her. “People were nice. There was no traffic. A person could drive there.”

They’d visited Haven because Alex wanted to see her wife’s roots. He had no knowledge of Amish life or faith. Mary made no attempt to contact her family, knowing it would only cause them pain. They sat in the car outside the bakery and watched her sister Sara enter.

It had been an exquisite agony.

Eight long years with no communication. During that time she’d earned her high school equivalency degree, earned a bachelor’s degree, finished her masters, and started a PHD. Still, she wasn’t learned enough to know how to approach a community that believed she was risking her eternal salvation by not returning to their faith.

Life had gone on. Loved ones might have died. More babies born. Brothers or sisters married. Their lives had gone on. Just as hers had.

They were family. Her own family. Now Alex's family. He needed family.

Mary kissed the top of his forehead, hugging him tighter. Her heart fought with her head. She would do anything for Alex. Anything.

Even this. "Then we'll go home to my home."

Chapter 4

A white picket fence. Could anything be more cliché? Mary tugged her woolen glove from her hand and ran her fingers over the rough wood of the picket fence. She wanted to feel something, anything, even the bitter cold and rough wood. She wanted the stereotype of the two-story clapboard house with a wrap-around front porch, the swing, the white picket fence and the big front yard—currently covered with a blanket of pristine late January snow that had fallen the night before. She needed a safe retreat for her family, a place where she could handle being in charge. Six years of university study of psychology should've prepared her for this. If she couldn't help her own husband, how could she help anyone?

The doctor had been right. Alex had entered in the throes of a depression Mary couldn't penetrate. He didn't leave the house. Not to swim. Not to deal with the business of closing his practice. Not to go to church. The last worried her more than the others. The Alex she knew relied on his God with a fierce dependence. This new Alex seemed lost and unable to seek his usual port in a storm. The only time his expression lighted was when he read to the girls. The simple stories and their rapt attention seemed to give him relief.

She'd tried to convince him to speak to a therapist. He refused. So she'd moved on to Plan B. Haven. While many psychologists relied on more medical approaches to mental health, Mary planned to embrace natural healing as part of her practice as well. Fresh air, healthy food, exercise, outdoor exercise. Cooking. Gardening. All activities they could do here in Haven. If she could dig Alex out of his slump.

She'd found the house with the help of Tracy Lumpkin, Reno County's number one Realtor—according to the business card she'd tucked in Mary's hand the second the handshake ended.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Tracy bustled through the gate and held it open so that Mary could pass through. “The Higgins took wonderful care of it. They’d still be living here if Mr. Higgins hadn’t taken that fall at Thanksgiving and broken his hip.”

“Why are they renting instead of selling?” Mary wasn’t looking to buy. Not yet. Irrational as it may be, she still harbored a tiny wisp of hope that somehow all this would work out and she would be able to go back to her doctoral assistant position at the university and finish her dissertation in her tiny office in the psych building. Alex would snap out of his depression . . . eventually. “I’m sure the proceeds from the sale would go a long way in covering their medical expenses and assisted living.”

“Mr. Higgins is a tough old bird.” Tracy trilled a laugh. Her red lipstick, which matched the color of her hair—both which came from a tube—was smeared on her teeth. “He insists they’re coming home one day.”

Deluded like Mary. “I’ll take it.”

“But you haven’t seen the inside.” Tracy sounded gleeful. Given that she wasn’t receiving a sales commission on this transaction, she probably didn’t want to waste a great deal of time with showing the property. She’d made it clear she was doing her sister-in-law a favor by showing her parents’ house as a rental. “It’s really quaint. A hundred years old. All the original woodwork. A nice fireplace. Big kitchen. Detached garage on the side with room for two cars. Nice in the wintertime, you don’t have to scrap the windshields and it’s easier to get them started—”

“I saw the video on-line.” With COVID-19 much of the hunt for a house was done virtually these days. This house had been beautifully maintained by its long-time owners. Mary stamped her feet. Even in boots and heavy socks, her feet were going numb with the cold. She

wanted this done. She needed to go back to Kansas City and tell her husband she'd rented a house without asking him. Not that he would care. He acquiesced to her every decision now with an absence of emotion that scared her more than overt anger at his condition would have. "This will work for us. It's fine. It's perfect."

If they could just make it to spring. Spring held so much promise. Rebirth, new life. Birds built nest and laid eggs. Green shoots worked their way through the earth to find the sun. Flowers bloomed. People raised their faces to the sun and embraced its warmth.

The days grew longer and the dark receded.

Everyone felt better.

The cold turned Tracy's white cheeks a perky red, making her look younger than her fifty-plus years. "Four bedrooms, two and half bath is a lot for . . ." Her gaze dropped to Mary's bare hand. She wore a simple, thin silver band in deference to Alex's wishes. She hadn't needed a ring to proclaim her married state. Her heart and soul were married even before the vows were spoken. "For just a married couple."

"We have two children."

"Ah, it has a great big backyard, huge, you could build a second house on it and not feel crowded. Perfect for a swing set or an above ground pool."

It had to be force of habit. Tracy didn't know how to not sell a place even when it wasn't for sale. Not yet anyway. Maybe the real estate agent thought Mary would buy it when the Higgins gave up on their dream of returning to their home. Sadness enveloped her. She didn't want them to give up their dream. They shouldn't have to and neither should she. "You don't have to sell me on it. I said I'll take it."

“Sorry, habit.” Tracy didn’t look sorry. She patted her leather satchel. “I have the paperwork in here somewhere. Let’s go inside where it’s warm to finish up.”

Mary followed her into the house. It wasn’t much warmer—no sense in heating an empty house—but at least they were out of the wind.

Tracy spread the paperwork out on the kitchen island’s quartz top. “So you’re one of the Miller clan, right? You used to be Amish. You left after you lost your parents in that awful buggy accident.”

Mary retied the scarf around her neck. She needed a moment to form a response. It had taken the Realtor long enough to figure it out. Tracy’s husband was one of the sheriff’s deputies who responded to the accident that killed Mary’s parents. “That’s right.”

“You look just like your sisters. Especially Sarah. I buy pastries for our staff meetings from the bakery at least once a week. She must be so excited that you’re coming back after running away all those years ago.”

Heat bloomed on Mary’s neck and rose to her cheeks. She’d been twenty when she left home, far too old to be considered a runaway. “Actually, I haven’t talked to them yet.”

Tracy slid her reading glasses down her long nose and looked up from the lease agreement. “I grew up around here, so I know all the stories about how the Amish are. *Rumspringa* and shunning and such. But surely they’ll be glad to see you.”

She might have heard the stories, but like most English people, she had no true understanding of the depth and breadth of the Plain faith and its corresponding playbook—the *Ordnung*. The rules that dictated how situations such as this one should be handled. Mary didn’t owe the woman an explanation, yet she felt the need to try. “I’ve married a non-Amish man. I’m finishing up my dissertation for a doctorate degree. We’ve adopted two children who are not

being brought up in the faith. My family will be happy to know we are well, but they can't welcome us back into the fold as if none of those things are true."

Nor is any of this your business. The Realtor's unabashed attempt to pry information from Mary presented the main thing she hated about country living. Everyone knew everyone's business and relished it. Did she really want to experience that again? Not really, but the trade-off was having a peaceful, quiet place where she could help Alex regroup. They could plant vegetables and flowers, take long walks, and soak up sunshine. "I haven't spoken with my family . . . yet."

"So it's a surprise?" Tracy's penciled, thin eyebrows did a little dance of joy. "Is that wise? Shouldn't you speak to the bishop or write a letter of abject apology?"

"Neither is required. I'm simply moving my family home for an extended stay."

"No matter. We could use another doctor at the medical clinic."

Startled, Mary tried to grasp the woman's meaning. How could she know Alex was a doctor? She couldn't know that he was no longer practicing. "I'm sorry?"

"The initial paperwork you filled out for the credit check indicated your husband is a doctor. Doesn't he plan to practice?"

The million-dollar question. Mary would face it over and over in this small town. Better to answer it once. If she told Tracy, the word would spread like fire on a drought-stricken corn field after a lightening strike. "Alex is taking some time off to recover from some medical issues. He won't be practicing."

"Medical issues?" Tracy's tone perked up. She was on the trail of some good gossip. She already had Mary's return, now all she needed was marital strife or a near death experience to make it really juicy. "Is he a . . . recovering alcoholic?"

“No! No. His . . . it’s private. I’m sure you understand.”

“Of course, of course.” Tracy’s tone said she did understand and couldn’t wait to share her understanding with others. She’d be on her cell phone the second she returned to her car. *Guess who’s back in town . . . guess why she’s back . . . the husband . . . yes, she has an English husband, who would’ve thought . . .* She shoved the lease in Mary’s direction. “Sign here, initial here and here, and sign here.”

Mary did as instructed.

The Realtor went over the deposit and rental agreements. Mary wrote a check and handed it over.

“I’ll scan the contract and email you a copy.” Tracy slid two sets of keys across the slick quartz. “It’s all yours. On behalf of Haven, welcome back, Mrs. Romano.”

Sincerity rang in those words. She meant it. Mary had been gone so long she’d forgotten the flip side of the coin when it came to small towns. They welcomed folks. They might know a person’s business, but they also cared about people. They helped out.

“Thank you.”

Mary waited until the door closed behind the real estate agent, then went to the living room window. Tracy strolled, a certain studied nonchalance in her stride, to her car parked in the driveway. She slid into the Lexus, leaned back in the seat, and put her cell phone to her ear.

The grapevine was in motion. Which meant Mary needed to be in motion.

She turned in a quick circle, examining the built-in bookshelves, the heavy oak mantel over the fireplace, and the beautiful bay window. A picture formed of Alex reading in his favorite chair, a cup of cocoa on the coffee table next to him. Heat and sweet aroma of wood emanated from the fireplace. The girls played make believe doctor with their dolls.

And Mary sat on the couch perusing her vegetable seed catalogues.

Life could be good again.

The image evaporated as quickly as it had come. She couldn't put it off any longer. First she had to face her family.

Chapter 5

The heavenly scent of bread baking could soothe almost any pain. Almost. Breathing as if she'd run the hundred yards from her car to the Yoder Bakery, Mary closed the door and looked around her family's bakery. In eight years, little had changed. The array of pies, cakes, breads, cookies, and doughnuts boggled the mind. The aroma beckoned customers to return again and again. If they weren't in a hurry, they could have a cup of fresh brewed coffee or tea, along with their choice of pastry, at one of the small round tables clustered by tall windows that gave them a view of tiny downtown Yoder.

Mary inhaled again and immediately entered another place and time in her life. *Mudder* in the kitchen. Emma and Sarah arguing good naturedly over who would wash and who would dry. Matthew and Ian slapping cold water at each other. Poor little Joseph, trying to keep up with his big brothers when they washed their dirty hands and faces, cracked jokes, and shoved each other around the room. Lillie and Maddy playing with their dolls at the kitchen table, their chatter background music. Another time. Another place.

Daed clumped through the door in his dusty boots, his laughter only half-stifled as he tried to sound stern. He'd claimed the hoopla bothered him. She'd known it didn't. He loved his big family. The more the merrier, he said. The more the merrier. They'd been a merry family.

Until they weren't.

Pain as sharp as any ax slayed Mary. She wrestled the memories into their box, so like her hope chest, and closed the lid. A line of customers waiting to pay for their breads and cookies and cupcakes gave her a chance to pause and get her bearings. From the time she'd handed Tracy Higgins her signed copy of the lease, slid in the Range Rover, put the key in the ignition and drove across this small town, she'd been practicing what she would say.

Now, a thick blanket covered her thoughts, silencing them, making her wordless. An older lady wearing pink sweats and red-rimmed glasses moved away from the counter, allowing Mary to see who stood behind it. Sarah.

Her younger sister's figure had filled out. If *Daed* were here, he would say Sarah had meat on her bones. The way a woman should. Sarah handed a woman a white paper bag and some change. She moved down the line. Mary knew the moment her presence registered. Sarah's face lit up. There was no other word for it. Then the light banked, and she ducked her head and turned back to her customers.

Mary had expected this reaction. She moved to a table and took a seat. She would wait until Sarah gathered her courage and came to speak to her. Or kick her out, one or the other. No matter what Sarah thought, Mary felt an obligation to let her family know she intended to live in Haven for the foreseeable future. For as long as Alex needed this refuge.

The line dwindled. Mary sank into a chair and waited. Sarah would come to her. She wouldn't be able to help herself. The minutes ticked by. Mary swiveled so she could watch her sister work. She moved with such grace and economy of movement. She had a smile and a chatty comment for each customer. This was her element. Sarah was meant to do this. Own a bakery. Just as Mary was meant to earn degrees in psychology so she could help others overcome traumas in their lives. So she could overcome her own trauma.

Finally Sarah slipped around the counter and made her way past a customer browsing a display of jellies and jams in jars with lovely hand drawn labels. Her steps slowed as she approached. Her face, so like Mother's, was filled with a mixture of disbelief and sweet delight. "I can't believe you're here."

"I know. It's hard for me to believe too." Mary stood. She waited, unsure whether to offer an embrace or leave. "I'm sorry. I'm not here to cause you trouble."

"It doesn't seem real. I've dreamed of seeing you again and here you are. I don't know what to say" Her voice dropping to a whisper, Sarah enveloped Mary in a long hug. She smelled of cinnamon and vanilla. "*Schweschder*. It's so *gut* to see you."

Mary hugged her back. "It's *wunderbarr* to see you too. How are you? You look so . . . you're blooming with health."

"Healthy as a horse like *Daed* used to say. Still smiling, Sarah settled into a chair across from Mary. She patted her belly. "But it's mostly having *boplin*. Jacob and I have two and another on the way. We've been blessed."

Mary pushed away the pain that crackled through her like a sudden jolt of electricity that came and went. Her sister had married. Life had gone on in Haven without her. She had known it would, but somehow it still hurt. "Jacob Herschel then. You're Jacob's *fraa* now."

"*Jah*. I am." Sarah's smile lighted the room better than any lamp powered by electricity. "He's a gut man."

"He makes you happy."

"Jacob's a *gut daed* and a *gut* man." Sarah's smile grew. "And you? Are you back? Really back? Luke and Emma and everyone will be so happy. We've prayed so hard. Luke can help you meet with the bishop—"

"Nee, Sarah, *nee*, just stop, please." It seemed beyond cruel to burst her sister's bubble of optimism. The truth had to be told. Mary would never return to a culture that kept her from her vocation as a doctor, from the man she loved, and called the death of her parents God's plan.

“*Nee. Jah*, I’m staying in Haven for a while, but not because I want to return to the faith.” She held up her left hand and pointed at the silver ring. “I’m married. He’s a *gut* man too. A doctor.”

Was a doctor.

Disappointment welled in Sarah’s face. She chewed her lower lip and glanced back at the counter. Already distancing herself from her wayward sister.

Not yet. Don’t go yet.

“I’m sorry. I know you hoped for a different outcome, but I’m happy. We’re happy. Alex and I adopted. Two little girls.” Mary opened her purse and pulled out a photo of the girls sitting on the swings in a park near the house. They were grinning from ear to ear, each holding an ice cream cone. “Their names are Annabelle and Elisa.”

She slid the photo across the table. Sarah touched the corner with one finger. She glanced up at Mary, then back at the photo. “They’re . . . Oriental?”

“Asian is the correct word. Korean.”

“You weren’t able to have your own?”

“*Nee*, but they are my own.”

“I understand that. Still, it must have hurt horribly to learn you couldn’t bear children.”

On top of everything else. Mary finished the sentence in her head. She’d cried in her husband’s arms on many nights. Others, she’d silently cried out to God while Alex slept. The answer had always been the same. Sarah surely thought of how different Mary’s situation would’ve been had she stayed and married a Plain man. Every Plain couple wanted lots of children, but they also accepted it as God’s plan if they were unable to have them. “It broke my heart and did little for my faith, I admit, but Alex never lost sight of his own faith. He knew there were children who needed forever homes and we were in a position to give them love and

everything else they need. He showed me how me how we could make a family in a different way.”

Her face still etched with sadness, Sarah nodded. She studied the photo. The silence between them stretched for a few minutes, filled by the chatter of customers debating the pros and cons of pecan pie versus peach pie or snicker doodles. The girls offered advice, suggesting they should take some of each. Mary glanced back at her sister. Sarah's gaze went to the door, then flicked back to Mary. Her sister smoothed an errant crumb on the table into her hand, then brushed them together. Her gaze went back to the door.

“Sarah, please. I came to see you because I wanted to tell you in person that I'm here. That my family is here. I would like for my *mann* and *dochders* to know their family. They have no family on Alex's side. You're all they have.”

“You know that's not possible.”

“It is possible. How many sermons did we hear over the years about forgiveness?”

“You are forgiven. That doesn't mean we can welcome you back into our homes. You also know the rules. You were baptized. You left the faith.”

“I left because it didn't make sense. I couldn't make sense of *Mudder* and *Daed's* death. And little Joseph. He'd barely begun to live.”

“It was hard for all of us. Your leaving made it harder.” The bitterness in her voice signaled how hard forgiveness had been—or still was—for Sarah. She smoothed the table again, even though no crumbs marred the wooden top. “John Plank passed. You probably didn't know that.”

“I didn’t.” The bishop of Haven’s Plain district had been a fair man. He had listened that day eight years ago when she’d gone to his house to tell him she was leaving. He’d made the case for her to stay, but he’d also accepted her decision to go. “He was a good man.”

“*Jah.*”

“And the lot fell to whom after his passing?”

“Bryan Hostetler.” Sarah’s expression remained neutral, but prickliness of her tone warned Mary. “You don’t know him. He moved here after you left. He married Esther Daugherty.”

“I didn’t think Esther would ever get married.” Mary stopped herself. No need to speak ill of folks just because they irritated you a bit. “You don’t like Bryan?”

“I didn’t say that. I like everyone.” Sarah looked shocked. “He’s a good, decent man appointed by God through drawing of the lot.”

Sarah was one of those people who truly attempted to like everyone. She did her best and refused to admit defeat when a person tried her patience or took advantage of her kindness. “But he’s not like Micah.” Mary took a guess. “He’s . . . stricter.”

“He takes a more narrow approach to the *Ordnung*.” Sarah’s careful choice of words would amuse Mary if their content didn’t throw cold water on her hopes of reconciling—not reconciling, but at least having a truce—with her closest family members. “He takes very seriously the notion of *meidung*.”

“I imagine Jacob does, as well.”

“He does.” Sarah fiddled with the strings of her *kapp*. If she didn’t leave them alone, she would rip one off. “But he’s a kind man with a good heart.”

“I won't take advantage of his kindness. I only came to tell you I'm bringing my family to Haven.”

“You plan to stay in Haven, but not return to our community.”

“*Jah*. I don't know for how long, but indefinitely.” She couldn't bring herself to tell Sarah why. In due time, the people in Haven would figure it out. Right now, Alex deserved his privacy. He deserved to be able to encounter people whose first reaction wasn't pity. “I've rented the Higgins house on Vine Street.”

Sarah clutched her hands in her lap. “In some ways it will be nice to have you close—”

“But in other ways it will make it harder. The same is true for me.” Mary let her off the hook. “It will be nice to get a peek at your brood. And Matthew. And Ian, he must be a man now.”

“Almost. He looks like Daed. Of course, Luke looks more like him because he's starting to get gray hair. His beard is more gray than brown now.” Sarah plucked at dried dough on her apron. “Ian's courting even though he likes to think it's a big secret. I reckon there will be a wedding in the fall.”

A wedding to which Mary would not be invited. “*Gut* for him.”

“Did you become a doctor, then?”

“Nee. Not a medical doctor. I chose psychology. Counseling.”

Images of Sarah's confused, worried face late one night a few months after the buggy accident presented themselves front and center. Mary had wanted to leave. She had to leave. She had no one in whom she could confide her desire for more education, for learning, or the desire to understand her feelings. She wanted to fix herself. She wanted to help other people who went

through sudden tragic loss the way she had. Surely that would give meaning to the loss of her parents and her little brother. Sarah hadn't understood then. She wouldn't understand now.

"You help people who feel bad in their heads instead of their bodies."

"A *gut* way to put it."

"It must take a lot of schooling to learn to do that."

"Years."

"I hope it helped. I hope it was worth it." Her gaze flickered to the door again. Her expression froze. She rose from her seat. "You should go."

Mary swiveled, trying to see what had made Sarah's face go white. A thin, sparse woman carrying a canvas bag had entered the store, a pair of preschool-age boys toddling behind her. It took Mary a minute to place her. Esther Daugherty. Now Esther Hostetler. The bishop's wife.

Sarah rushed forward. "Esther. What can I get you today?"

"Oh, don't let me interrupt your visit. I just stopped by to get a few loaves of bread for Sunday supper. We're having company from Jamesport and I won't have time to make enough myself." She glanced toward Mary, no sign of recognition on her plain face. "I'm Esther Hostetler."

Mary stood and smiled, waiting for her to see the similarity between Sarah and Mary's looks. Sarah might be plumper, but they could still pass for twins with their blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin. They were two peas in pod, *Mudder* used to say. Of course, the English clothes would cause a person to see what they wanted to see. A stranger. An *Englisch* person. Sarah wrung her hands. "You remember my sister, Mary, don't you, Esther?"

Esther stumbled two steps back, her friendly expression gone in the blink of an eye, replaced with something akin to distaste. “I see.” She fixed Mary with an icy stare. “What do you think you’re doing here?”

A very good question, indeed.

Before Mary could answer, Esther turned her back, gathered her boys to her side, and fled from the bakery.

“You have to go.” Sarah whispered the words. “Now.”

“I understand.” Mary grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

“Mary.” Sarah’s voice held a beseeching note. “I’m sorry, but . . .”

Mary reached for the doorknob. She turned and looked back. “It’s all right. I know.”

Sarah glanced at the three ladies ordering chocolate chip cookies, cherry pie, and German chocolate cake. “Wait.”

She scurried behind the counter. A few seconds later, she returned, two loaves of bread in her arms. “I didn’t which one your *dochders* would like. Cinnamon-raisin or sour dough.”

Her throat tight with tears, Mary took her sister’s still warm offering. “They’ll like them both. They like *smear*—with more marshmallow fluff than peanut butter, of course. *Danki*.”

Smiling through tears, Sarah stepped back. “Please don’t come back here. Please.”

Chapter 6

The car door slammed. Mary heaved a sigh of relief. She didn't dare look back. The sound told her Alex had decided to get out of the car. A suitcase in one hand and Elisa, still half asleep, on her hip, she trudged up the steps to the front door of their new home. She'd begun to despair that he would sit there until he froze to death rather than come into a home he saw as a shameful hideaway from his real life. "Isn't it pretty? I think it's really a sweet house," she called as she dumped the suitcase by the door and fumbled for her keys. "It has four bedrooms and two and half baths."

Now she sounded like the real estate agent.

"I know. You told me that." Alex's voice, hoarse from a cold he couldn't seem to shake, floated by her left ear. He was close. "No need to repeat yourself. I have Parkinson's, not Alzheimer's."

"Alex!" Mary didn't know why the callousness, so unlike him, continued to shock her. He wanted to wallow, and he wanted her to wallow with him. Or he wanted to shock her, either way, he was doing a good job of it. She inhaled and waited a beat. "We can turn one of them into an office, if you like. I'll need a place to finish my dissertation as well."

She'd offered that possibility already too. They'd talked—argued—many times in the month that it had taken to square things away in Kansas City. They sold the townhouse. When it was time to move back there, she wanted a house, a real house, like this one, with a big yard where she could plant flowers and vegetables. A hint of spring in the February afternoon air, a thaw in the chill provided the barest hint of what dirt would smell when she turned it with the manual rototiller. This time of year, that no man's land between winter and spring, always made

her antsy. She wanted the sun on her face and fresh air in her lungs. She wanted the country, no matter where she lived.

“You plan to hire a nanny?”

Alex's unsmiling face told her he wasn't joking. They could afford a nanny, but both of them would be at home for the foreseeable future.

“If I work at home, you'll be here.” She turned the key in the lock, pushed open the door. *Here we go. One step at a time.* Alex's doctor kept reminding them both of this. *One step at a time.* “The girls love spending time with you.”

“And since I'm not working, I can just be the babysitter.”

“You're their father, not a babysitter.”

“You sure you trust me with them?”

“Of course I trust you.” She shooed Annabelle in the house and waited while Alex brushed past her. He hadn't bothered to carry in any of the other suitcases. She paused another beat, five, six, seven. “I trust you with their lives. I trust you with my life.”

He didn't answer. She followed his gaze. Boxes, large and small, filled the living room. The movers had stacked them neatly on one side, furniture to the other.

“Well, we have plenty to do before we have time to think about an office.” She sat Elisa on the couch. The little girl curled up around her stuffed teddy bear, stuck her thumb in her mouth, and went back to sleep. “I thought you could help me decide where to put the furniture. Do you want your easy chair by the fireplace?” She ran her hand over an ornately carved, oak mantel. “We can tilt it at angle so you can still see the TV.”

“Invalid that I am, I'll just sit in my chair and veg out with reality TV. I guess that's what you're saying.”

“I didn’t say that.” From her head to her toes, the muscles in Mary’s body tensed from the strain of trying not to engage in the argument Alex seemed desperate to pick. No matter what she said, it wouldn’t be right. “I thought we could watch movies together when it’s too cold to go outside. I brought some jigsaw puzzles. You like puzzles.”

“My hands shake too much. They’ll knock the pieces all over the place.”

“That’s fine. We’ll unpack the books first. As long as I’ve known, you, you’ve talked about wanting time to read for pleasure. You were always buying books for your TBR stack and never getting to read them. Now is the perfect time.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

“I’ll put your chair so you get the afternoon light. Isn’t this a pretty room? The Realtor—”

“It’s fine. Set it up however you want.”

Okay. Baby steps. The psychologist she consulted had said some days would be better than others. The upheaval in Alex’s life, from losing his practice to moving to a new city, would be hard. Change was always hard, but especially during a life-altering event like a Parkinson’s diagnosis. For his part, Alex refused to admit to being depressed. He blamed his moods on not having enough to do and insomnia brought on by lack of activity.

It would be better here. He would be better. Together, they would make this house a home. They would plant the vegetable garden they used to talk about having when they were first married. They would take long walks. The girls could start t-ball and dance class.

They would get to know their neighbors, go to block parties, and have barbecues, make homemade ice cream and go fishing.

They’d find a church to attend.

It would not be Plain.

Mary left the suitcase at the bottom of the stairs. She straightened and rubbed her back. The long drive had taken its toll on her body, but now it was over. They were here. In their new home making their new start. Making the best of it. Whatever it would bring. “Annabelle, if you want, you can go upstairs and decide which bedroom you want to share with Elisa.”

“Me?” Annabelle, who had been pawing through a box of toys that had come open at the seam looked up and grinned her trademark cheeky grin. “I get to pick?”

“Yes, you do. Except the one right over us.” Mary pointed at the ceiling directly over her head. “That’s the master bedroom. It belongs to Papa and me.”

Undeterred by this caveat, Annabelle raced up the stairs as fast as her short legs could carry her.

“Take it easy, I don’t want you falling down the stairs on our first day in our new house.”

Laughing, Mary turned back to Alex. The laughter died in her throat. The sheer magnitude of the sadness in his face buried her in a tsunami of emotion. “Alex—”

“Your house you mean. You picked it out. You decided we needed to move.”

“I tried to talk to you about it.”

“You wanted to run away. You didn’t want our friends to me . . .” His arm jerked out and swept the air in front of his body. “Like this.”

“You know that’s not true.”

He moved a box from the sofa to the coffee table, plopped down, and leaned his head back. “I’m tired. It must be the medication. Do you know where my pills are?”

“I’ll get them.” It took every ounce of determination to keep the quiver from her voice. “Keep an eye on the girls while I go to the car?”

“Sure.”

She leaned down and kissed his warm forehead. His eyes opened. Pain mingled with sadness. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Don’t be. It’s okay.” She brushed his hair from his eyes and leaned closer, wanting to kiss his cheeks, his mouth. If she could just reach him, somehow, get him to lower the wall he’d built between them. “Just give it a chance. Please. For me.”

He edged away. “I need my medicine.”

Consumed by the powerful urge to wail, Mary straightened. She rushed through the front door, closed it behind her, and leaned against it. *God, where are you? Why do you keep forsaking me?*

That fact that she prayed at all only devastated her more. The need to call on Him again was so powerful, so unexpected, so devastating. She had no one else, and yet He forbore to answer her. Just as He always had. The depth of her desperation made her do something she’d sworn never to do again.

Just because you don’t get the answer you want doesn’t mean He hasn’t answered.

Emma’s voice echoed so clearly in Mary’s head she looked around as if her oldest sister might be coming through the gate toward her. Tall, straight in posture, body wiry, hair perfectly tucked away under her *kapp*, blue eyes snapping with energy. Just like *Mudder*.

But no. that would be too much to ask. Emma stepped into *Mudder’s* shoes on that awful July day when they lost *Mudder*, *Daed*, and Joseph. Emma had no choice.

In this world you will have trouble but take heart! I have overcome the world. John 16:33. Luke had whispered this verse over and over again as he crafted the small casket that

would hold Joseph's body. Her older brother didn't know Mary stood outside the barn door, listening to him sob and repeat this single verse.

God, where were You then?

Where are You now?

Mary concentrated on the sound of her own breath. In and out. In and out. After a few seconds, the ache eased, but her eyes burned and her nose ran. She tugged a tissue from her coat pocket and swiped at her face. She needed a minute.

She needed a year, but wives and mothers didn't get that kind of reprieve in the midst of crisis. They leaned into the boulders and pushed forward.

Instead of going to the SUV, she waded through the wet, slush of snow, melting in a lovely warm sun, around the side of the house into the backyard. The Realtor had been right. The backyard went on and on, finally ending in an alley that separated the Higgins property from their neighbor's backyard, also long and empty except for a large cluster of trees that were likely fruit trees. Maybe apricots and cherry.

Her own backyard held similar trees. Tracy hadn't mentioned fruit trees. Biting her lip to keep from crying, Mary's mind conjured up scenes of picking fruit, pitting the cherries and apricots, and filling wide-mouth Bass jars with steaming, bubbly concoctions of goodness. She could teach the girls to can. She walked the length of the yard, imaging those little girls leaning to can and cook just as she had when she was a little older than they were.

Not just cherries and apricots. Mary squatted and brushed away the snow to reveal wet, black earth. She touched it, then brought her glove to her nose. Dirt. The smell of dirt. The smell of life going on.

Brushing her gloves together, she rose and surveyed the property again, trying to calculate the space. Tomatoes. Definitely tomatoes for tomato sauce, stewed tomatoes, and chow-chow from the green tomatoes. Cucumbers, lots of cucumbers for pickles. Sweet pickles, Bread and butter pickles. Dill pickles.

Carrots, bell peppers, eggplant—eggplant grew well in these parts—corn, leaf lettuce, if the jackrabbits would leave it alone. What else? Green beans. It would be a big garden. A lot of work. But it would be good for Alex to get outside and do some physical labor. It would also teach the girls about where their food really came from. Vegetables did not grow in the supermarket.

Smiling at the thought, she trotted back around the house and burst through the door. “Alex, Alex, are you awake? We have a huge back yard. It’s great. I was thinking we’ll plant a really big vegetable garden. We’ll plant everything we need to make your world-famous spaghetti sauce from scratch. Tomatoes, onions, bell peppers, mushrooms. I’ve never grown mushrooms, but—”

“Did you get my pills?”

“Not yet, I went around back to look at the yard—”

His head shook. It didn’t stop shaking. “Like I said, I’m tired. All my thrashing around is going to keep you awake at night.” He stood and shuffled to the stairs. He clung to the banister like a cowboy clings to his saddle horn in the middle of a stampede. “I’ll pick another bedroom. You can have the master bedroom with the bath.”

After a minute, Mary remembered to close her mouth. The pain of his rejection of their life together as husband and wife knocked the breath from her body. She fought the urge to

double over from the force of a sucker punch that came out of nowhere. The ease with which he'd hurt her spun the room around her in a nauseating tilt-a-whirl.

What hurt even more, however, was the realization that he didn't notice.

Or seem to care.

Chapter 7

“You’re pruning those branches back too much.”

Shears in mid-air, Mary paused. Not because the speaker was correct, but because his voice was so familiar, and she always did what Luke told her to do. He was her oldest brother, after all.

Until she ignored his advice one day eight years ago and hitched a ride with an old friend who dropped her off at the bus station in Hutchinson. With exaggerated care, Mary lowered the shears, laid them against the apricot tree’s trunk, and turned to face him. Sarah was right. Luke was the spitting image of their father with his unruly brown beard laced with gray, his dark brown eyes, long nose, and high cheekbones. No response immediately came to mind. Annabelle and Elisa’s high-pitched giggles as they made mud pies in what would soon be the vegetable garden filled the silence.

“You never cut your hair.”

Luke filled it for her. Mary’s hand went to the braid that swung loose down her back to her waist. “No.”

“I always imagined you with one of those short hairstyles I see on the *Englisch* women who come into the furniture store.”

That Luke thought about her at all surprised Mary. He spoke in Deutsch. After a second she made her choice and did the same. “*Nee, bruder*. I couldn’t bring myself to do it, for some reason.” Even when she was overloaded with her waitressing job coupled with babysitting to make ends meet while taking a full load of classes. She still couldn’t cut her hair to make life easier. “I’m surprised to see you here.”

After all, February had turned to March. They'd been in their new home for a month now. The wind had shifted to the south some days. Cool weather vegetables could now be planted. She had rented a rototiller and prepared soil so she and the girls could plant potatoes, peas, onions, and lettuce in the carefully designed plot. After pouring over catalogues with the girls, she ordered seeds for tomatoes and peppers. When they finally came, Annabelle and Elisa planted them in pots. Now they took turns watering the baby plants until they could be transplanted when the soil had warmed. In the meantime, they'd traveled to Hutchinson to a nursery to buy pansies, snapdragons, and calendulas to plant in the flower beds. New rose bushes, tulip and daffodil bulbs would come later.

Instead of answering, Luke pushed through the gate and entered the backyard. He held up a plate of cookies wrapped in plastic wrap. "I found this on your front porch. Looks like oatmeal raisin. My *fraa* also sent a loaf of banana nut bread. You're set."

"Tell Salome I said thank you. People around here are so welcoming. You can set them on the step behind you."

Almost every week someone from the community came by. The next-door neighbors with a taco casserole. The pastor from the Methodist church with an apple pie made by his wife. A fruit basket from the Lion's Club. An invitation to attend the Baptist church. An invitation to join a quilting club. Haven had embraced its new residents.

Her family had not.

Until now. Luke did as he was told, but his gaze lingered on the girls, who were too engrossed in covering themselves with mud to notice the newcomer. He smiled. "When Sarah told me you were living here now, I counseled her to stay away from you. All of us agreed

nothing has changed. It doesn't matter if you live in the big city or down the road. Our instruction is the same."

Meidung. Their version of tough love. They thought freezing a person out, making them invisible, would force them to reconsider a decision to leave the faith or marry an *Englischer* or some other *fehla*. Mary had needed help. She'd needed support to understand how a so-called loving God could allow her parents and her little brother to be so alive one second and simply gone the next.

Instead the bishop mouthed platitudes. God has a plan. His ways are mysterious. We're only passing through this world. His will be done. Finally, she'd chosen to leave her faith after having been baptized. Nothing could change that. "So why are you here?"

"Because you are my *schweschder*."

A simple statement that said so much more.

"*Jah*."

"Are you all right? The grapevine has gone rampant. You came back because you're dying. Or your *mann* is dying. You're back because you want to help other Plain girls who want their freedom. Like an underground railroad for the Plain."

A laugh burbled up in Mary. It burst forth. Luke's thick eyebrows rose. His lips turned up in a smile and he laughed with her. The girls looked up, their clothes, hands, and faces covered with mud, and grinned as if they knew what was so funny.

"Don't worry. No one is dying. I haven't come to contaminate anyone with my wicked, worldly ways." Mary picked up her shears and went back to work. "And I haven't pruned these branches too much. These trees will be heavy with apricots later this summer."

"Fresh apricots are *gut*."

“So is grubbing in the soil. So is planting flowers and watching them grow. Sitting on the porch and watching the sunset is *gut* for what ails a person.”

“So that’s why you’re here.”

“*Jah.*”

“You could’ve done this many places in the Midwest, far from old memories, far from the family you left.”

“Would you have liked that better?”

“*Nee.* Not at all. I’m only trying to understand.”

Mary didn’t understand it herself. “This place seemed . . . safe.”

“It is a place you know. Where you have *gut* memories . . . before the bad ones came.”

“*Jah.*”

Luke squatted next to Annabelle and Elisa. Annabelle, ever the shy one, pretended to ignore him, but Elisa stood and waddled toward him. “I’m Elisa. Who are you?”

“I’m Luke.” He glanced up at Mary. “Uncle Luke.”

Elisa offered him a ball of mud. “I made a pie for you.”

Still smiling, Luke took the mud. “Thank you. It looks good.” He pretended to partake of the dessert and then deftly let Elisa’s offering fall to the ground while she was busy preparing more. He straightened and brushed his hands odd. “Who is ailing here, Mary?”

“My *mann.* He has early onset Parkinson’s disease.”

“Are you sure he’s the only one ailing?”

Mary snapped the shears blades hard around a recalcitrant branch that refused to yield. “Of course I’m sure.”

“All that schooling and you’re still not learned.”

“If you have something to say, spit it out.” Mary shuddered inwardly. The young girl who’d left this town eight years earlier would never have talked to Luke that way. Women deferred to men, to their opinions, to their needs. Any vestiges of her former self were long gone, lost in a world where she had to fend for herself in the early years and now for her husband and children. She switched to English. “My husband needed a change of scenery. He needed fresh air and sunshine. Parkinson’s doesn’t just attack the body, it attacks a person’s soul.”

“I’m familiar with it. *Onkel* Edward had it. He passed last year.”

The pruning shears suddenly felt too heavy to hoist into the air. Mary let them drop. “I didn’t know.”

“*Aenti* Mae lives with Matthew and his *fraa*, Suzanne.”

“Then you know what I mean.”

“I know it took its toll on *Aenti* Mae and the whole family, but we had each other. We had our faith. I fear for you because you don’t have yours.”

“How do you know what I have?”

“I can see it in your weary face, *schweschder*. Your shoulders are stooped from carrying the burden. The lines on your face belong to an older woman. You’re trying to do it all on your own.”

Burning both ends of the candle did that to a person. The endless research into how to handle chronic disease related depression. Being mother and father to their girls. Running the household. Lying in bed at night aching for her husband’s presence and his touch. Stressing over a dissertation not finished. “It’s my job. I’m the *fraa*. I’m the *mudder*.” Her native tongue refused to be silenced in the heat of the moment. The words poured out. “Who else will carry my burden? Who is there, Luke? I have no family. Alex has no family.”

“*Gott* will carry it for you. You need only ask. You forsook your family, not vice versa. If you think we don’t pray for you every day, you are sadly mistaken. We pray for your salvation. We pray for your return to us.”

“I appreciate your prayers.” The words stuck in Mary’s throat, mixed with tears that couldn’t be allowed to fall. “But I’ll never return. Not in the way you mean. Where was *Gott* when *Mudder* and *Daed* died? When Joseph died? Where was He then?”

“In my heart, I see Him there, leading them home. We rely on his grace and his mercy for that knowledge. I’m only a humble man. I have no right to assume anything about *Gott*’s plan in that moment. But Scripture tells us He can take everything and make it work for our *gut*. I find solace in that. You should too.”

Luke’s words, spoken with such quiet assurance, surrounded Mary. She tried to escape, but they were everywhere. “I couldn’t have *boplin*, Luke. After all I’d been through. He couldn’t give me that, even.”

“Instead He gave you these beautiful little girls who needed a *mudder* and a *daed*. He blessed them. He blessed you. Instead of being thankful, you hang on to old bitterness and hurt.”

His brusque words rang with a truth that Mary already knew. She loved these two babies as if they were her own flesh and blood. No matter the circumstances of how they came to be a family, they were irrevocably knitted together. “Now my husband has a disease that has taken his livelihood and worse, his very essence. It’s taken his joy.”

“*Gott* didn’t give your husband this disease. He didn’t take his joy. Is your husband a believer?”

“He was. I thought he was,” Mary whispered. “*Gott* could’ve kept him from getting it, but He didn’t.”

“Silver honed by the fire. A faith not tested is puny.”

An answer for everything. “You shouldn’t have come.”

“I know.” Luke glanced toward the house. He cleared his throat and ducked his head. “I would’ve like to have met him.”

Mary stared at the house. How would Alex react? He’d always wanted to meet her family. But not like this. Not under these circumstances. “And I would like you to meet him. All of you. One day.”

“God willing. I just wanted you to know we pray for you. We want you to come home. Truly home. Back to the faith.”

“I can’t.”

“You won’t. There’s a different. But we still pray *Gott* will draw you back. That He will do what we cannot. We pray your faith will be restored. Nothing is more important than that. Tell him I said hello.” Luke doffed his black wool hat and ambled toward the gate. “Tell him I pray for him as well.”

“I made you another pie.” Elisa scrambled after him. Dirt smudged her cheeks and her tiny sneakers made squelching sounds in the mud. “It’s chocolate pie.”

“My favorite.” Luke paused at the gate to accept the muddy pie. “Thank you.”

“Come back and play with us.”

“I wish I could, but I have work to do.” He sounded truly sorry. “And so does your mother.”

Mary gritted her teeth against tears. She needed a tissue. The wind made her nose runny, not the tears. She patted her apron pockets. No tissues. She glanced at the house. Alex looked back at her from a kitchen window.

His face immediately disappeared.

He'd been watching. A glimmer of interest? All those one-sided conversations at meals where she recounted her research into what to plant when, fertilizers, mulching, and which hybrid strain of tomatoes grew better in southern Kansas. He occasionally nodded. Sometimes offered a mumbled *uh-huh*. That had been it.

Then he sat in his recliner in the living room watching inane sitcoms. The Alex Mary used to know never watched TV. He read books in the evening or worked crossword puzzles or read to the girls.

How long had he been watching her and Luke?

Time to find out.

Mary herded the protesting girls into the house. "Time to clean up for lunch."

"Can we have pie?" Annabelle dragged her feet. "I want apple pie. And ice cream."

"We'll see. Maybe pie, but not both. Too much sugar. Now go in the bathroom and wash up. I'll get you some clean clothes. Help your sister, okay?"

Alex stood at the kitchen sink carefully pouring iced tea from a plastic pitcher into a travel mug. He didn't have to worry about spilling it once the cap was in place.

Mary joined him so she could wash her hands. Alex immediately moved to the table. He seemed to avoid being in the same space with her at all costs. She turned on the water and breathed until she was sure her voice wouldn't quaver. "We had a visitor."

"Really? Who?"

So he wouldn't concede that he'd been watching and already knew of Luke's visit. "My brother Luke. He came to welcome us."

Sort of.

“A little late for that.”

“He shouldn't have come at all, as you know.”

“So why did he?”

“He wanted to make sure his little sister was okay, I guess.” She dried her hands and turned to lean against the counter. “The Plain grapevine has it one us is dying. Either that or I'm running an underground railroad for wayward Amish teens.”

She managed a chuckle. His grimace might pass for a half-hearted smile, but his bark of a laugh held no mirth. “So he came to see for himself. Why didn't he come in?”

“You're not dying, and you know why he didn't come in.” Mary dug deep for patience she didn't feel—and past the guilt she felt for not having more patience. “The garden plot is ready. This afternoon we'll plant the potatoes, onions, peas, and lettuce. You could help. The girls would love it.”

I would love it.

“I'll just dump the plants all over the ground.” Alex stood and shuffled toward the door. “I'm tired, anyway.”

“I'd think you'd be tired of feeling sorry for yourself.” Mary's hand flew to her mouth. No wonder doctors couldn't treat their own family. Everything she'd learned from the textbooks about dealing with a depressed patient just flew out the window. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way.”

“Yes, you did. Maybe you should walk a mile in my shoes.” His flat voice held no anger at her words. No nothing. “Maybe then you'd understand.”

“I may not have Parkinson's, but I'm living it with you. So are the girls.” Mary strode across the room. She tugged at his arm, forcing him to turn. “We love you. We hate seeing you

like this. We hate seeing you give up without a fight. With all my schooling, with all my knowledge, I still can't find a way to help you and it's killing me."

"Stop then. Just stop." He tugged free, teetered, lost his balance and fell on his behind. His face turned beet red. His arms flailed. He shook his shaggy haired head. "Just leave me alone."

"You stop. You stop feeling sorry for yourself. You have me. You have the girls. We have the financial means to survive despite your illness. We have a roof over our heads and food on the table. We are blessed. You have reasons to live." Mary plopped on the pine wood floor next to him. "Stop pushing me away. I love you, Alex Romano, and this stupid disease won't change that."

Alex scooted away. "You say that now, but what about when I can't feed myself or go to the bathroom on my own, when you have to push me around in a wheelchair, or I start having hallucinations and dementia? Then what?"

"We'll figure it out."

"I don't want to figure it out. I don't want to live like this."

The words hummed in the air, belligerent, a threatening storm moving fast.

"Alex, please, you don't mean that."

He rolled over on his knees, grabbed a chair, and hoisted himself to his feet in a laborious process that gave him none of the dignity he so desired or deserved.

"Alex!"

Using the wall to prop himself up, he edged away. A muscle twitched in his jaw. He sniffed and swiped at his face with his sleeve. "Don't worry. I'm too much of a coward to take my own life."

Mary tried to rise, but her arms and legs betrayed her. She folded her arms around her middle and breathed. "What about your faith? Have you given up on God so easily?"

He snorted. "Believe me. I've had words with the Great I Am about this. I had faith. I did all the right things. But here I am."

"So you gave up. Just like that."

"Just like that. Just like you did when your parents died."

Still leaning against the wall, he made his way from the room.

Fiery, red-hot anger flashed through Mary. How dare he? How dare he? "It's not the same," she hollered.

He didn't answer.

"It's not the same," she whispered. "You know it's not."

Was it?

After their parents died Luke and Emma had stepped in to be parents to eight younger siblings. Instead of stepping up, Mary ran. Despite years of faithful church attendance, despite her baptism at nineteen, she'd folded at the first sign of trouble.

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart. I have overcome the world.

She turned her back on God. Not the other way around.

No words came that could begin to describe how alone she'd felt those first weeks and then months after Mother and Father died. And sweet little Joseph, barely six years old, with his lisp and his missing two front teeth that never had a chance to grow in.

Gott . . .

The Holy Spirit knows your thoughts and groans for you.

Who had told her that? The bishop after the buggy accident. A person didn't have to have words. God heard and understood the Holy Spirit's groans on her behalf.

She scooted so she could lean against the wall and close her eyes. *I can't, Gott. I can't anymore. It's too much. He needs you. I'm not enough for him. I can't do this on my own. I have nowhere else to turn.*

Stop trying so hard. Let me.

The words, electric in their simplicity, flashed around her.

Stop trying so hard. Let me.

Gott?

Plant your garden. I will make it grow.

Gott?

Small, soft hands touched her face. "Mommy, what's the matter?"

Mary opened her eyes. Annabelle patted her cheek with still wet hands that smelled of earth and Dove soap. The little girl's forehead wrinkled and she frowned. "Does your tummy hurt?"

"No, honey, I'm just resting for a minute. Where's Elisa?"

"Playing in the bathroom. We made bubbles with the soap."

"You probably shouldn't play in the bathroom." Mary hugged Annabelle's warm, chunky body to her own. "Did you make a big mess?"

"Yes. But we cleaned it up."

Mary managed a chuckle. She'd seen their efforts at cleanup.

"We're hungry. We want chicken nuggets and French fries."

"Okay"

“With pie and ice cream?”

“Sure.”

Annabelle crowed with delight. This wasn't the mommy she knew. “Can Daddy have some too?”

“If he wants.” Mary's voice cracked. She swallowed the tears. “Why don't you go ask him while I start lunch?”

Annabelle skipped away. Mary dragged herself to her feet. She would make lunch.

Then she would plant that garden.

Chapter 8

April showers bring May flowers. They also help the newly planted carrots, beets, and corn grow. Mary reminded herself of these comforting facts as she leaned into a stubborn window in the girls' bedroom. Living in an old house had its challenge. Cold air seeped through cracks. Doors didn't close properly. The furnace didn't always work. Windows didn't want to close at all. A gust of wind tore through the room, bringing with it fat, cold drops of rain. Lightning flashed, lighting up the oak and elm tree branches that bowed and danced in the backyard. A long, rolling thunder boomed.

Elisa whimpered and climbed out of her bunk bed into Annabelle's. The two girls huddled together. "Get Daddy. He can close it, Mommy."

The old Alex loved storms. He loved preparing for storms. He marched around the house, gathering candles and kerosene lanterns. He checked all the windows, battening down the hatches, as he called it. He would check his weather apps on this phone and compare with the local meteorologists' forecasts on TV.

This evening she hadn't heard a peep out of him since he went to bed at nine o'clock—before even the girls did. "Daddy's asleep."

"The thunder will wake him up."

"Maybe."

Maybe not.

"Come on, come on." The window refused to budge. Rain bombarded her face. She shivered. Jagged lightning hurled itself across the sky. For a few seconds it illuminated hail that pelted everything in its path. "This is ridiculous."

She smacked the window with both hands. It dropped with a bang.

And didn't break.

Thank you, Jesus.

Those little prayers slipped out now and then. They still surprised Mary, but she accepted them as a hopeful sign, like the tendrils of leaves slowly popping up in her garden, and the buds that slowly opened and became marigolds or Shasta daisies or petunias. Better to not question in the quiet moment when she smelled fresh earth, mulch, and the baby sweat on her girls' necks.

More than once, Alex slipped out on the porch to watch. If she looked his direction, he looked away.

Once she found him watering the tomato plants, still waiting to be transplanted.

Hopeful signs.

"All done. Now you two can get some sleep." Mary squeezed on to the bed and wrapped the two girls in hugs. "The rain is good. It'll make the tulips grow and the potatoes and the onions and the corn. Everything will shoot up."

"When we get up tomorrow there will be a beanstalk up to the sky!"

Elisa was fascinated with the Jack and the Beanstalk story.

"Not quite like that, but they will grow."

Another clap of thunder shook the house. Annabelle screeched and tucked her hands over her ears. "I want Daddy. I want Daddy."

"He wasn't feeling well. I don't want to wake him up."

"I want Daddy." Annabelle wiggled from Mary's grasp. She slid from the bed, landed on her knees, righted herself, and trotted in her pink nightgown to the door. "He'll make it stop."

"Bella baby, he—"

Fierce training thunder drown out Mary's response.

Elisa rolled from the bed and ran after her sister. Mary had no recourse but to follow. The girls raced on bar feet across the cold pine floor to the smallest second floor bedroom squeezed under the roof's eaves. Mary only entered the room to collect Alex's dirty laundry and return the clean clothes. Even if he wasn't in the room, she felt as if she were intruding.

Anabelle reached up with both pudgy hands to turn the doorknob and pushed it wide open. Alex sat on the bed, head in hands."

"Alex?"

He raised his head. "What's going on here? You girls should be in bed."

"We need you, Daddy." Elisa climbed onto the queen-sized bed and pushed her way onto his lap. "Didn't you hear the thunder? You always come when it thunders. Why didn't you come?"

"I'm sorry, honey." He raised his head and cast a beseeching glance at Mary. She shrugged and shook her head. Alex's arms went around both the girls. "I'm sorry. I should've come. But sometimes daddies get sick and they can't do things the way they did before."

"Sometimes all they have to do is show up." Mary kept her voice soft, encouraging. "Sometimes little girls just need to know their fathers still care about them. Even when the father doesn't feel up to it. He still loves them because they still love him."

Alex closed his eyes and lowered his head. "You girls know I love you very much. I'll never stop loving you. No matter what."

"We love you too, Daddy."

Annabelle and Elisa took turns showering their father with kisses. Mary gripped her hands behind her. Her heart wanted in on those hugs and kisses. She wanted to kiss him. To hug him. To hold him.

“Group hug.” Annabelle waved at Mary. “Come on, Mommy. Group hug.”

She moved forward. Alex's hand came out. She grasped it. His dark gaze begged her for something. Understanding. Forgiveness. Help.

The lights went out. They were plunged into total darkness.

Both girls screeched.

“It's okay, it's okay.” Alex's deep voice, filled with assurance, soothed them. It soothed Mary too. His hand found hers. “Did you bring a flashlight?”

“I didn't. I didn't think—”

“There's one on my nightstand. Can you get it?”

She felt her way past the bed to the nightstand. A second later she had the flashlight and turned it on. Their faces wet with tears, both girls clung to Alex. He put his arm up to shield his face. “Point it away from me We should go downstairs. Did you unpack the candles and kerosene lamps? Do you know where you put them?”

For the first time in months, he sounded like himself. Assured. In charge. Relief, however short lived, surged through Mary. “In the pantry. I'll get the girls' sleeping bags. We can have a slumber party in the living room.”

A deep, rolling siren drown the sounds of wind and rain beating against the roof.

“Tornado alarm.” Alex scooped up the girls and stood. “That means a tornado has been spotted on the ground. Go, go, Mary, we need to get to the basement.”

A single flashlight did little to light the way, but it was better than nothing. Mary led the way to the door in the kitchen. “I haven't done much work down there. It's pretty dank and dirty.”

“Take Elisa.” Alex thrust the little girl at Mary. “Annabelle, you walk behind Mommy, okay. Daddy needs to get the lanterns. Mary, are there chairs, at least?”

Mary had spent all of three minutes exploring the semi-finished basement. Enough to know it was dry, had shelves for her canned goods, and needed a good cleaning.

“I don't think so.”

“Go. I'm right behind you.”

Elisa on her hip, Mary grabbed Annabelle's hand. Together they started down the step stairs. “Alex, forget the lanterns. Just get down here.”

“Half a minute and I'm there.”

It seemed more like forty days. Elisa hiccupped sobs. Annabelle clung to Mary's leg, making it hard to move.

“I want Daddy.”

“I know, honey. He's coming. Let's just pretend we're on an adventure. We're in a cave. We're searching for treasure.”

“What kind of treasure?”

Two sturdy folding chairs or beach chairs would be nice. So far a few plastic bins, a trash cans, and a few boxes covered with cobwebs served as their only treasures. “A treasure chest filled with all your favorite candies.”

“I would like that.” Annabelle's grip loosened. Her small voice cheered considerably.

“And Elisa's too?”

“Elisa's too.”

Thundered boomed again and again. Annabelle hurled herself at Mary. Elisa wailed. Something crashed overhead. Mary instinctively ducked, silly, though it was. She sank to her

knees and the cement floor and covered both girls with her arms. "It's okay. It's okay. It's just thunder. We're fine."

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!"

"I'm here, I'm right here."

A lantern in one hand and a blanket over his shoulder, Alex edged down the stairs. He grabbed the railing with his free hand. The lantern swung and the light careened wildly around them. "Be careful. Don't fall."

"I'm good." He sounded almost cheerful. "I didn't take time to go in the garage for the beach chairs, but I grabbed the blanket from the couch. We can sit on it."

He made it to the bottom step and staggered across the floor where he set the lantern on one of the plastic tubs. "I grabbed that bag of cookies from the counter. How's that for prioritizing?"

"I want a cookie." Annabelle immediately transferred her death grip from Mary to Alex. "So does Elisa."

Elisa loosened her choke hold around Mary's neck. "Cookie."

"I think you made the right choice." Mary sat the little girl on her feet and took the blanket from Alex. "Everything's dirty down here, but it'll do. What was that crash?"

"Here, sweet peas, sit down, and I'll hand you the cookies." His expression was somber in the half shadows cast by the lantern. He smoothed Elisa's unruly hair and looked at Mary. "I think one of the trees in the front yard came through a window in the living room. I didn't dare go look."

One of those beautiful, stately old oaks in the front yard gone now? Mary took the cookie Alex offered her and sat down cross-legged with the girls. "I should've been paying attention to the weather. I had no idea it was supposed to get this bad."

"You're used to me tracking the weather." Alex squatted next to her. "I've been falling down on the job."

Was that an attempt at a joke? Mary squinted, trying to see his face better. "You're dealing with a lot."

"No, you're dealing with a lot. Because of me."

"I don't know how many ways to say this. I meant the vows I took on our wedding day. I wasn't simply mouthing words."

"I know." His hand stole across the red plaid wool until his fingers touched hers. "I'll try to do better. I promise."

A naked lightbulb flashed on, illuminating the long narrow room. Three faded lawn chairs sat in a row in the far corner next to a stack of empty crates. Old jars of canned goods lined a dozen shelves on the other side. The Higgins had left a few supplies behind.

Alex's hand withdrew. He dug his phone from his pocket and thumbed through the apps. "It's a massive storm, but it's moving away quickly. Mostly rain and wind left."

He eased to his feet. "I'll go see what it looks like upstairs."

"No, Daddy, stay with us." Elisa grabbed at his leg. "It's scary down here."

"Mommy's here." Alex patted her cheeks and kissed the top of her head. "She's supermom."

"Ha, ha." It felt good to hear him say that. It felt good to hear him say something positive. "More like half-baked mom."

“Very funny.” He labored up the stairs, one at a time, but he went.

Thank you, God, for baby steps.

Where those baby steps hers or his?

A few minutes later, the door at the top of the stairs opened. “You can come up now.”

“How bad is it?”

“It’s not great, but we’ll live.”

Thank you, God.

They now had a large oak in their living room. The tree took out two windows. Hail did its part with two more. Rain, still coming down, soaked the furniture. Wind scattered books and papers. The big screen TV hung crooked.

Mary hoisted Annabelle on her hip and forced herself to breath. “Should we try to cover stuff? We can use the drop cloths I bought for painting.”

“I don’t think it would do much good at this point.” Alex picked up a copy of a biography of Marie Curie. Water dripped from its torn pages. “We should try to get some sleep. We’re better off dealing with this in daylight. A lantern isn’t enough. Someone will fall and get hurt.”

To sleep would be impossible. The remnants of adrenaline still swept through Mary in regular waves. Her hands shook and her stomach rocked. “You go on. The girls won’t want to sleep in their room tonight. I’ll put them in with me.”

“I want Daddy.” Elisa whimpered. Her head lay on Alex’s shoulder and her arms clutched at his neck. “Don’t go, Daddy.”

“I’m not going anywhere, sweet pea.” He jerked his head toward the stairs. “I’ll help you tuck them in.”

Together they trooped into the master bedroom. Momentary shame rolled over Mary. She hadn't made the bed. Her research for her dissertation lay sprawled over the rumpled sheets, along with her laptop, and an empty bag of Oreo cookies.

"There's enough space in this house for you to have an office." Alex's voice held a hint of suppressed laughter. "I hope the cookie crumbs don't draw ants. How do you sleep in this mess?"

"I don't. Not much."

She met his gaze over the heads of their children. His shoulders hunched but he didn't look away. Instead, he began to clear the detritus from the bed with his free hand.

Mary tucked Annabelle under the covers on the other side and went to work stacking her papers. They worked without speaking, while the girls curled up together in the middle of the bed. Exhausted from the excitement, they were asleep in seconds.

Alex laid the last book on the dresser next to the lantern. Turning, he cleared his throat. "It's still raining."

"And the wind is still blowing."

"But we're still here." He trudged to the bed. "They're so sweet when they're asleep."

"And when they're awake."

His gaze drifted to her face. "I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"You don't have anything to be sorry for."

"We're all doing the best we can."

Alex tucked a lock of Annabelle's hair behind her ear. He leaned over and kissed her cheek, then Elisa's. "Sweet dreams."

Mary touched her own cheeks. Her bones ached. Her heart thrummed. "Please stay with us."

He ducked his head and studied his hands. "Are you sure?"

"Alex."

"I'm not the man I was."

"I will always, always love you."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. He cleared his throat. A second later, he slid under the covers next to Annabelle. Mary did the same on the other side, the girls between them.

"I can't promise I'll ever be the old Alex."

Mary touched his hand. "People change. I've changed. I just need you to let me in."

"I'll try."

"That's all I ask."

She closed her eyes and listened to the breathing of the three people most important to her in the world. She loved her Plain family. She loved them with a fierce desperation. But she loved these three people even more.

"Mary?"

She didn't dare open her eyes. "What is it?"

"Can you pray for me? Please."

Oh, Gott. "Yes."

His hand slid over hers. Their fingers entwined.

"Lord in Heaven, we pray for healing for Alex's body and his heart. We pray for healing of the rift in our marriage. We pray that your will be done in our lives. Help us to see more

clearly what your will is. Keep these babies healthy and happy. Show us the path that leads to eternal life. These things we ask in your name. Amen.”

“Thank you.”

“I pray this for them, not for us.”

“I know.”

Gott, give me the wisdom, the strength, and the endurance to run this race you've set out for me. Forgive me for taking so long to find my way back. I can't return to my Plain faith, but I know now I can do nothing without you. Scrap me up off rock bottom and set my on my feet, Oh Lord, I pray. Amen.

Mary lay awake staring into the darkness, wondering what daybreak would bring. Gradually, Alex's sudden jerking ceased. The restlessness in his arms and legs calmed. His breathing softened. A few seconds later the familiar tiny snore that had accompanied her dreams for the past four years commenced. She closed her eyes and let it lull her to sleep.

Chapter 9

In the early morning light, the storm damage looked worse. Mary cupped her hand against her forehead and squinted against the bright sun. One of the big oaks had indeed tumbled across the porch, damaging the railing, and breaking through the bay window. The softball-sized hail broke three other windows. The hail also damaged the roof to such an extent that it would have to be replaced. Their neighbor's full-grown elm tree now lay in their yard, their demolished fence and mailbox under it. Haven's volunteer fire department chief said the culprit was likely straight winds rather than a tornado, but such a technicality didn't matter. All over Haven, their neighbors were beginning the arduous process of cleaning up and repairing.

"You did get renters' insurance, didn't you?" Alex stood next to the elm, one hand on its enormous trunk. Annabelle and Elisa, outfitted in matching rubber purple and pink polka dotted rainboots, danced in the puddles. Their squeals of delight punctuated the conversation. "It should cover the water damage inside too."

"I did. I just need to figure out where I stashed the paperwork." When she'd awakened at dawn, Alex had already been gone from their bed. She found him downstairs making coffee and peanut butter toast. His diffident smile had been the only assurance she had that the previous night had not been a dream. Mary shook off the image and the thoughts that careen after it. Would things be different now? Was her Alex beginning to fight find his way through the swampy morass of depression? "I'm not sure where the owners' insurance ends and ours begins. I'll have to get in touch with the Realtor."

"I took photos of everything inside." Alex held up his phone. "I'll do the same out here. Some of them will be blurry, with all this jerking around, but you can always take more. We'll have to hire out the repairs. We don't have the equipment to cut up this tree, even I could handle

a chainsaw. For now, we need to get the trees removed so we can board up the windows in case we get more rain.”

His tone was rueful instead of the self-pitying one he'd employed so often in the last months. Hope tickled Mary's heart.

The clip-clop of horses' hooves on the asphalt and the creak of wooden buggy wheels filled the air before she could respond. She slipped down the porch steps and went to the gate. A parade of buggies filled the street led by Bishop Bryan Hostetler and his family. Luke and his wife Salome followed with their kids. And two girls who had to be Lilly and Maddy—the little sisters Mary had not seen in eight years. They could be twins. They would be fifteen and thirteen. Emma and her husband, their children. Matthew and Ian.

“Whoa, whoa.” Bryan halted the buggy in front of their house. The other buggies halted as well. “*Guder mariye*, Mary. We've come to help.”

A simple statement so full of meaning it boggled the mind.

“To help?” Her voice sounded weak in her ears.

“Those of us who had no damage in the storm are spreading out to work with those who did.” He hopped from the buggy. “They still can't say if it was a tornado or straight winds, but it was a strange phenomenon to be sure. Several of the businesses in Yoder have damage. The bakery is fine, though. Sarah's there now. Houses on one block lost roofs while houses on the next are completely untouched.”

“A strange phenomenon to be sure.”

Almost as strange as the bishop showing up to help a shunned woman and her family make repairs after a storm. Mary kept that notion to herself and simply introduced Alex and the

girls. Annabelle hid in Mary's skirt, but Elisa insisted on meeting Bryan's horse. In fact, she wanted introductions to all the horses.

"They are sweet girls." Emma chuckled over Elisa's utter lack of fear for the huge creatures. Her hug was hearty. Her voice softened to a whisper. "Motherhood agrees with you *schweschder*."

"*Danki*. They are the light of my world. Both of them and Alex."

"What is that in your hair?" Elisa reached for Emma's *kapp*. "I want a hat."

"It's a prayer covering. That's up to your mother, little one." She knelt and said hello to Annabelle who leaned into Mary, her gaze wary. "Hi there, would you like to meet the rest of your aunts and uncles or is it a little too much?"

Annabelle looked up at Mary, who patted her sleek dome of silky hair. "It's okay, baby, they're family."

Annabelle took Emma's hand and off they went.

It seemed like a dream. Mary hugged every neck and kissed every cheek. By that time Bryan and Luke had unloaded the equipment, including a propane driven chainsaw and a generator.

"We brought sandwiches and cookies and pecan pie and lemonade." Breathless, Lilly stopped her recitation. "You look pretty, *schweschder*. Are you a doctor?"

"*Danki*. Not yet. I'm studying to be a psychologist."

"Jah, so she can fix you, *schweschder*," Ian called out as he unloaded two large toolboxes. "You've never been right in the head."

"Ha, ha, *bruder*. I'm sure that you're the one in need of a doctor."

The banter and the laughter that accompanied it felt like a draught of refreshing water to a dry throat. Mary's face hurt from smiling. Bryan, Luke, and Ian manned the chainsaws. The woman grabbed brooms and went to work in the living room and on the porch.

Emma took Mary's arm. "I hear you are working on a big garden. Why don't you show me?"

"I haven't even looked to see how it fared." Mary glanced back to make sure Lilly had the girls in a safe place. "I hope everything made it."

"Ours looked ragged, but they got a nice drink of water out of it." Emma sidestepped a huge branch that lay in the space between the house and the side fence. "This is a *gut* house. Sturdy. Spacious."

"It's big, I suppose for our small family." Mary ignored the usual sharp pain in the space around her heart. She'd awakened this morning with an unwavering sense that God had a plan for her little family and for her. "But it's only until Alex is ready to go back to Kansas City."

"Sarah told me about your difficulty with childbearing. I'm sorry. It must've been hard, but your girls are sweet. This is a good place to raise children, as you know. You're sure you want to leave and go back to the big city?"

Mary studied the meaning behind her sister's words. "Emma, why did Bryan come here today? Why did he agree for all of you to come? Has something changed in the *Ordnung*?"

"*Nee*, it hasn't changed, but that doesn't mean we don't have a heart for helping our neighbors." Emma brushed back the branches of a rosemary bush. Rain droplets that sparkled in the morning light showered their warm faces. "You are our neighbor. We could not help others on this block and not you. It would be wrong. It's as simple as that."

"So it doesn't mean you'll be inviting us into your homes or for the holidays."

Emma's smile held sadness. "Not unless you truly come home, *schweschder*. We never stop praying for that."

An honest answer. Painful, but honest. They rounded the corner of the house and surveyed the backyard. The neat rows of potatoes, onions, lettuce, carrots, corn, radishes, and bell peppers were untouched. The cherry and apricot trees still stood, offering roosting spots for cardinals and robins.

Even the pansies, daisies, snapdragos, calendulas, and elderly rose bushes that had clung to life when Mary began to care for them earlier in the year, looked dewy and fresh in the flower beds that outlined the back porch.

"What a beautiful garden." Emma clapped in delight. "You always had a green thumb. At least that hasn't changed."

"I'm still me." Mary scooped up a bundle of twigs and leaves that had landed among the pansies. "I still love to garden and bake and sew. What I see now is that these activities have medicinal qualities too. They have the ability to heal. Working with your hands helps your head. That's what I want to do for people."

"Doctors can do that?"

"I have to finish my formal education, but yes, I can do both."

"Why did you come here, to Haven, to do this?"

"I came for Alex. He needs healing. The head kind." Admitting to her sister that life out in the world had not turned out perfectly was hard. "He needs this garden."

Emma touched the rich red petals of a pansy. She shook her head. She looked so much like Mother with her blond hair now tinged with gray and the lines beginning to form around her

pale blue eyes. "I think it was you who needed the garden. You needed to come back here to heal."

Mary knelt and straightened the twigs she'd used to mark the rows in her vegetable gardens. "I'm fine. I've always been fine."

"So you've come to terms with the death of *Mudder, Daed*, and Joseph."

A wave of pain, as fresh and new as the hot July day she'd stood in the middle of the road and screamed in horror, washed over Mary. "It still hurts my heart, but I've learned to live with it."

"It was horrible for all of us, but for you especially. They died before your eyes and there was nothing you could do to save them." Emma knelt next to Mary and reached to still her hands. "Luke and I have talked about how we should've seen this. We should've gotten help for you. We didn't and you ran away. We lost you, forever, it seemed."

"None of it was your fault. You were thrust into a nightmare situation. You had to be parents to our *bruders* and *schweschders*. You had to hold together the family. You did the best you could."

Emma's arm came around Mary's shoulders. "I'm sorry we didn't do better by you." Her hug was tight and warm. "I'm sorry I didn't do better."

"I'm sorry I ran away instead of staying to help you take care of the *kinner*."

The silence that followed was filled by a pair of cardinals chattering on their perch in a cherry tree and the soft rustle of leaves in the breeze.

Mary grasped a handful of wet earth and lifted it to her nose. It smelled sweet and clean and healthy. It smelled like rebirth.

Like healing.

Chapter 10

“What are you doing?”

Mary tugged her robe over her nightgown and let the screen door close behind her. Squinting against the porchlight, she stared at a sight to behold. Alex, dressed in the T-shirt and baggy sports shorts he wore to bed, knelt in the garden. Two powerful flashlights lay on their sides on one of the wooden benches she'd installed along the edges. A dozen tomato plants in plastic pots were lined up in the grass. He looked up at her question and smiled. “I saw you'd written on the calendar that today is the day to transplant the tomatoes. May first.”

“It's five o'clock in the morning, Alex.”

“I couldn't sleep.”

Mary understood that. Sleep came in brief starts and stops for her. She padded on bare feet down the steps and across the grass. It felt cool and delicious on her toes. Frogs croaked and crickets joined in the serenade. A dank breeze rustled the tree leaves. Soon dawn would come, and the sun would turn the day blistering hot Kansas day, but in the semi-dusk, spring still lingered.

She slowed and stopped at the edge of the garden. “Have you ever planted tomatoes before?”

“No, but I was a surgeon. Surely I can figure it out.”

He sounded so chipper.

In the six weeks since the storm, he'd worked with Luke and the rest of her family to repair the house. Despite a few mishaps that resulted in bumps and bruises, he ended each day sweaty, dirty, and full of chatter about the firewood that would come from the fallen trees and the cost of new fencing and how windows were best replaced. The girls found it all very

interesting until the roofers came. Then they hid from the incessant pounding until Alex took pity on them and carted them to the park in their double stroller.

Through it all, he seemed so like his former self, Mary found her hope growing like the sunflowers on the side of the road, tall and wild.

Except for that part of him that had been for her and no one else. The part that was her husband. A simple hug. A kiss. Clasp hands. Touching when no one else saw. That part had yet to reappear.

She settled onto a bench and clutched her robe tighter, waiting for something. Not sure of what.

“Do you want to help?” Alex held up the first plant, grown from seed, and now a robust mass of greenery. “Or give me some tips?”

“Dig out the dirt in the pot so you keep the root ball together.” Mary adjusted the flashlights so they shone directly on Alex’s spot in the garden. She slipped into the row and knelt next to him. “Use a trowel to make the hole big enough to slip it into the ground. Then cover it with the fresh dirt.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

Alex handed her the plant and went to work on the hole while Mary loosened the dirt around the plant and lifted it from the plastic pot. After a few seconds he turned back. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

He reached for the plant cradled in her palm. Their fingers, covered with dirt and mud, touched. For a moment they held the small plant together. His head came up and his gaze swept across her. Mary couldn’t speak. She could only inhale his scent of sweat and soap, mingled with

the scent of fresh dirt and new life. If Emma was right and she'd come back for healing, Mary's goal had been achieved, but there was more. She needed more.

Alex's smile faded, replaced with a somber stare. "I don't know how."

"You don't know how what?" Mary whispered. "Whatever it is, tell me, and we'll figure it out. I promise."

"I don't know how to get you back."

"You never lost me. I've always been here."

"I was proud. I didn't want you to be stuck with a patient instead of a husband."

"You never stopped being my husband. You're all I need. You're everything I need."

His eyes closed. He drew her hands closer, lower his head, and kissed her fingers with an exquisitely soft, feathery touch. One by one.

Mary didn't move. She wanted the moment to last forever and ever. He lifted his head and cupped her face with his hands. "I love you."

"I love you too."

The kiss came as the sun slipped over the horizon and cast its light on the garden. The rays warmed their faces. Mary slid her arms around his neck and leaned closer. She wanted to climb inside his skin and find that place where two became one.

Whatever came next, they had this moment in time to sustain them.

After a long time, he leaned back and traced her cheeks with his finger. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too."

"I have no one to blame but myself."

"We've both been lost."

“You were right to come here.” He pulled her closer. She leaned her head on his chest. His hand came up and stroked her hair. “I couldn’t see it at the time, but now I know this is what we needed. It’s what we need.”

“So you think we should stay here . . . for good.”

“For our good, yes. You’ll finish your dissertation and join a practice. Or start your own. Whatever you decide. You can work in Hutchinson or Wichita, either one.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought.” Mary listened to the thump of his heart, steady and strong. He hadn’t said anything for so long, but he’d been working it out, slowly, over time.

Thank you, Gott. “I’m so glad you’re seeing your way.”

“That doesn’t mean it’ll be easy. Nothing about this disease is easy. Nor am I as strong and noble and faithful as I would like to be.”

“We’ll be strong and noble and faithful for each other. And when we can’t, it’s okay, because we have each other.”

Alex kissed the top of her head, her forehead, and her cheeks. His hands went to her shoulders. His gaze undid her. “Do you want to go inside?”

Only God knew how much time they had in this world together. However long it might be, Mary wanted each day, each hour, each moment. “Let’s plant the tomatoes first.”

“Good idea.”

Together they worked in the dawning light to finish the task. It took much longer than it should have because of the more and more frequent stops for lingering kisses.

Finally, they were done. Alex had dirt smudged on his face. Their hands were covered with mud. Mary’s robe was filthy. She’d never felt cleaner. “Now we can go inside.”

Alex stood and held out his hand. She took it. He pulled her to her feet and put his arm around her. Together, they went home.

Chapter 11

Sweat trickled down Mary's forehead and dripped in her eye. She'd forgotten how hot canning was—even with the benefit of central air, something she hadn't enjoyed as a Plain girl. Temperatures in southern Kansas were breaking records for the month of August. She wiped at her face and stepped back to look at the pretty rows of Ball jars filled with dill pickles, tomatoes, and green beans. A wave of sudden queasiness swept over her.

She checked the time on her cellphone. The moment of reckoning had arrived. She wiped her hands on her apron and went to the guest bathroom where she'd left the test. *God, don't let me be disappointed. It's not probable. It's not possible. Thy will be done. If it does happen, it'll be pure joy. If it doesn't, I still have the perfect, complete family you've given me.*

But it was. The plus sign was a neat pink. No wavering lines. No doubts.

Mary held in her hand the third positive test in three weeks. She could no longer doubt the miracle. She was expecting.

She stowed the test in the trash and went to the back door. Alex had set up the sprinkler and the baby pool for the girls. Their screams of laughter filled the back yard. Wearing his swimsuit and a Royals baseball cap, her tanned husband looked years younger than he had when they moved into the house six months earlier. Annabelle and Elisa were inches taller and their clothes were too small.

Fresh food, fresh air, and family. The prescription for health.

And for babies, apparently.

Unable to contain her smile, Mary slipped into the yard and skirted the twirling sprinkler. Alex looked up just as she reached the bench where he sat, phone in hand, taking photos. He slid

the bill of his cap to the back of his head. He needed a haircut. "How's the canning going? Did you finish? You should put your suit on and come out and play."

"Later." She settled on the bench next to him. "I have something to tell you."

"You finally connected with the department chair at Wichita State about finishing your doctorate there. You have your schedule set up for the fall so you can defend your dissertation next summer."

"Yes, yes, and yes, but that's not what I want to talk to you about." And her news might blow up her plan of attack for the PHD. A sudden wave of shyness engulfed Mary. How could she be shy with her own husband? She clasped her hands in her lap. "It's something else."

Alex's smile disappeared. "What is it? What's wrong?" His playful tone evaporated as well. "Tell me you're not sick—"

"No, no, nothing like that. I'm not sick. I'm pregnant."

"You're" His mouth dropped open. He shook his head. "What are you saying? That's not possible."

The doctors had agreed. First, second, and even third opinion. The likelihood of Mary conceiving had been small, infinitesimal, in the words of the last specialist. "With God, everything is possible."

"You've been to the doctor?"

She shook her head. "I wanted us to do that together, but I've taken three tests and they've all been positive. Plus, I'm late. And I threw up this morning."

"You threw up this morning?" Laughing, Alex jumped up and pumped his fist. "You threw up!"

“You don’t have to be quite so happy about that part.” Mary tugged him back onto the bench. “I made an appointment with a doctor in Hutchinson. For next week.”

Still laughing, Alex slid his arm around her and smothered her in kisses. “A baby. We’re having a baby.” Suddenly he stopped and leaned back. “This is good news, right?”

“It’s a miracle, Alex.”

“I mean with me being the way I am—”

“You being my husband and the love of my life, you mean? You’re already a great father and nothing will change that.”

“But I—”

“No buts. You’re a wonderful father to Annabelle and Elisa. You will be a wonderful father to their brother or sister. This is the best news ever.”

He nodded and cleared his throat. “The best news ever.”

His arm slid around her. She leaned her head on his shoulder and watched their girls run through the sprinkler, shrieking with laughter. Hummingbirds visited the snapdragons, roses, and pansies. Blue jays chattered in the trees overhead.

The plants in the garden were heavy with bell peppers, cucumbers, and tomatoes. The corn would be ready to pick in a few more weeks.

Thank you, God, for a plentiful harvest. Not just the food, but the harvest of love.

“Time to get celebrate!” Alex popped from the bench, grabbed her arm, and tugged her toward the sprinkler. “Time to dance with my girls.”

He could do little more than sway, but his efforts enchanted Annabelle and Elisa. Mary took their hands. Together they twirled around him in the cool, cool water. They danced for joy.

They danced in a garden planted with hope. They danced for love.