

KELLY IRVIN

“Will capture the hearts of those who love
the Plain culture and an endearing romance.”

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bestselling author of *The Coffee Corner*, on *Mountains of Grace*

Love's Dwelling

AMISH
BLESSINGS
Book One



Love's Dwelling



KELLY IRVIN



ZONDERVAN

Love's Dwelling

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*To my Kansas family,
love always.*



My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.

John 14:2-4



Glossary of Deutsch*

Ausbund: hymnal used by the Amish for church services

beheef dich: behave yourself

bobblemoul: blabbermouth

bopli, boplin: baby, babies

bruder: brother

bu: boy

daadi: grandpa

daed: father

danki: thank you

Das Loblied: “The Praise Song”

dawdy haus: attached home for grandparents when they retire

dochder: daughter

dumkupp: dummy

Englischer: English or non-Amish

eck: the corner table where the bride and groom sit at the wedding reception

fraa: wife

Gelassenheit: submission to the will of God; attitude of tranquil humility

gern gsehme: you’re welcome

Gmay: church district

Gott: God

Glossary

guder mariye: good morning

guder nammidaag: good afternoon

gut: good

gut nacht: good night

hund: dog

Ich bin gut: I am good

Ich bin schlecht: I am bad

Ich bin zimmlich gut: I am pretty good

Ich bin zimmlich schlecht: I am pretty bad

jah: yes

kaffi: coffee

kapp: prayer cap or head covering worn by Amish women

kind: child

kinner: children

kinnskind, kinnskinner: grandchild, grandchildren

maedel: girl

mammi: grandma

mann: husband

meidung: shunned, excommunicated from the Amish church

mudder: mother

nee: no

onkel: uncle

Ordnung: written and unwritten rules in an Amish district

rumspringa: period of “running around” for Amish youth before they decide whether they want to be baptized into the Amish faith

schmeir: a sandwich spread made of peanut butter, corn syrup, and marshmallow cream

schnee: snow

schul: school

schweschder: sister

Glossary

sei so gut: please (be so kind)

sub: son

Wie bischt du: How are you?

wunderbarr: wonderful

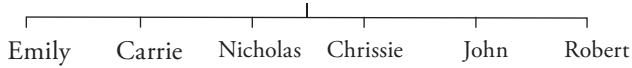
*The German dialect spoken by the Amish is not a written language and varies depending on the location and origin of the settlement. These spellings are approximations. Most Amish children learn English after they start school. They also learn high German, which is used in their Sunday services.



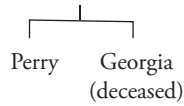


Featured Haven Families

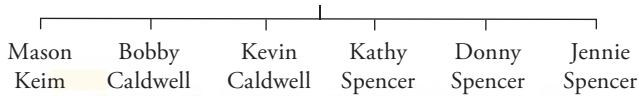
Delbert (minister) and Loretta Byler



Job and Dinah Keim



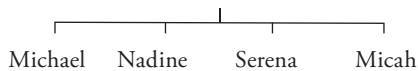
Georgia Keim-Carter and Clayton Carter



Caleb and Elizabeth Mast



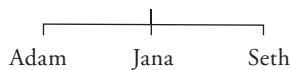
Bryan (bishop) and Esther Miller



Leroy and Connie Weaver



Samuel (deacon) and Anita Zimmerman





Chapter 1

A ROBIN PERCHED ON TOP OF THE EMPTY BIRD FEEDER OUTSIDE the kitchen window. Cassie Weaver paused, a package of pork chops in her hand, to study it. Didn't the dandy with his red-breasted plumage know he was early? Spring wouldn't show its face in southern Kansas for another month. February was an in-between month when Mother Nature couldn't seem to make up her mind. Five inches of snow had fallen since dawn, and the fluffy wet stuff continued to accumulate.

Working for Dinah Keim, who was fast losing her eyesight, made Cassie acutely aware of the blessing of sight. Not to be able to see a ruby-throated hummingbird clothed in delicate, shimmering greens and blues, sipping nectar from purple, pink, and red pansies, would diminish her world. Having seen it and now to be bereft of it only made matters worse. Cassie stopped to count her blessings. She could see, which meant every day was a beautiful day, beginning with a brilliant sunrise and ending with her sister sunset.

Life was good.

"Cassie? Are you there?"

Dinah's arrival signaled that the time for gathering wool had ended. Cassie forked the pork chops into a cast-iron skillet on the

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stove and turned. "I'm here. I'm making pork chops and fried potatoes for lunch. Did you check your blood sugar?"

Her wooden walking stick making a *thunk, thunk* on the oak floor, Dinah trotted to the kitchen table with a sure step. Every piece of furniture in the house remained in the same resting spot it had occupied for years, so she never had to worry about colliding with a misplaced chair or table. "I feel light-headed."

"The potatoes are done. The slaw is on the table. All I have to do is fry the pork chops. Check your blood sugar while I finish." Cassie turned up the gas flame under the skillet and strode to the propane-powered refrigerator. The never-ending balancing act between too high and too low blood sugar had become more difficult as Dinah's frail body failed her. "I'll get your shot ready."

When she started working for Dinah and Job Keim six years ago, Cassie had been squeamish and then timid about the shots. Not anymore. Were she not Plain, she might have been a nurse or even a doctor. Snorting under her breath at the fanciful thought, she took a tiny bottle of insulin from the box on the refrigerator shelf, placed it on a saucer, and added a syringe. The cotton balls and alcohol were already on the table.

"Something smells *gut*." Job barged through the back door and stamped snow from his enormous work boots on the rug. Her employer had the biggest feet Cassie had ever seen. But then, he stood well over six feet tall. The feet matched the man. "I shoveled off the walk, which makes no sense, I know, fed the animals, fixed that hole in the fence, and chopped wood. Now I could eat an elephant."

"No elephants on the menu today." Cassie smiled as she set the saucer in front of Dinah. "But I can see if the meat market offers it next time I go into Yoder. It's probably more tender than the last chuck roast I bought from them."

Job's belly laugh always made Cassie laugh with him. His smile wide over a long black beard shot through with silver, he slapped his broad chest and let one rip. "You tickle my innards, girl."

"Someone's coming." Her head cocked, forehead furrowed, Dinah leaned forward in her chair. Her thick-lensed black glasses magnified her blue eyes. Failing eyesight had amplified her hearing. "Sounds like a van or an SUV coming up the drive."

"Somebody has gut timing, *fraa*." Job squeezed his wife's shoulder as he walked past her. "They managed to arrive just in time for lunch. I'll meet them at the front door."

If they wanted lunch, Cassie was in trouble. Six thin pork chops wouldn't go far—especially with Job's insatiable appetite. The man didn't have an ounce of fat on his sixty-seven-year-old frame, even though he inhaled all the food Cassie put in front of him.

"I wonder who it could be." Dinah took care of her finger poke, used the test strip, and handed it to Cassie to read. "How am I doing?"

"Time for the shot and then some food. Guests or no, you need to eat." Cassie administered the shot with an ease that her sixteen-year-old younger self would not have thought possible. "There you go. I have some sugar-free banana pudding with vanilla wafers and banana slices for dessert."

That drew a delighted whoop from Dinah, who barely seemed to register the injection anymore. The dessert was a favorite. Her sweet tooth seemed to grow in direct proportion to her disease. She preferred chocolate-frosted brownies or apple pie with ice cream, but even those made with sugar substitutes had to be saved for special occasions. Her thin body was just what the doctor had ordered.

"*Fraa*, come out here." Job no longer sounded jovial. "Now."

"She just had her shot," Cassie called back. She shook her finger

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at Dinah. "I'll go. Start with a roll. They're in the basket on the table, along with the butter."

She turned off the stove and moved the skillet to a back burner.

"Dinah, you need to get out here."

Something akin to bewilderment mixed with panic reverberated in Job's deep voice. He didn't rattle easily or at all. Cassie raced down the hallway to the living room. Job stood in the foyer. He'd taken off his black wool hat. He kept running his big hand through curls more silver than black so they stood up all over his head.

Lined up in front of the fireplace stood five English children in stair-step fashion. The oldest one, a boy, held the youngest one, a girl whose red cheeks and wet face told the story of recent tears. A gray-haired lady in a green pantsuit, a worn leather satchel in one hand, joined them.

In the doorway loomed one more visitor. A tall, muscle-laden man with charcoal-black hair and blue eyes who methodically wiped his muddy work boots on the rug. He wore faded jeans with holey knees, an untucked red plaid flannel shirt, a fleece-lined jean jacket two sizes too big, and a Kansas City Royals baseball cap. Everything about his stance said he'd rather be sitting on a doctor's exam table than standing in the Keims' living room.

"I only have six pork chops." The words came out of Cassie's mouth of their own accord. Embarrassment flooded her. "I mean, I can heat up the leftover roast from last night's supper—"

"They're not here for lunch." Job settled his wide-brimmed hat back on his head. His cheeks were damp and his face ashen. "They're—"

"Perry? *Suh?*" One wrinkled hand outstretched, Dinah tottered past Cassie, heading for the man standing on the welcome mat. "Is that you, Suh? Where have you been? I've missed you so much. Where's Georgia? Is she with you?"

"I'm not Perry. He's my uncle. I'm Mason. Mason Keim." The man's big hand sought the doorknob. He took two steps back. "I'm Georgia's son."

"Georgia? Our *dochter's* suh? *Gott* has answered our prayers." Dinah's face brightened as if a lamp's oil had been replenished and light restored. "Where is she? Where's my *dochter*?"

Mason Keim's jaw worked. His gaze went to the children who stood oddly silent, too still for kids. The girl with a tangled dark-brown ponytail that reached her waist grabbed the smaller boy's hand. Finally, Mason spoke. "She died."

Confusion clouded Dinah's face, extinguishing the light. "Died?"

The smallest girl buried her head in the boy's shoulder and sobbed.

The walking stick clattered to the floor. Dinah crumpled in a heap beside it.

Chapter 2

THE GIRL DRESSED IN AN OLD-FASHIONED DRESS AND APRON directed a troubled frown at Mason. That said it all. He'd messed this up big-time. Just like he did when he told his half brothers and sisters. At twenty-two he had no experience delivering death news. The police officer who'd told him about his mom and Clayton's deaths had been kind but quick. "*Better not to beat around the bush,*" he'd said, with a quick man-pat on Mason's hunched shoulders. Apparently that didn't work with everyone.

Mason dropped to his knees next to the prostrate woman—his grandmother, Dinah Keim, according to the caseworker. Dinah and Job Keim were his grandparents. He'd never had grandparents before and he'd practically killed one of them already. He dug his cell phone from his pocket. "Is she all right? Should I call 911?"

The girl in the dress and apron shook her head. "She fainted, that's all. It was a terrible shock. You should've waited until she sat down to give her such grievous news."

"Let me at her." Job scooped up Dinah—Mason's brain couldn't cope with calling them Grandpa and Grandma—like she weighed no more than a baby. He carried her to the couch and sat down beside her. "It's okay. You're fine."

The naked love on his grizzled, whiskered face was too much to bear. It only existed in cheesy movies, didn't it? His mom and her one-after-the-other husbands sure never stared at each other like that. Leastways not where others could see. Mason stood.

The girl brushed past him. "I'll get her some orange juice, Job. She already took her shot. Her sugar is bound to be low."

Dinah stirred and moaned. "My *bopli*, my *bopli*."

What was a *bopli*?

"I know." Job wiped tears from her face with the back of his hand. His thin cheeks seemed to crater under high cheekbones, and his blue eyes shone with unshed tears. Those brilliant blue eyes had been passed down to Mason's mother and to all of his siblings. "But she was gone long ago for us. Dead to us."

Such harsh words. Did he really mean that?

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset her—"

"When?" Dinah strangled the single syllable. "When did she die?"

"Three weeks ago." Mason cleared his throat. "January nineteenth. Just before midnight."

"Where is she now?" Job's arm slid around his wife. She leaned into him. He stared at Mason with despair in his eyes. "When was the funeral?"

A dark, cold, snowy landscape and the images of kids standing around two holes in the ground haunted Mason's dreams. Jennie was so heavy in his arms. Her screams visited him at night. How did a person explain to a four-year-old that Mommy's body had to be put in the ground?

"*She's not in her body anymore. She's in heaven with Jesus,*" he'd whispered over and over again as he stroked the little girl's silky dark-brown hair and tried not to lose his mind.

Bobby's doubtful scowl almost undid Mason. *Yeah, right,* it

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said. Mason's knowledge of heaven and a guy called Jesus was garnered from the occasional excursion to the closest church with a candlelight service on Christmas Eve.

A white lie to comfort a child. Surely God understood that. "She's in a cemetery in Wichita, close to where we live. Her and Clayton both."

The bills kept coming—ambulances, ER, doctors, two burials. Every effort had been made to save his mother and Clayton. For which Mason was deeply grateful. But they had no insurance and had made no arrangements in event of their deaths.

"We would've liked to have been there." Job's arms hung slack at his side. Bleak sadness made his face ancient. "She was our daughter."

"We didn't know about you then." They hadn't even known the Keims existed until Mason found a safe-deposit box key in Mom's jewelry box. That led to the living will. But that was another story. "We thought Uncle Perry was our only family."

He might be their only family, but Perry hadn't let that influence his decision not to take them into his home. His reasons had been plentiful—not enough money, not enough room, not enough experience with children. "*You can handle it, Mason. You've been taking care of them for years.*"

He'd actually been able to say that sentence with a straight face.

"Maybe I should take it from here." Delores Blanchard, the caseworker assigned to his half siblings by the Kansas Department of Child and Family Services, made a *tsk-tsk* sound. Her doughy double chin shook like it always did when she was stressed. Which was most of the time. "Mrs. Keim isn't the only one who's upset. Why don't you calm down your brothers and sisters?"

Mrs. Blanchard was right. The kids huddled together in a tight cluster, faces worried, full of fear and uncertainty. They'd lost their

parents. Now they were being forced from the only home they'd ever known to live with strangers. They were perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. As Uncle Perry had pointed out, they'd been doing it for years.

Mason trudged over to them. Bobby, the oldest at sixteen, shushed Jennie, the youngest at four. Even though they were the product of two different fathers, his siblings had a strong family resemblance—blue eyes and various shades of dark-brown to black hair. Like their mother, when she didn't treat herself to one of a rainbow of hair colors.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Jennie. You didn't do nothing wrong." Bobby rubbed his sister's back with a practiced hand. Like Mason, Bobby had a lot of experience parenting. He scowled at Mason. "Can we go home now?"

"This is what Mom wanted." Mason took Jennie from him. She immediately wiped her runny nose on his coat and wrapped her arms around his neck in a stranglehold. He smoothed her tangled brown curls. "It's okay, sweetie. She'll be okay. She was just surprised to see all of us. Like a really big surprise birthday party."

"I want to go home too. I promise to be good." Donny, who was six, tugged at Mason's arm. "I'll remember to put my dirty clothes in the basket, and I'll wash all the dishes every night. I'll be good, I promise."

"You're not being punished. These folks are family. Mommy wanted you to get to know them." Mason sucked in a breath. Why hadn't she introduced them to the Keims years ago? It would've been nice to have family. To have grandparents. Finding that living will had been the sucker punch that kept on giving. "You'll be better off here."

A six-year-old couldn't begin to understand the logistics of single parenting five younger kids. The cost of day care, food,

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clothing, medical bills, utilities, and rent. Mrs. Blanchard and the advocate appointed by the judge to make sure the kids' best interests were safeguarded had helped him fill out mountains of paperwork to get government assistance. Otherwise he'd still be drowning in red tape. Until he found the will, he'd had everything under control. Almost.

"Mason's right. We need to honor your mother's wishes." Mrs. Blanchard's head bobbed in agreement, which meant her double chin bobbed too. She'd made it clear from the get-go that the will gave the Keims legal standing with the children—whether he liked it or not. "You'll love it here out in the country with all this fresh air and farm animals."

As an adult, he could sue for custody. If he could afford to hire a lawyer, which he couldn't. The bigger question—the one he'd wrestled with every day since he'd discovered the will—revolved around what was best for them. He hadn't wanted to show it to Mrs. Blanchard, but it didn't seem right to hide it or destroy it. To deny them the chance to have grandparents would be wrong. "That's right. I saw horses when we pulled into the yard, and chickens and a cat."

Mrs. Blanchard edged closer to the couch. She settled in a straight-back chair on the other side of a thick, homemade coffee table. "Mr. Keim—"

"It's Job."

"Mr. and Mrs. Keim, I'm sorry we had to come to you in such unfortunate circumstances. Your daughter left a document that specifically stated that she wanted you to have custody of her children should anything happen to her."

The girl was back with a glass of orange juice. She turned and smiled for the first time. She had dimples. She didn't dress like any girl Mason had ever known. No makeup, no bling. Every bit of her

arms and legs was covered by her long dress. Yet this girl was far prettier than most. "Welcome, Georgia's children, welcome."

Her face still lit up like she'd just received a new car for her sixteenth birthday, the girl helped Dinah with the glass of juice. "Drink it all up, Dinah. You'll need your strength. You have five new grandchildren to get to know." Her smile tentative, she glanced at Mason. "Or is it six? Dinah thought you were her son, Perry."

Stop staring. She wasn't much bigger than a kid herself. She had dark-cocoa-brown eyes and fair skin. The little bit of hair showing outside the white covering on her head was a shiny brown. She didn't resemble his mother at all. Besides, she was too young to be one of the Keims' kids. A grandkid maybe. His uncle Perry had never married, and his mother said he was her only sibling.

"Mason? The young lady asked you a question." Mrs. Blanchard's thin eyebrows rose. "Don't be rude."

"Sorry . . . I was . . . Yeah, Georgia was my mother. Who are you?"

"I'm Cassie Weaver. I keep house for Job and Dinah. I'm sorry for your loss. Both your parents in one fell swoop. That's so sad."

"Clayton wasn't my father." Mason couldn't let it go, even though it might be easier. "He wasn't father to any of us. He was Mom's third husband."

Their sudden frowns said it all. He might as well have said she was a polygamist or a prostitute. Did they know she had never married Mason's father? Probably not. That might induce a stroke for the two older folks. Cassie's smile melted into sad disbelief.

"Jake Caldwell is Bobby and Kevin's dad. They don't remember him, but I do." Enough to know he was an okay guy who sold used cars and mostly held down a job. But he drank too much. "Mom ran him off after she caught him kissing a sales associate behind the counter at Buck Doolittle's Used Cars." Why had he shared all that?

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Mason gritted his teeth, sucked in air, and forced himself to keep going. “Deacon Spencer is Kathy, Donny, and Jennie’s dad. He’s in the army. He’s stationed in Germany now.”

“He’s nice,” Kathy volunteered. She slung her waist-length dark-brown hair over her thin shoulders, dug around in a ratty backpack, and produced three tattered paperbacks. *Little House on the Prairie*, a Nancy Drew mystery, and an Amelia Bedelia book. All of which she’d read to Jennie and Donny at least twenty times. “He brought me these. He knows I like to read.”

“Reading is good.” Dinah’s smile looked determined. “He sounds like a good father.”

“He is.” Kathy sighed and rubbed her small hand over the covers. “I miss him.”

Mom had married Deacon after knowing him for two months. Kathy came along eight months later. By that time Deacon was doing a two-year tour in Afghanistan. When he was around, he was a stand-up guy who bought presents for all the kids—not just his. After he returned to the States, Donny made an appearance, followed by Jennie two years later. Deacon’s request that Mom follow him overseas for a six-year stint in Germany had resulted in a sudden divorce. Jennie was two when Clayton entered the scene.

Not to think ill of the dead, but no one would miss Clayton. He was a mean drunk with a foul mouth and a wandering eye. The two did nothing but fight and make up from day one.

“So now you know all the parties involved.” Mrs. Blanchard pulled a folder from her satchel and opened it. “We’ve been unable to find Mr. Caldwell thus far, but we’ll continue to search for him. Mr. Spencer has been notified of your daughter’s death. We haven’t received a response from him. Either or both could contest your daughter’s will and seek custody of their children.”

"They're not coming forward." Mason fought to hide his bitterness. "They've never been real parents."

Mrs. Blanchard gave a long-suffering sigh. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Mason."

Mason waited. Surely one of them would ask. There was a hole in the story. Or maybe they knew and didn't want to talk about their daughter having a baby out of wedlock. Did anyone even use that phrase anymore? Not in the real world. In the Amish world, it was probably the ultimate sin. Maybe it didn't matter anymore. He was an adult and no man had ever come forward to claim his role as father.

He certainly wouldn't do it now that the one person who could confirm his story was six feet under.

"In the meantime, Job and Dinah always wanted a house full of children." Cassie clapped her hands and smiled so big her face had to hurt. "What a gift from God that they have this big house with plenty of bedrooms for their grandchildren. There's a big yard and a pond for swimming and fishing. You would like that, wouldn't you?"

That last part was directed to the kids. Donny nodded and grinned. Kathy chewed her lip, her hands clasped as if in prayer.

"I don't know."

Job and Mrs. Blanchard spoke at the same time.

They stared at each other. "Go ahead." Job gestured at the caseworker. "You first."

"It seems like Mrs. Keim is in poor health. If that's the case, she may not be in a position to care for five young, rambunctious children. Cook meals, buy clothes and other provisions, supervise bathtime, bedtime, make sure they go to school . . ." Forehead wrinkled, Mrs. Blanchard studied Job and Dinah as if seeing them clearly for the first time. "You folks do send your children to school, don't you?"

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“Yes, we do.” Job didn’t seem affronted by the question. He leaned forward, hands on his knees. “Through eighth grade—”

“I won’t go to school?” Bobby’s incredulous shout filled the small living room. “I have to graduate high school to go to the police academy. I’m not staying here. This sucks.”

“Language, Bobby.” Mrs. Blanchard swiveled to shoot a frown at him. “I know you’re having a rough time, but that’s never an excuse for being rude.”

Maybe this was an out. Maybe the family court judge would see this as a valid reason to set aside the will. Mason kept that thought to himself. “Chill out, Bobby. Let the man finish.”

“We share a grade school with English families in Yoder. Our kids attend first through eighth. After that our teenagers receive what the state likes to call vocational training. They learn to farm, raise food, take care of livestock. Some learn carpentry, dairy farming, or other skills.”

Job propped his elbows on his knees and steepled his long fingers. “We can give these children, our grandchildren, everything they need as far as clothes, food, and such, but my wife’s health does worry me a bit. It’s a hard thing you’re asking. I can see our daughter’s face in every one of these precious children. We prayed for years to have children. God gave us two and they both chose to leave the faith. Now to have grandchildren . . .”

Bobby clamped his mouth shut and wiped at his face with both hands.

No one spoke for a second. Kathy released Donny’s hand. She trotted past Mason, scooted around Mrs. Blanchard’s chair, and stopped in front of Job. “Don’t be sad, Grandpa. We’ll stay if you want us to.” She patted his knee. “When I’m sad I sing songs. That’s what Mommy told me to do. Do you want me to sing you a song?”

"Maybe another time." Job took her hand and squeezed. "What's your name?"

"I'm Kathy. It's really Katherine, but nobody calls me that unless I'm in trouble. I never get in trouble. I'm eight." She pointed at the others. "Should I introduce you to the rest of my brothers and sisters?"

"Give us a minute, Kathy," Mrs. Blanchard intervened. "Please, honey. Go sit with Mason, why don't you? The grown-ups need to work some things out before you get too comfortable."

Kathy appeared puzzled, but she did as she was told. She was like that. Mason put his arm around her and hugged her. "You did good."

She smiled up at him. "That's our grandpa. We never had a grandpa before."

"I know."

Whether Job Keim would claim the title still remained to be seen. He might simply be another in a long line of disappointments for Kathy and the rest of Georgia Keim-Carter's kids.

"Maybe they could come visit, you know, like grandchildren do." Job rubbed already-red eyes. "If they could be placed in a home nearby—"

Dinah set her juice glass on the coffee table with a bang. Her hands flailing, she jabbered a string of words in a language Mason had heard on his construction jobs in Wichita that included Amish workers. Once he'd heard Mom singing a song in that language while planting flowers in their front yard. When he asked her about it, she shrugged and said it was made up. "*My own special language from when I was a kid.*"

At least part of it was true. "What's she saying?"

"She wants the children here. She insists that they be allowed to stay." Cassie sounded as if she approved of her employer's stance.

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“She says she’ll block the door if someone tries to take them away. I believe she would too.”

Dinah still had plenty of get-up-and-go in her skinny body. She wanted the kids. That was a nice change.

Job’s gruff response came more slowly. His hands reached for his wife’s. She accepted his offering, but her words came faster, seeming to fall over each other in an effort to be heard.

A person didn’t have to know the language to understand what was happening. Two people who’d been married forever were pouring their hearts out to each other over something important, something that would change everything. They were in it together.

Mason had never seen such a sight in his life, but he still recognized it. He still wanted it. If the Keims took the kids, he might be able to have it, if the right girl came along at the right time.

No, that was selfish. Stupid and selfish. The kids needed him. “It’s okay. If they don’t think they can do it, the kids can stay with me. I’ll become their guardian. I can take care of them.”

“Mason, we’ve been over this. Your mom’s wishes were specific. And you can’t support six people on what you make in construction.”

“I’ll get a second job.”

“And who’ll supervise the children?”

“Me.” Bobby’s bellowing didn’t help Mason’s case. “Just like always. Nothing will have changed.”

Bobby was a shorter version of Mason. His hair was lighter, more of a burnt-wheat-toast color, but his eyes were just as blue. His shoulders were broad, which was good because he served as Mason’s second in command. He was the master of the microwave. Corn dogs, fish sticks, bagel bites, frozen pizzas, mac ’n’ cheese. His arsenal of easy-to-fix meals was almost as good as Mason’s.

“No sixteen-year-old high school boy should be responsible for

four younger brothers and sisters if there's another option. In this case there is and it's one the court recognizes." Mrs. Blanchard's non-sense approach to the world was born of much experience—or so she'd told Mason a dozen times. "Dinah, you thought Mason was your son. Were you confused? Cassie mentioned a shot. Are you on medication?"

Dinah straightened and withdrew her hand from Job's. "I've had diabetes since I turned twenty-six. My mother and my great-aunt both had it. It runs in the family. I take insulin shots, sometimes twice a day." She adjusted her glasses and smiled firmly. "It has taken its toll. My eyesight is affected and my kidneys, and I have numb hands and feet, but I'm not a doddering old fool. I know Perry is much older now. It was a shock, that's all."

Mrs. Blanchard didn't seem convinced.

"I can help Job and Dinah take care of the children." Cassie ran the words together in her obvious excitement. "I'll move in. I'll do the cooking. I do it now. It's just a matter of cooking a lot more." Her cheeks turned pink as she picked up speed. "Kathy can help. The other kids will help with the cleaning and the laundry and the garden. That's how Plain families work. Most of them have more children than this. We can do it. That is, if you want to have them stay here at the house, Job."

Breathless, she stopped, her hands clasped as if in prayer.

Job's frown deepened. He shook his head. "There's no money to pay you more than we do now, Cassie."

"No need. I'll receive free room and board in exchange for my services. My pay remains the same. It's a perfectly good arrangement for all of us."

Mason swallowed the retort that rose in his throat. He didn't want to do anything to jinx the offer, but the girl was crazy. Cassie obviously had no experience taking care of children. Stay-at-home

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moms, childcare workers, teachers, and nannies should be paid more than pro basketball players and celebrity actors combined. Anybody who'd spent any amount of time taking care of kids deserved a fat paycheck, a vacation in Aruba, and a presidential medal of honor.

Job squinted as if trying to see the future. He scratched his forehead and studied his boots. Dinah's hand crept back into his. He studied their hands for a while. Finally, he took a long breath. "I reckon if it's what Georgia wanted and it's what my wife wants and with Cassie's willingness to help, we should give it a try. We'll see if we can do it. If that is okay with you, Mrs. Blanchard?"

All nine pairs of eyes in the room turned to stare at Mrs. Blanchard. She nibbled on her lower lip. Her fingernails, painted a pearly white, tapped on the file folder in her lap. "I agree with Job that this is a challenging situation. Let me ask this. You say you can provide for them. You are probably in your sixties, Job, retirement age. How do you plan to pay for the needs of five children? It's a chunk of change. What exactly do you do for a living?"

"The Amish don't exactly retire. Usually the children take over the farm or business and the grandparents move into the *dawdy haus*—a little house attached to the main house. We don't have that option, obviously. I still build furniture to be sold on consignment in a Yoder store. With the snow, you probably didn't notice our big stand out at the road, but when the weather's good we sell vegetables, jams, canned goods, baked goods, and some of my wooden toys. Some get sold in stores in town. Tourists love Yoder. We make our clothes and grow much of our food. Our district will help with whatever we need. Including paying for medical care."

"You no longer farm, as such."

"No. It's not possible to make a living from farming here on such a small piece of property. I plant alfalfa, milo, corn, and such

for my needs and to sell to some of the other farms around here, but that's all."

"Understood. This information helps." Her lips pressed together in a thin line, Mrs. Blanchard furiously took notes. Everyone seemed to hold their breath, watching her. Finally, she lifted the pen and used it to shove her glasses up her nose. "Given your daughter's wishes, I have no choice but to agree to this placement. I'll let the children's advocate know. She'll want to visit as well. We'll both want to keep an eye on the situation. Expect visits."

"Yay!" Kathy clapped. "It'll be fun."

Jennie mimicked her big sister. So did Donny and Kevin. Only Bobby seemed gloomy.

Mrs. Blanchard held up her hand. "We had a preliminary hearing in Sedgwick County since that's where the children lived. You live in Reno County. Every Kansas county has different procedures for handling placements in these situations. I'll get back to you on next steps. There will be another hearing at some point for permanent custody. Regardless, it's usually a formality where the parent's wishes are known, the children aren't at risk or in danger, and there are no special needs."

"We don't go to court." The lack of emotion in Job's words matched his stony profile. "It's not our way."

"You'll want legal standing to make decisions about your grandchildren's medical care, and what if the fathers do enter the picture? You'll want to be able to defend your custody. That requires a court hearing."

Job didn't seem convinced, but he nodded. "I'll talk to the bishop about it."

"I have a question." Bobby crossed his arms over his chest. "Does that mean I have to be Amish? No way I'm wearing those clothes."

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A good question. Bobby might only be thinking of the clothes, but Mason knew more about it than his little brother did. Amish was a way of life, but it was also a religion. Mom had taken him to church a few times in the early years, mostly at Easter and Christmas. For all her craziness with booze and men, she still seemed to find comfort in it.

If the kids didn't want to convert to the Amish religion, maybe they would still end up with Mason.

It might be what he wanted, but the same question remained: What was best for them?



Chapter 3

“IT’S A GUT QUESTION.”

Ignoring Tater’s mournful whine, Cassie pulled her ancient hand-me-down suitcase from under her bed and plopped it on top of the Sunshine and Shadow quilt. The doubt in her mother’s words didn’t surprise her. Nor did the dog’s quick understanding that the suitcase meant Cassie was leaving. Tater was smarter than many people, and Mother had a practical, commonsense approach to life that often didn’t leave room for small miracles. The answer to Bobby’s question remained to be seen. “The littlest one is four and the oldest one is sixteen. Plus the grown-up one, Mason.” Mason with the stormy blue eyes, black hair, and wary stare that said he didn’t know who to trust. “They’ve never been around Plain folks. With time, they might learn to love it here. They might learn to love our life.”

“That won’t make them Plain.” Mother folded a dress and laid it in the suitcase. Her thin fingers caressed the faded cotton. “Job and Dinah will be in for more heartbreak if the *kinner* decide to leave like their dochder and suh did. Like us, they wanted more kinner, but Gott had other plans. I hate to see them go through that again.”

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If anyone could relate to the Keims' heartbreak, Mother could. Cassie leaned over to scratch behind Tater's ears. His tail thumped. The brown-and-black German shepherd plopped on the piecemeal rug and lowered his graying muzzle until it lay on his big paws. "You would settle right in the way, wouldn't you?"

Still mulling over her mother's view of the situation, Cassie stepped around him and took another dress from the hook on her bedroom wall. "They can't not try because they're afraid of getting hurt again, can they? Wouldn't it be a special gift if these little ones decided to embrace our faith? Wouldn't it be *wunderbarr* to see them grow up and start families here in our *Gmay*?"

"Spoken like the true optimist that you are." Mother chuckled. The crow's-feet around her gray eyes crinkled and her pale cheeks dimpled in the same place that Cassie's did. "Also spoken like someone who hasn't been tested by the fire yet. I am thankful to Gott that you haven't had to know pain yet, but Scripture says there will be trouble in this world. You've never mothered one child, let alone five."

Her smile faded, replaced by a troubled frown. "These aren't puppies or kittens you can feed and give an old blanket to sleep on next to the fireplace. They're not kittens abandoned by their mother that can be bottle-fed until they're able to fend for themselves." Mother knew Cassie too well. Her penchant for mothering every animal on the farm was among Father's favorite stories told to her aunts and uncles. Every animal had a name. When it came time to slaughter a chicken or a pig, she fell into a funk for days and refused to eat the meat. "Don't fall in love with these kinner, Dochder. Remember they aren't yours and they aren't Plain. It's likely they'll leave as quickly as they came into your life."

Don't be softhearted, Cassie. In other words, don't be yourself.

Mother had an uncanny way of knowing things that never

failed to amaze Cassie. She shrugged and did her best imitation of nonchalance. "Dinah will be there. She may be sickly in body, but she has a sturdy, even fierce, spirit. She'll show me what to do."

Mother was too late. Cassie's heart had a mind of its own. Jennie with her tears. Donny and his pledge to be good. Kathy's determined attempt to cheer up her grandpa. Kevin who said nothing but wiped at his face when he thought no one would see. Bobby was all bluster.

And what about Mason? A feeling, like butterfly wings fluttering against her skin, came and went before she could capture it. Her heart squeezed in painful acknowledgment of the hurt that he wore like armor. Mason had seen more than his share of the world's trouble, and it showed.

"You need to tell your *daed*." Sadness draped itself across Mother's skinny shoulders. "If you're really sure you want to do this."

"*Mudder*, it's a chance to help Dinah and Job have the family they've always wanted. Their hearts were broken when their dochder and suh left."

Cassie had no younger brothers and sisters. This was her chance to practice being a mother. God willing, she would have her own children one day. Lots of them. True, not every couple was blessed with a big family. Not every woman found that one true love. So far no special someone had driven his buggy up to the house to take her for a ride on a crisp spring night. Not yet. She was twenty-two. Most of her friends were married or had beaus. That didn't mean it was too late for her. Whatever God had in store for Cassie, she would embrace it. Starting with these five sweet youngsters.

"Cross that bridge when you come to it, Dochder."

"What bridge?"

"Marriage and motherhood."

Mother saw too much. In order for there to be a marriage,

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there had to be a man, a suitor. Cassie added nightgowns to her suitcase. Tater raised his head, sighed, and let it fall to his crossed paws. Animals loved without limits. People should do the same. “I’m content. I truly am.”

“For now.” Mother swooped in and hugged Cassie, quick and hard. Her body, even though it had grown wirier in recent years, offered the same comfort it always had. “What you’re doing for the Keims is kind and good-hearted. The right thing to do. Just don’t lose yourself there. These jobs aren’t meant to be a substitute for becoming a fraa and having your own family.”

Cassie drew away. She shut the suitcase and zipped it up. How could she explain to Mother the feeling that had sprouted in the vicinity of her heart earlier in the day? A feeling of breathless anticipation that grew and blossomed. Like she’d been waiting for this moment her entire life only to have it arrive suddenly and in circumstances she could never have imagined. “Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“Worrying is a sin. I’m . . . concerned . . . about what your daed will say.”

Mother didn’t give Cassie time to respond. She marched from the bedroom, one of five in the house where Cassie had grown up. Tater close on her heels, Cassie followed. Over the years one room had been turned into a sewing room. One served as a guest bedroom, and a third provided storage. As a child Cassie often wondered why no brothers and sisters slept in those rooms. Mother had patiently answered her questions and turned away—but not before Cassie saw the tears in her eyes. Better not to ask.

Mother led the way to the kitchen where a pot of venison chili simmered on the stove. The spicy scent, mingled with the aroma of freshly baked cinnamon rolls, made Cassie’s mouth water. She poured food in Tater’s bowl and refreshed his water. The dog had

made it clear he should eat when they did. Tonight he turned up his nose and plopped down next to the wood-burning stove.

"Fine, be that way." Cassie went to the cabinet and pulled out three bowls and three saucers. "I'll tell Daed over supper."

"You'll give him indigestion."

"Daed will understand—"

The door swung open, bringing with it a rush of frigid evening air. His breath white puffs of steam, Father strolled in. He had the collar of his black woolen coat turned up and his black hat pulled down. "What's for supper, Fraa? Something warm, I hope."

"Chili, hot and spicy, just the way you like it." Mother hustled to the stove. "Wash up. It'll be ready in two shakes."

Five minutes later they were seated at the table, the praying done, and Daed had a serving bowl-sized portion of chili in front of him. He picked up his spoon and stuck it in the soup. He paused. "What is it I'll understand?"

Taking her time to gather her wits, Cassie stirred her chili, dunked her spoon, and blew on a chunk of venison. "What do you mean?"

"I may be old, but my hearing hasn't gone yet. When I came inside, you two were talking about me. I could tell by the guilty expression on your mudder's face." Father grinned at Mother. "Did you know it's impossible for her to lie? Or keep a secret? At least from me."

"It's true." Mother's chagrined look faded after a second, replaced by a demure smile. "But that is a gut thing, isn't it?"

"It works for me." Father swiped an oversized roll from the basket and picked up a butter knife. "So what is it you're afraid to tell me?"

"I'm not afraid." In a way it was fear. Fear of making her father sad. She never wanted to hurt either of her parents. Their lives had been hard enough already. "It's nothing bad."

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“So spit it out, Dochder. My hair is turning white while I sit here.”

It was an old joke. Father’s head held not a single hair. He’d been bald since his early twenties. Mother said it only made him more her “cup of tea.”

Cassie tried not to think too much about what that meant.

“I’m moving in with the Keims.” Best to spit it out all at once. Of course Father knew Cassie would leave home sooner or later, but in the continued dearth of beaus, he surely expected it to be later. “They need me to help take care of their grandchildren—five of them.”

A frown replaced Father’s smile. He laid his spoon on the table and wiped his mouth with his napkin. “That seems like a decision we should’ve talked about first.”

“It all happened so fast and it seemed like the only solution to their dilemma.” Cassie rushed to explain, outlining the day’s events. “After much back-and-forth, Mrs. Blanchard approved of leaving the kinner with Job and Dinah. The oldest son, Mason, will bring the rest of their belongings later in the week. All they brought was enough clothes for a few days. I think Mason was hoping Job would say no and he could take them home again.”

Even if he brought their clothes, she would need to make clothes more suited to living in an Amish district. Which brought Cassie back to Bobby’s question. How would the boys feel about home-made denim pants with no zippers and long-sleeved blue cotton shirts? What would Kathy think of wearing dresses instead of the flowered leggings, red sweater, and red sneakers she’d worn today?

So many questions. No need to dwell on them. Food, a roof over their heads, and lots of love—those came first. Others would figure out the rest. Cassie’s fingers itched to get to the sewing machine.

"It's a hard row to hoe for those kinner, no doubt." Father picked up his spoon, then laid it down again. "When would you go, then?"

"Tonight. I put a casserole in the oven for supper and helped them make up their beds so they'll be ready for bedtime." Cassie's appetite vanished. She shredded her roll into small pieces. "But Dinah needs my help. I need to be there to cook breakfast in the morning—"

"You're needed. I understand. Finish eating. I'll hitch up the buggy." Father dropped his napkin on the table and scooted back his chair. "You take the cinnamon rolls to the kinner. Your mudder and I shouldn't be eating them anyway. Knowing your mudder, she made way more than two people can eat."

"Daed—"

"Dress warm. It's colder than Alaska out there and we'll probably get more *schnee*."

He stalked over to the rack by the back door, grabbed his coat, and left in the same blustery wind that had ushered him into the kitchen.

Mother gathered up her dishes and headed for the sink.

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine. He just needs time to adjust. We knew you would leave home. All kinner do. It just didn't seem like it would be soon, with you not . . ."

"Not courting."

"It's selfish of us, but we like having you around."

Cassie stared at the mess she'd made with her roll. "I like it too."

Evenings spent putting together jigsaw puzzles or playing checkers. Eating popcorn and drinking hot chocolate by the fireplace in the winter and watermelon and lemonade on the front porch in the summer. Her father reading tidbits to them from

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The Budget newspaper while she and Mother sewed. Father's bad jokes and Mother's long-winded stories from her childhood. Life at the Weaver house had an even, peaceful keel that could be counted on.

That didn't mean she didn't long for the day when she would share a home with a husband and her own children.

It didn't mean this new, unexpected chapter with the Keim grandchildren didn't leave her feeling almost dizzy with anticipation. As if she'd been waiting, simply waiting for something to happen in the two years since her baptism.

God wouldn't have put her smack-dab in the middle of the Keims' lives for no reason. Or maybe this was her consolation prize. A lovely prize, to be sure. He knew what her future held. Husband. Children. One or both or none.

"Just because it happened to your daed and me doesn't mean it will happen to you."

Cassie dropped her spoon. It clattered on the oak floor. Tater raised his head, a soft growl in his throat. He got up and stalked from the kitchen. Cassie rolled her eyes. The dog had far too much attitude. "You have to stop doing that."

"Doing what?" Mother ladled chili into a plastic storage bowl. "I didn't do a thing."

"Reading my mind."

"It doesn't take a mind reader to know you worry about having boplin. Any woman in your shoes would." Mother stuck the plastic container in the refrigerator and returned to the counter. "Don't let it keep you from opening yourself up to the possibilities."

The possibilities. Joseph Hostetler had approached her once after a singing. Cassie pleaded a headache. He never asked again.

Other lost opportunities paraded past her mind's eye in slow motion.

Love's Dwelling

"I'm not afraid."

Not much. Maybe those weren't lost opportunities. Maybe she was supposed to wait. "*For such a time as this.*"

God had a plan. She couldn't wait for it to unfold.

