

The
Warmth
of
Sunshine

AMISH BLESSINGS

ZONDERVAN®

KELLY IRVIN



ZONDERVAN

The Warmth of Sunshine

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Glossary of Deutsch*

aenti, aentis: aunt, aunts

beheef dich: behave yourself

bobblemoul: blabbermouth

bopli, boplin: baby, babies

bruder, brieder: brother, brothers

bruderkind, bruderkinne: niece or nephew, nieces or nephews

bu, buwe: boy, boys

bussi, bussis: cat, cats

daadi: grandfather

daed: father

danki: thank you

dawdy haus: attached home for grandparents when they retire

dochder, dechder: daughter, daughters

dummkopp, dummkopp: dummy, blockhead, dummies, blockheads

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

reception

eldre: parents

Englisch, Englischer: English or non-Amish

eppies: cookies

Es dutt mer leed: I am sorry

faeriwell: good-bye

fehla: sin

Glossary

fraa: wife

gaul, geil: horse, horses

geil un weggel: horse and buggy

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

gern gschehme: you're welcome

Gmay: church district

Gott: God

groosmammi: grandmother

guder mariye: good morning

gut: good

gut nacht: good night

heess: hot

hund, hunde: dog, dogs

jah: yes

kaffi: coffee

kapp: prayer cap or head covering worn by Amish women

kind, kinner: child, children

kinnskind, kinnskinner: grandchild, grandchildren

kuss, boss: kiss (singular noun)

maed, maede: girl, girls

mammi: grandma, affectionate form

mann: husband

meidung: shunning, excommunication from the Amish church

mudder: mother

narrisch: foolish, silly

nee: no

onkel: uncle

Ordnung: written and unwritten rules in an Amish district

rumspringa: period of “running around” for Amish youth before

Glossary

they decide whether they want to be baptized into the Amish faith

schtinkich faul: awfully (or stinking) lazy

schweschder, schwesdchdre: sister, sisters

sei so gut: please (be so kind)

sub: son

un: and

vun: of, from

Wer iss sei?: Who is she?

Wie bischt du?: How are you?

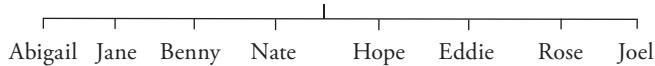
wunderbarr: wonderful

*The German dialect commonly referred to as Pennsylvania Dutch is not a written language and varies depending on the location and origin of the Amish 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.

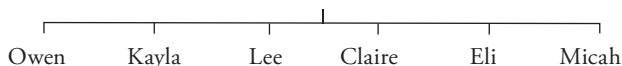
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Featured Families

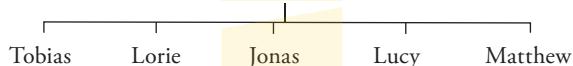
Freeman and Lorene Bontrager



Chester Kurtz (widower)



Mary Wagner (widow)



Bryan (bishop) and Esther Miller

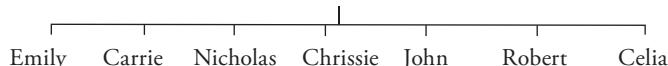


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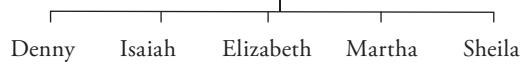
Samuel (deacon) and Anita Schrock



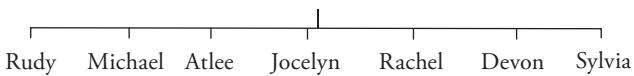
Delbert (minister) and Loretta Beachy



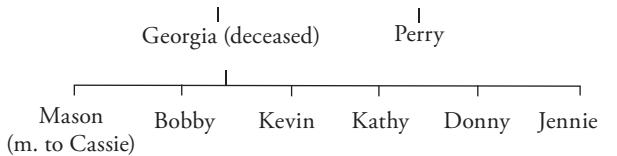
John and Rachel Christner



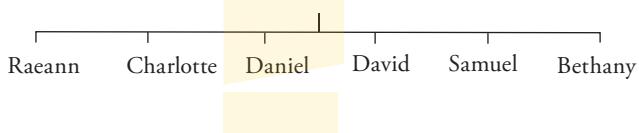
Joshua and Molly Hershberger



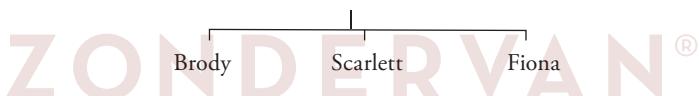
Job Keim (widower) and Dinah (deceased)



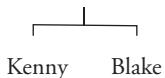
Wayne and Nelda Graber



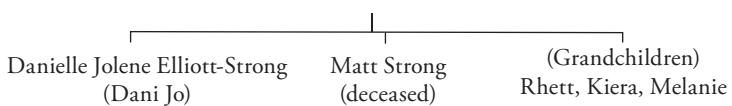
Heather and Dan Hanson (divorced)



Eric and Susie Waters (divorced)



Helen and Miles Elliott (deceased) (grandparents)



Chapter 1

TRACTOR ENGINES MADE MUSIC. EVEN IF ONLY ABIGAIL BONTRAGER could hear it. The deep-throated rumble of Grandpa's old tractor accompanied Abigail on Highway 96, the quickest route from the Yoder restaurant where she waitressed to her parents' farm outside Haven, six miles away. Others might fuss at the noise, but the sound served as a cheerful song to her ears after eight hours of dishes clattering, silverware clinking, and the steady buzz of mostly tourists talking at the Buggies and Bonnets restaurant.

Diesel fumes carried on black smoke perfumed the air in stark contrast to the mingled aromas of fresh bread, pot roast, fried chicken, and chocolate cream pie baked to perfection. Yep. The smell was Plain perfume. Plus it reminded her of family. When Grandpa and Grandma moved into the *dawdy haus*, Grandpa no longer needed the tractor.

Reveling in the sameness of it all, Abigail sang "Bringing in the Sheaves" at the top of her lungs to keep herself awake. The old John Deere's vibrations loosened the aching muscles in her shoulders, arms, and legs. The thirty-two dollars in tips tucked into her canvas bag—along with the satisfaction of a job well done—more than made up for it. Other than dumping a piece of lemon meringue pie into a

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customer's lap, today had been a good day. The money would help with expenses at home, and she would set aside a small portion in her nest egg for that day when she would set up housekeeping with her future husband.

Not too distant future, God willing. *Sei so gut, Gott.*

The image of towheaded Owen Kurtz with the bluest eyes in all of Haven floated in her mind. Stocky body, deep tan, calloused hands. Heat that had nothing to do with the Kansas late spring sun on her face warmed her. They'd taken a few buggy rides together. He hadn't even held her hand yet, but something about him kept her awake at night, imagining the day he would.

A horn blared. Abigail smiled and waved at the impatient truck driver as he passed. Amazingly, he waved back. Mother said the high road had the best view. Mother was always right.

Abigail turned onto the gravel road that led to the farm. The winter wheat was heading in the field on her right. On her left the shorn plants indicated Father and the boys had put up the first cutting of alfalfa. Early May's sunny days had been kind to their crops. *Danki, Gott.*

A dark-blue SUV sat at a precarious angle on the curve of the driveway in front of the sprawling house she'd grown up in. Someone had parked as if unsure of the proper etiquette. Or poised for a quick getaway. English guests for dinner? Mealtimes tended to be rowdy at the Bontrager homestead. Abigail's three younger sisters would have it under control, but the oldest sibling should do her fair share. She rushed to park the tractor in the barn, where Doolittle greeted her with his usual tail-wagging enthusiasm.

"I'm glad to see you too." She brushed back the long black bangs that hung in his eyes. "Did you defend the fortress from grizzly bears and four-eyed monsters while I was gone? *Gut hund, gut hund.*"

"Woof, woof."

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It was a family joke. Doolittle mostly lived up to his name. “Indeed! You’re the best do-little dog around.”

Bobbing left and right to avoid tripping over the furry mountain of a dog as he ran circles around her, Abigail traipsed up the steps and through the back door into the kitchen. “*Mudder*, I’m here.”

The aroma of chicken and onions simmering greeted her. But not her mother. An enormous pot of chicken soup bubbled on the stove. It bubbled so hard it had splattered the stove top. Hard, burned spots marred its surface. Chopped raw potatoes, carrots, and celery covered the cutting board next to the stove. Mother had stopped in the middle of making one-pot chicken stew. She called it her favorite—because it made a ton and it was filling—a must with four growing boys to feed. A pan of fresh-baked soda biscuits cooled on the trivet next to the board. Two peach pies shared the open window’s sill. “Mudder? Jane? Rose? Hope?”

Doolittle meandered toward the pies.

“Don’t you dare.” Abigail shook her finger at him. He ducked his graying head and whined deep in his throat. She turned down the stove’s flame and headed for the great room that served as both dining and living room. Doolittle followed, of course. The murmur of voices reached her. “Mudder?”

The murmuring ceased.

Mother sat in the pine rocker next to the empty limestone fireplace. She’d chosen the chair farthest from where an auburn-haired English woman perched on the sofa. Abigail’s sisters were nowhere to be seen. Why weren’t they in the kitchen?

The woman rose. She held out both hands. “You must be Abigail.”

Mother moaned an awful, guttural sound. “Please, don’t. Let me.”

Doolittle rushed to her side. He whined again. He nosed her hands in her lap. She patted him without seeming to notice.

“Hello, I’m back.” Silly thing to say. Of course they could see that.

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How did this stranger know her name? “The chicken was boiling. I turned down the flame.”

“I forgot . . . I forgot about it.” Mudder continued to smooth Doolittle’s thick fur. “This is Heather Holcomb, now Heather Hanson. She’s the daughter of the Holcombs who were neighbors to *Mammi* and *Daadi* way back before they moved into your *onkel* Warren’s dawdy haus.”

The Holcombs were nice. Grandma and Grandpa used to take them gingerbread men at Christmas and check on them after storms. They returned the favor by supplying cranberry-nut bread and offers of rides when the roads were bad during the winter. “Why aren’t the girls taking care of supper?”

“I sent them upstairs.”

That made no sense. Abigail opened her mouth.

“You look just like me.” The woman took two faltering steps toward Abigail. “I always imagined you would.”

Abigail looked nothing like her. Her hair was bobbed below her ears, while Abigail’s waist-length hair—neatly coiled in a bun under her *kapp*—was more blonde than strawberry. Sure, the woman had blue eyes, too, but lots of people had them. Mother and Father did. So did Jane. People always thought her younger sister and Abigail were twins even though they were born exactly eleven months apart.

Abigail peeked at her mother. Tears rolled down her plump face. Mother never cried. She found silver linings in every situation. When Grandma Evie died, Mother said she’d been whisked away to a better world. When lightning struck the barn and burned it to the ground, it was old and ramshackle and an eyesore. Besides, barn raisings were fun—the women laughing, talking, and working side by side to feed the men.

“What’s this about, Mudder? What does she mean, I look like her?”

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“I’m sorry. We should’ve told you. Your *daed* and I meant to tell you, but we could never find the right time.” Mother’s voice cracked on the word *father*. Her nose was running. She swiped at her face with her sleeve. Another thing Mother would never do. “The older you grew, the less it seemed to matter. You’re ours. All ours.”

Of course she was. Who else’s would she be? “Tell me what?”

Mrs. Hanson stumbled forward, grabbed Abigail’s hands, and pulled her against her body, all bony angles and sharp points. Not anything like Mother’s round cushion of a body. “You’re my daughter,” she whispered into Abigail’s ear. Her breath tickled. “I’m your mother.”



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Chapter 2

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CEASED TO MAKE SENSE. ABIGAIL RIPPED herself from Mrs. Hanson's grip. "Mudder, *wer iss sei?*"

"Mudder—that's me." The woman reached for Abigail again, caught herself, and ran her hands through her hair instead. "It's been twenty years since I've lived in Haven, but I still remember some of the words. I'm your mudder."

"That's the right word, but no, you're not." Mother shook her head so hard her kapp shifted. "You're not her mother, Heather. We have an agreement. You gave her to Freeman and me. You left."

"My parents made me do it." Heather spoke to Mother, but her beseeching gaze enveloped Abigail. "They forced me to break up with my boyfriend and sent me to live with my aunt in Abilene. I was sixteen. They didn't give me a choice."

The room shrank to a narrow funnel shape that spun wildly. Abigail put her hands to her ears. Her heartbeat cranked up to a hundred miles an hour. The chicken salad sandwich she'd eaten for lunch rose in her throat. "*Nee, nee. Mei naame iss Abigail Bontrager. Dochder vun Freeman un Lorene Bontrager.*"

"Of course you're Abigail. Of course you're our daughter. Nothing will change that. Not ever." Mother hopped from the rocker and

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sped across the room. Doolittle, growling low in his throat, followed. Mother slid an arm around Abigail. Her fingers were cold. "You need to go, Heather. We had an agreement."

Heather ignored her and Doolittle, even though the dog eyed her like fresh meat.

Gut hund.

Murmuring to herself, Heather dug a billfold from an enormous leather bag. From the billfold she produced a laminated photo yellowed with age. "I bet this is the only baby photo of you that exists. Me and you. Together." She held it out. "I begged the nurse to take it before Freeman and Lorene showed up at the hospital."

Her hands were shaking. Abigail closed her eyes and opened them. Heather's offering still hung in the air between them. She blinked away unbelieving tears and took it. Heather had changed in twenty years. At the time of Abigail's birth, if the woman was to be believed, Heather had long, curly red hair. Despite being a new mother, her arms and face were thin. She wasn't smiling. The baby wasn't much more than a fluff of reddish-blonde hair wrapped in a pink receiving blanket.

"You were small. Five pounds, four ounces. That's because you came three weeks early." Heather spoke fast, her voice filled with a fierce desire to get the words out, as if she'd been saving them up for a long time. "I sang 'You Are My Sunshine' to you as soon as they laid you on my chest. You stopped crying and stared at me wide-eyed. Like 'I know you. You're my mommy.'"

Abigail turned over the photo. On the back someone had scrawled the words *Me and my baby, born at 3:34 a.m. on February 14.*

Abigail's birthday. Valentine's Day. Lots of people had that birthday.

Her fingers let go of the photo. It plummeted through time to the pine floor. Heather swooped down and retrieved it. "I can see why

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you'd be upset. I'd hoped Lorene and Freeman had told you about me." She slipped the photo back into the billfold. The billfold went back into the purse as if this action somehow assured her it would be safe. "I wrote letters. I told them I was coming."

"And I wrote and asked you *not* to come." Mother edged between Abigail and Heather. Doolittle growled and did the same. "I reminded you of our agreement. Abigail is our daughter. The adoption papers are in order."

"That doesn't mean I can't know my—can't know Abigail."

"What purpose would that serve?"

At the sound of Father's voice thundering from behind her, Abigail turned. He had that look. The one she always tried to avoid. Red cheeks. Wrinkled forehead. Woolly black eyebrows drawn up. His full lips parted so his slightly crooked teeth showed above his John the Baptist beard.

His woodshed-whipping look.

"Abigail has a right to know who she really is."

"I know who I am." At least she had until a few minutes earlier. Now her world twirled airborne like a tree ripped from the ground, roots and all, by a tornado. "I left my bag in the tractor. I'll be back."

Abigail broke free of her mother's grasp, dodged Heather, and darted toward the door. Doolittle tried to follow. "Nee, stay, hund."

She needed to be away from these people—strangers, all of them.

She needed to be with people she could trust.

Chapter 3

“ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME?”

The whine in his younger brother’s voice forced Owen Kurtz to shift his attention from the mare. Her restlessness suggested she would deliver her foal in the next few hours, if not minutes. “I’m listening. I’m also trying to make sure Daisy gets situated. She’s all over the place.”

Lee snorted. He sounded like barnyard livestock himself when he did that. “She’s a mare. This is her second foal. She knows what she’s doing. She doesn’t need your help. What’s going on? Why do you have that goofy grin on your face? You usually come home from work dragging like someone spit a big loogie in your *kaffi*.”

“Do not.” The smell of horse manure, dirty hay, and musty air calmed Owen’s spirit. The barn—or any place on his family’s farm—did that. Farming soothed his soul. Not building prefab structures with his father’s crew. “It just takes me a minute to throw off the day when I get home, that’s all.”

“But not today.” Lee pulled his straw hat back on his crazy wild hair and leaned against the stall gate as if to settle in for a long

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conversation. That was Lee. He could stretch a single thought into a daylong discussion. He would make a good bishop someday, if God decided to choose him. “What happened today?”

Nothing happened. Not yet. But there was still time. If Daisy would get busy, Owen would be done here in time to slip over to Abigail’s house and take her for a buggy ride. He’d only driven her home from the singings a few times, but they’d had fun. She was a sweet girl—nervous and awkward—but sweet. Why he made her nervous, he couldn’t imagine. Kayla insisted they were right for each other, but Abigail was like another sister—until recently.

Abigail had been a fixture in his life forever. His sister’s friend. His friend, if Plain girls and boys could be friends. His feelings had been like a fine mist that grew into a sweet, steady rain until suddenly they became a deluge. When his fingers brushed hers or their knees accidentally touched in the buggy, a sudden, fierce thunderstorm ensued.

All of which had to be guarded behind the locked, thick doors of his heart until he could be sure she felt the same.

God’s plan for Abigail and for Owen surely meant for this meandering path to lead somewhere. On the other hand, a man who thought he knew God’s plan was surely in for a headfirst dive into an abyss that appeared in his path. If anybody knew that, Owen and his family did.

Still, a man had to swing for the fence and be prepared to accept the curveballs life threw at him. Baseball was the best sport bar none.

“There it is again. That loopy, goofy grin.” Lee chortled. He pointed his skinny index finger with the bruised, black nail from a misfire with a hammer at Owen. “This has something to do with Abigail, doesn’t it? Come on, courting her must be like kissing your *schweschder*.”

“There’s been no kissing.” *Not yet.*

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“Why not?”

“Lee!”

“Well?”

“Well, nothing. A man doesn’t kiss and tell. Even if he’s not.”
Especially a Plain man. “How are things with Jocelyn?”

Turnabout was fair play. Lee had been courting Jocelyn Hershberger since he turned sixteen six months earlier. They had a complicated relationship according to Lee’s long-winded descriptions. Owen kept his courtship stories—of which there were few—to himself.

“Don’t try to change the subject.”

“I’m not. You want to talk courting. How are things coming between you and Jocelyn?”

“That’s between Jocelyn and me.”

“Which is exactly what I’m saying about Abigail and me. Nothing to tell, anyway.”

“But there’s a spark, right?”

Owen turned at the sound of Kayla’s voice. His sister loped through the barn doors. Kayla never walked anywhere. She raced, she rushed, she ran. Just watching her made Owen tired. “That’s none of your business.”

“Help me saddle a horse real quick.” Kayla pulled the hood of her rain slicker over her head and buttoned the top button. “Daed says Abigail is out on the road in a buggy. He was turning in the drive and saw her. He stopped to ask what she was doing. She said she was driving by. But when he turned back, she was still sitting there in the rain and thunder and lightning.”

“She comes here all the time. Why wouldn’t she come on in?”

“I have no idea.” Kayla grabbed a saddle from the saddle horse and thrust it at Owen. “Knowing Abigail, she doesn’t want to bother anyone, or she’s afraid Daed will think she came to see you this time.”

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“Why would Daed think that?” Owen placed the saddle back on its resting place. “It’ll be faster to walk up there. I’ll go with you. Daed doesn’t know about Abigail and me.”

“Sure he does. He knows everything that goes on with us.” Kayla spun around and headed for the door. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll keep Daisy company.” Lee straightened. “If the Bontragers need anything, let us know.”

That went without saying. Owen grabbed a raincoat from a peg on the wall and followed Kayla at an easy jog. Her legs were almost as long as his. She was built like their mother, tall for a woman and slender. He slid carefully past that image. Thoughts of his mother didn’t hurt like they once had.

“And where was Daed? Why was he out in this weather?”

“Where do you think?” Kayla threw the question back at him without slowing down. “He wasn’t at work this late.”

Which meant in all likelihood he’d stopped at the Wagner house on his way home from work. Mary Wagner had been widowed less than a year. She had five young kids. She needed help. No one begrudged her that. Least of all Owen.

His dad had been father and mother to his six children for six years now. Seeing Mary surely gave Dad relief from the loneliness he undoubtedly faced day in and day out. *Danki, Gott, for that.*

A wild wind filled with a fine mist of cold rain slapped Owen’s face. Kansas weather could turn on a man in a matter of minutes. He picked up speed. The mist turned to fat, heavy drops that splatted against his straw hat. Wind whipped his skin. He shoved the hat down hard to keep it from blowing away.

There she was. Shoulders slumped, head down, Abigail clung to the reins on the seat of her father’s buggy at the corner where Haven Road met East Cable Road. Kayla beat him to the buggy by a few steps. “Abigail? Abigail!”

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Her head came up. “Kayla. I’m sorry. You’re all wet. Owen, you didn’t have to come. I was just leaving.”

“No, you’re not. You’re coming up to the house, you silly goose.” Kayla hauled herself into the buggy. “Why are you sitting out here in the rain? You’ve been up to our house a thousand times.”

“I needed to talk to you.” Abigail swiped sodden strands of loose hair the wind had coaxed from under her kapp from her face. “But then I couldn’t. I couldn’t talk to anyone. I can’t make heads or tails out of anything.”

“Out of what?” Owen moved around to the other side of the buggy. “Scoot over. I’ll drive.”

Abigail did as she was told. Kayla put her arm around her friend while Owen picked up the reins. Lightning crackled across the black sky. A few seconds later thunder rumbled. Both girls jumped. “It’s okay. It wasn’t that close. We’ll get you up to the house, and Kayla will make you some tea. Abigail, are your folks okay? Your *brieder* and *schwesdchdre*?”

“They’re not my *eldre*. They’re not my *brieder* and *schwesdchdre*.”

She was talking nonsense. Owen snapped the reins. The horse picked up speed. “I don’t understand.”

“I can’t talk in front of your daed. He’ll think it was wrong of me to have come. It’s a family matter. My family.”

“We’ll find another dry, quiet place then.”

The farrowing building was empty at the moment.

Abigail didn’t protest. In fact, she didn’t say anything more. *Gott, please help her. Help me help her. Whatever it is, let us help her overcome it together.*

Because that’s what friends did. With time, they could be more than friends, but for now this was about Abigail, a family friend.

Once in the farrowing building, he lit two lanterns while Kayla helped Abigail down from the buggy and tucked a blanket around her shoulders. The two women settled onto a stack of feed bags.

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Owen set a lantern on a workbench near the stalls where the sows gave birth to their litters. Abigail's expression was unfathomable. She didn't speak. The howling wind shook the rafters. Bits of hay and dust flitted in light cast by the kerosene lantern. Rain pounded against the roof. A sound like rocks beating the wood added to the rain's staccato. Hail. There went the strawberries and tomatoes the girls had planted only a few days earlier. And their flower garden.

He glanced at Kayla. Her thin eyebrows rose and she shrugged. She had no idea what to do next either. "Would it help if Owen left? Would you rather just tell me?"

"Nee. He can stay. It affects him too. At least I think it does. I'm just trying to puzzle it all out." Abigail took a long, shuddering breath. "I'm adopted."

Of all the statements Owen had anticipated, this had not been one that came to mind. "Nee, you're not."

Kayla scowled at him. She patted Abigail's shoulder. "How do you know? What happened?"

Abigail tugged the blanket tighter. She looked like a half-drowned kitten. Even so, nothing could make her any less pretty. It would be so nice to have the right to pat her face dry and brush her strawberry-blonde hair back under her kapp.

Owen jerked his gaze to the lantern in his hand. He set it on the shelf and settled on a stool across from where the girls sat.

"My *real* mother came to see me. Her name is Heather Hanson. She drove down from Abilene to meet me."

"Lorene raised you. Your whole life. She's your real mother." If only he could hold her hand. Hug her. Owen had daydreamed about doing both, but not under these circumstances. "You're the spitting image of your mudder. You and Jane are practically twins. Everyone says so. Your parents have never said anything about adoption, have they?"

“Nee. Not a word.” Abigail patted her face dry with the blanket. “Nothing about us is the same. She has red hair. She wore flowered leggings, a purple blouse, and sandals. Her toenails were painted pink. She’s *Englisch*.”

English. Everything Owen knew about Abigail turned into a mess of squiggles he couldn’t decipher. The story they’d just begun to write ebbed from the pages, the ink dark and smeared. “It doesn’t matter. You’re not Englisch. You’re Plain. You’ve been baptized. You chose the faith. She can’t just show up and change that.”

“Can’t she?” Abigail straightened and pulled away from Kayla. “She showed up today because she regrets giving me up for adoption. She wants to get to know me. She wants me to get to know her.”

“Twenty years later? Just because she wants it, doesn’t mean you have to have anything to do with her.” Kayla stood and paced the hard-packed dirt floor that separated Owen and Abigail. “You have a choice. She can’t force you to do anything. After all, she gave you up.”

Abigail flinched. Kayla’s words might be true, but they hurt. She didn’t know how to soften her thoughts, only to fling them about like arrows from a bow. They’d never had to pick their words carefully around Abigail. Navigating such a painful revelation changed that.

Owen breathed in the odor of swine, dirt, and hay. “I’m sorry. That must hurt. Knowing she gave you up before she even knew you.”

“I can’t have it both ways, can I?” Abigail studied her hands as if they belonged to a stranger. “I can’t be angry at her for giving me away at the same time I’m angry at her for wanting to know me.”

“However you feel, you feel.” Owen floundered for words. He was a farmer and a reluctant builder of engineered structures. What did he know about feelings? Other than how hard they were to keep

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locked up in cages. He'd been doing it since he was sixteen and his mother passed away suddenly, inexplicably, in the middle of the night. "Feelings just are."

His father would call that an unfortunate truth. Everyone wanted to obey Scripture that said, *Don't worry, obey, be humble, be kind, be joyful, be loving.* But sometimes feelings got in the way because humans were born with them.

"We are supposed to accept what happens to us as *Gott's plan.*" Abigail's thoughts seemed to be following the same path Owen's traversed. "Even if we don't understand—and I surely don't understand why this is happening to me."

"What exactly happened? Did she say how you ended up with your parents—with Freeman and Lorene?"

Abigail shared the bare facts she'd learned before she rushed from her parents' house. "I couldn't stay one more minute. I needed to think. I needed to figure out how to feel. It was like waking up and discovering I'd changed into a different person overnight. It's like the world has gone dark. I'm having trouble seeing. I'm afraid to move for fear I'll run into something."

"I'm sorry. I can imagine how hard this must be." Could he really? He hadn't suddenly acquired a new parent. Or two parents. "Did she say who the boyfriend was? Your biological father?"

"No. We didn't get that far. I ran. I shouldn't have." Abigail shrugged the blanket from her shoulders and folded it with precise movements. She handed it to Kayla. "It was wrong of me to run away from my parents—from Lorene and Freeman. I should go back. I just needed a moment to breathe. With people who won't think of me differently. You won't think of me differently, will you?"

Her gaze sideswiped Owen, bounced to the wall, and back to the floor.

"Of course not." Kayla laid the blanket aside. She grabbed Abigail's

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hand. “Don’t be silly. You’re my best friend. Owen is your . . . I don’t know what, but he’s my *bruder* and he’s smart. He would never be mean to you. I wouldn’t let him.”

“You’re adopted, not a leper. Lots of people are adopted.” Owen’s stomach dropped in a sickening lurch so like the one that signaled a terrible thing was about to happen and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Abigail’s life had changed from one moment to the next. He of all people understood how that felt. “It’ll take time, but you’ll figure out how to handle it and go on being you.”

Whoever that turned out to be. Whether that was Plain or English. Would she consider leaving her Plain life? Owen’s heart squeezed painfully at the thought. His fledgling feelings for Abigail couldn’t be allowed to matter. Not now.

“We’ll help.” Kayla tugged Abigail to her feet. “Come on. Let’s go into the house for some hot tea. We’re in this together, right, Owen?”

“Definitely.”

Abigail’s eyes were huge and dark in the lantern light. Cornflower blue turned to indigo. “I appreciate that, but I need to figure out who I am. No one can do that for me.”

No matter how new it was, the looming loss of hope, the loss of sweet anticipation, the loss of possibilities turned his world from the lush green of Kansas’s landscape to a dry wasteland, a desert thirsty for rain that wasn’t coming. “Understood. Just know we’re—I’m—here if you need help.”

Owen doused the lanterns and led the women out into the howling wind and driving rain. They bent double in the struggle to make progress against its fierce power. Rain pelted Owen’s face so hard he could barely see. He ducked to avoid tree branches turned into flying arrows. If either woman spoke, he couldn’t hear them. The pain in Abigail’s voice as she had told her story filled his ears. The

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hurt and confusion on her face accompanied him on the road to the house.

Not even a raging storm could inflict the kind of damage a woman named Heather Hanson had wrought in a few scant minutes. Buildings could be repaired and replaced. A young woman's world was much harder to fix.



ZONDERVAN®

Chapter 4

WHICH WAS SCARIER? THE STORM OR FATHER'S HULKING BODY standing on Chester Kurtz's porch in the pouring rain? At first glance he could have been an enormous bear in the black slicker that covered his frame from shoulders to the ground. His growl added to the illusion. Abigail brushed past Owen and Kayla and trudged up the steps. "I'm here, Daed."

He whirled. His hat was missing. His thick, black curls and long, unruly beard flailed in the wind. "I came to get you home, but then I saw a funnel cloud touch down on the road. We need to take cover."

Lightning crackled overhead. A clap of thunder rent the air. The horse hitched to his buggy whinnied, a high, nervous sound.

"I'm sorry I ran away."

"We'll talk about it at home." He turned back and pounded on the door. "Chester, open up."

The front door flew open. Chester Kurtz loomed. "No need to break the door down."

"A tornado touched down west of the road."

Chester opened the door wider. "We'd better get to the basement then."

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“Don’t worry about your horse and buggy.” Owen dashed back into the rain. “I’ll stable them and meet you in the basement.”

“What about Mudder and the *kinner*?” Fear burned a trail down Abigail’s spine. She’d run away, and now Mother and the kids were alone in the path of a tornado. *Your fault. Your fault.* “We have to go home.”

“It’s too late for that.” Father tugged her into the Kurtzes’ living room. Their raincoats dripped steadily onto the welcome rug. He didn’t seem to notice. “Your mudder knows what to do. They’ll be safe in our basement.”

Please, Gott.

The Kurtzes had their emergency plan well in hand. A few scant minutes later, Abigail followed Kayla and her siblings down the stairs into their cavernous basement filled with canned goods, extra firewood, and furniture odds and ends. The atmosphere was more like an impromptu frolic than an emergency sheltering. Kayla and her sister, Claire, lit half a dozen kerosene lanterns and a handful of homemade apple-cinnamon-scented candles, giving the room a cheery air. Lee snatched a pack of Uno cards from the shelf and settled at a card table with Eli and Micah, the youngest siblings. The family’s two dogs sniffed the corners, then sprawled at his feet.

“Why are you here? What were you and Kayla whispering about? Is it about Owen?” Claire employed a stage whisper that echoed against the four walls. “Lee says Owen was in a dither because he—”

“Hush, Claire!” Lee aimed and let a card fly like a Frisbee at his sister’s forehead. “Everyone can hear you.”

Owen grabbed old towels from a stack on a shelf next to rows of canned peaches, cherries, green beans, pickles, tomatoes, and a bounty of other produce. He passed them around to Kayla, Abigail’s father, and finally Abigail.

Trying to telegraph her feelings with her eyes, she accepted his

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offering. He nodded, his expression encouraging. She wiped her face and neck. The cool, dry basement didn't help. Shivers assailed her body. She removed her raincoat and hung it on a peg next to several others.

"*Danki* for sharing your basement with us." Father directed his words to Chester, who sprawled in one of several lawn chairs placed in a horseshoe beyond the card table. "Much as I'd like to get home, it didn't seem smart to try to outrun a tornado."

"The more the merrier." Chester waved to the empty chairs. "Pull up a seat. My dochder brought thermoses of hot chocolate. They can make a party from just about any occasion."

Father's gaze traveled to Abigail. Nothing could be said in front of the entire Kurtz family. That was certain. "Don't mind if I do."

His bleak stare did nothing to assuage the ache that filled up the spot that had once held Abigail's heart. He should have told her. Mother should have told her. Yet he was still the man who had been her North Star since she was old enough to remember sharing his lap with Jane while he read Scripture by a roaring fire before bedtime.

Sometimes he sang hymns in low, tuneless Pennsylvania German, his voice lulling her to sleep. Sometimes he told stories from the *Martyrs Mirror* or stories of his childhood in Ohio. Sometimes he said nothing at all, letting his girls rest against his chest, the beating of his heart soothing them.

Now, shoulders sloped as if suddenly old, he turned and strode over to Chester, who immediately launched into a replay of the weather and speculation regarding what repairs would be needed in the morning.

"Your daed has his exploding face on." Claire wrinkled her nose, blew up her cheeks, and drew her eyebrows together in an effort to demonstrate Father's infamous you're-in-trouble face. "What's he mad about?"

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“Just you never mind.” Kayla elbowed her sister, younger by two years but taller by two inches. “Give Abby a chance to breathe.”

Only her friends called her Abby. Father didn’t like the nickname. He thought Abigail was much nicer—so did Mother—and it was her given name. What would Heather have named her? Or maybe Heather picked the name Abigail. With a sidewise glance at the men-folk, Abigail drew farther into the farthest corner of the basement. A spiderweb brushed her face, sending a shiver scurrying across her neck. “What did Lee mean that Owen was in a dither?”

“Lee is full of hot air.” Kayla rolled her blue eyes. “He thinks he knows way more than he does, and it makes him feel important. Owen wanted to take you for a ride tonight, that’s all.”

Abigail bit her lower lip to keep from groaning. She’d been too busy caterwauling about her problems to even think about what all this would mean to Owen. In a few short hours, everything had changed. He might not want to take a ride with her anymore. The future was full of shadowy ifs, shifting maybes, and uncertain probabilities. What man wanted to tangle with that? It’d be like trying to hug fog. “I’m sure he’s having second thoughts about that now.”

“Not Owen. He’s crazy about you. Are you having second thoughts?”

“About him?”

“About anything.” Kayla held up both hands, fingers wide, as if encompassing the whole world. “Owen, your vows, being Plain.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. No.” She’d had her legs knocked out from under her. She might have to learn how to walk and think and talk all over again. “I don’t know. It just happened.”

It happened to someone else. No, she was someone else. An imposter in her own body. An English girl masquerading as a Plain one.

Another thought careened into the first one. Maybe this being

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English explained everything. Maybe it explained her awkwardness. Her lack of interest in baking and sewing. The tough piecrusts and bread that didn't rise. The uneven hems and scraggly embroidery stitches. The accident-prone Abigail was never supposed to be Plain. Maybe it explained why she never quite fit in.

So why did she fit in fine with Owen? *Ach, Owen.* The one place where she could be herself happened to be on that buggy seat next to him.

Abigail peered over Kayla's shoulder to where he sat with his back to them. His blond hair hung in wet clumps under his straw hat. As usual he needed a haircut. His right steel-toed boot tapped on the floor in a steady rhythm. Her father likely made him nervous. He probably was chewing on the inside of his cheek and nodding. An endearing picture of a man who needed a wife to take care of him.

I'm so sorry, Owen.

Why was she sorry? She didn't do this to him. It was done to her. Because the imposter Abigail had sold him a bill of goods. *What you see is not what you get. All sales final.*

Darkness cloaked the damage done by the storm by the time Abigail and the others emerged from the basement an hour later into the rain-cooled, humid night air. Tree limbs littered the front yard. A thick layer of leaves and twigs carpeted the porch and steps. The Kurtz house was intact and the barn still stood. A closer inspection would have to wait until morning light.

Father hustled Abigail out the door with a quick thanks to Chester for letting them ride out the storm here. They had to get home to make sure Mother and the others had weathered the storm safely. Owen again fetched the horse and buggy.

"I'll swing back by tomorrow with one of my *buwe* to pick up the other *geil un weggel*."

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“I can drive it home.” It would save him a trip the next day and provide Abigail with an excuse for postponing the conversation they were bound to have on the ride home. “I’ll follow you.”

“Nee.” Father stalked out to meet Owen.

Her stomach tied in knots, Abigail accepted a quick hug from Kayla and followed. Owen handed over the reins to Father. He turned, his back to her father, smiled, and nodded at Abigail.

He had such a sweet, encouraging smile. The dark clouds didn’t seem as dark. Abigail climbed into the buggy and looked down at him. “Danki.”

He raised his hand in a quick salute. “Take care.”

“*Take care.*” His way of saying he cared?

Abigail faced forward and settled back on her seat. Maybe Father would save his lecture for when they arrived at the house. Then he and Mother could join forces.

Abigail should say she was sorry for running out on them. She was sorry. But she hadn’t committed a lie of omission. She hadn’t concealed a critical piece of information from people she professed to love. She hadn’t allowed a stranger to deliver this news in their living room.

“Your mudder was worried.”

He’d made it all the way to the main road before he spoke. Abigail swallowed a thousand recriminations pushing and shoving, furious, determined to be first in line. Mother was worried? Did she not feel sorry for what she’d done to Abigail? Did she not wish to apologize? “Worry is a sin.”

“Don’t be smart with me.” Father snapped the reins. Jocko picked up speed. “I’m still your daed, and I have the piece of paper to prove it.”

“I’m sorry.” Trying to be sorry. There was a difference. “I don’t understand.”

"I know you don't." His voice tightened like a frayed rope about to break in two. "We should've told you."

One of those no-kidding statements. "Why didn't you?"

"You're our dochder. As much our flesh and blood as our other kinner." He paused as if searching his store of vocabulary from three languages for words that could somehow explain the unexplainable. "We waited at first, thinking it best to tell you when you were old enough to understand. Then time passed . . ."

Time passed until they lived in that warm, simple place past the point of no return. "My parents are Englisch. I can't fathom that."

"Your mudder and I are your eldre."

"Why are you angry?"

"I'm not. I am not angry. Not at you." He snapped the reins as if he wanted to make the horse go faster, to get home sooner, to end this uncomfortable conversation. "I'm angry with myself."

"Don't be mad. I'm not mad." Confused, hurt, addled, distressed, floundering, drowning.

Fine. Mad. Angry. Furious. Irate. These words couldn't scratch the surface of the boiling cauldron of emotion inside her. "Nee, I am a little mad, but it's because it was so unexpected."

"No daed wants to hurt his dochder."

"I know." *But you did.*

They drove the rest of the way in silence, the only sounds the creak of the buggy's wheels and the wind whistling through the trees that lined the road. Abigail closed her eyes and let the night air cool her warm face. This morning she had woken up an average, everyday Plain woman who did all the things Plain women did. In the space of a few minutes, a redhead woman stripped that identity from her. Now she had to make herself from scratch. Starting tomorrow. Tonight she needed to mourn the old Abigail.

At the house Father pulled up at the front porch and halted. "I'll

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be in as soon as I stable the geil un weggel and check on the livestock.
You check to make sure everyone is okay.”

“If this Heather Holcomb hadn’t shown up here, would you ever have told me who I really am?”

Father’s shoulders hunched. “You know who you really are.”

“And you know what I mean.”

He clucked softly. Jocko tossed his head and whinnied. “I don’t know.”

An honest answer but not a satisfactory one.

Abigail found her mother sitting on the couch in the living room, a basket of sewing in her lap. Doolittle curled up on a rug at her feet. Her eyes were red. She didn’t acknowledge Abigail’s presence. Instead she kept darning the hole in the sock in her hand. Doolittle hopped up and dashed across the floor. His greeting dance nearly knocked Abigail from her feet. Her gaze still on her mother, she knelt to pet him. “Is everyone safe? Any damage from the storm?”

“It passed over us quickly. We were snug in the basement. The kinner played checkers and Connect 4. Your breider are out checking for damage now.” Mother pushed the reading glasses she used for sewing up her nose and peered at the sock. “Where did you go?”

“The Kurtzes. Daed showed up, and we all hunkered down in their basement.” Abigail backed away from Doolittle, who trailed after her and settled next to the hickory rocker by the dark fireplace. “I’m sorry I ran.”

The words had to be said first. She owed her mother that much.

Mother tossed the sock into the basket and set it aside. “You didn’t give me a chance to explain.”

“I couldn’t think.”

“Abigail, you’re here. You’re home.” Jane flew down the stairs. “Where were you? We were so worried! Did you see the funnel cloud? Benny—”

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“Jane, go back upstairs. Make sure Hope and Rose are in bed.”

“They’re already—”

“Go.”

“But—”

“Go, Dochder.”

Jane shot a worried frown in Abigail’s direction. *Later*, Abigail telegraphed back. Jane nodded and tromped up the stairs, every leaden footfall shouting her thoughts on this turn of events.

Mother stared at her hands, now splayed in her lap. “Heather isn’t a bad person. She made a mistake a long time ago. She’s had to live with it ever since.”

“So I’m a mistake?”

“Nee. Giving you up was her mistake. Like she said, her parents insisted. I never understood that. I felt bad for her. When we went to the hospital in Wichita to fetch you, I was sure she would change her mind and refuse.” Mother’s face went still. Then a perplexed frown flitted across her face. “Her mudder stood next to the bed the entire time. She kept telling Heather it was for the best, that she would see it was for the best. It’s not something I can imagine doing, even in those circumstances.”

She spoke as if to herself. As if she had been trying to puzzle this out for many years. Abigail could see why. To give up a baby *was* unfathomable. Babies were gifts from God under all circumstances. They should not be punished for their parents’ mistakes. “Why you and Daed? Why give her *bopli* to you?”

Mother rose. “I’m thirsty. Do you want some cold tea? Or lemonade? You didn’t get supper. Are you hungry?”

“Nee. Nor thirsty.”

Mother sat back down.

“Just tell me what happened. *Sei so gut.*”

“Like she said, her parents had been neighbors with Mammi and

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Daadi. We knew them well enough to wave and say hi and ask about their health. Heather was younger, but we chatted when our visits coincided. She asked me a lot of questions about being Plain.” Mother smoothed her wrinkled apron. Her restless fingers plucked at some thread or stain Abigail couldn’t see. “Time passed. Your daed and I married, but no bopli came along. We were beginning to wonder if Gott had decided against kinner for us.

“One afternoon Heather showed up at our door. She was in a family way. She was sixteen years old. We had been married almost two years, and we had no bopli. Heather’s parents wanted her to put the bopli up for adoption. They wanted her to go to college and get a good job before she got married and started a family. Her mudder kept saying Amish are gut people. They’re gut parents. That I was a gut person.

“Your daed and I saw a young *maed* in need. We weren’t sure if or when we would have our own. It was in Gott’s hands. We knew that. We prayed. We talked late into the night. We went to see the bishop. He said to pray the will of Gott be done, so we did.

“The minute Heather’s mudder handed you to me and I saw your wrinkled red face and crooked nose, I knew.”

“Knew what?”

She stood and came to stand in front of Abigail. Her eyes, a shade of blue not so different from Abigail’s, were wet with tears. “That we’d made the right decision. You were mine, and I would never give you up. Ever.”

“People say Jane and I could be twins.”

“When you were born we knew we’d have another baby. Jane came along eleven months later, but we never regretted our decision. Not for a second.”

“Until now.”

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“We’re not the ones regretting it now.” Mother wrapped her in a quick, hard hug. “Not ever.”

She whispered those last two words in Abigail’s ear, let go, and headed toward the stairs. “It’s bedtime. Tomorrow’s another day.”



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Chapter 5

A WHOOP GREETED OWEN WHEN HE STRODE THROUGH THE DOOR of Miller & Kurtz Engineered Structures. Rob Miller, Owen's father, Lee, Denny Christner, and Alma Knapp, the receptionist, all grinned at him from their spots around the spartan office like a bunch of goofers caught loafing. Since Rob and Father owned the place, they really couldn't be accused of loafing. They only came into the company's building—which consisted of their two offices, a storage room, and the front lobby—for meetings.

Lunch pail in one hand, Owen bowed with a flourish. "If I had known gracing you folks with my presence would please you so much, I'd have knocked off for lunch earlier."

"I just hung up from talking with the guy from St. John who called last week wanting a quote on a horse barn." Father pushed away from the faux-granite countertop and mimicked Owen's bow. "He was calling to say he'll be up this afternoon to sign the paperwork. He wants us to start by the end of the week—or sooner."

"Gut news, indeed." Depending on the size and model the customer chose, this could be a forty-thousand-dollar job. The company built post-frame commercial buildings with metal roofs and siding, as well as traditional frame residences. This spring they had more

work than they could handle—which was good because winter meant slim pickings. “I stopped by the Cotters’ property. There were some downed limbs but no serious damage from the storm. I think we can still finish by Thursday, Friday at the latest.”

“The other crew should finish the barn in Lyons about the same time. It didn’t even rain there. It’ll take both crews to do this job on the timeline he’s wanting.” Rob spun around in the office chair on wheels usually occupied by clients waiting to see him. The chair squeaked under his girth. He hoisted himself to his feet. “In the meantime I’m headed home for lunch. I’ll be back before Mr. Nelson gets here. Alma, after you take your lunch break, please start the paperwork.”

“Yes, sir.” Alma tapped the monitor on the desk in front of her. “Already on it.”

Owen waited for Rob to close the door behind him before he high-fived Denny, his best friend since their school days, and then Lee. “We’ll be mighty busy for the next couple of months.”

“That’s gut. A steady paycheck is a gut thing.” Father threw his two cents in before Denny could answer. “Especially for a man who’s about to tie the knot.”

“Tie the knot?” It took a second for his father’s words to line up with Denny’s sheepish grin and red face. Owen pointed at him. “You did it? You asked Emily to be your *frau*?”

“I did. We talked to Bishop Bryan night before last.” Denny plucked a white card from a pile on the counter. “Our banns will be published on Sunday. Here’s a save-the-date card. Emily couldn’t wait to get started.”

“I already have one,” Father objected. “Save those for your family in Jamesport and Garnett.”

“True, but I want Owen to see it with his own two eyes. Otherwise he might not believe it.” Denny waved it in Owen’s face. “You’ll be the last one of our bunch still single. Time for you to get busy, my friend.”

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Jah, time to get busy, Bruder,” Lee chimed in. He leaned closer to a box fan sitting on top of the counter. Sweat made a ring around his shirt’s collar and stained his underarms, and the hottest part of the day hadn’t even arrived yet. “You’re running out of options.”

Two weeks. Owen accepted Denny’s offering and studied Emily’s neat penmanship. She was the same age as Abigail. They’d all been in school together. Her voice had been the high, sweet one at the singings. Denny had been courting her for more than a year. “I’m happy for you. I’m sure my time will come, Gott willing, and in His time.”

“You’d better pick up your feet. There aren’t many choices left.” Lee liked to spout off. “You-know-who is clumsy and not much of a cook, but she could still grow out of it.”

Lee’s halfhearted attempt to honor Owen’s privacy didn’t earn him any points. “It takes more than cooking to make a marriage work.”

Father didn’t seem to be paying attention to Lee’s chiding. He moved toward the door to the back room that served double duty as storage and a break room. “I’ll be in the back, Alma, if anyone needs me.”

She murmured acknowledgment but kept on working.

“We’re going to eat at the picnic table outside.” Denny held up his black metal lunch box. “Are you coming?”

“I want to talk to Daed first. I’ll catch up.”

Talking and joshing the way young guys do, the two sped out the door. Owen paused by Alma’s desk. “Alma, do you need anything? Have you had lunch?”

She shook her head and lifted her hand to shake her index finger, then went back to typing.

In the break room his father had both hands around a monster-size tuna salad sandwich. He looked up midbite. His eyebrows rose. He chewed and swallowed. “I figured you would go outside and eat with the boys. I prefer a few minutes of quiet.”

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His way of letting Owen know he wasn't in the mood for conversation. He rarely was, but opportunities to find him alone at home were nonexistent. "I wanted to pick your brain about something. I promise to make it quick."

Father eyed his sandwich. "Is it going to give me indigestion?"

"Nee. I was talking to Marty at the feedstore the other day—"

"There's your first mistake."

Marty was a big talker, but he always knew a little bit about a lot of things. He talked to all the farmers in the area. "Marty says sunflower seed prices are rising again this year. Growers in this part of the state are going to increase their acreage by sixty-two percent. They had a lot of snow in the Dakotas, so supply is down and prices are up."

"I think I know where you're going with this, *Suh*, and I don't see it." Father balled up the wax paper Claire had wrapped his pickles in and tossed it in the trash can near the table. "We've always planted milo, alfalfa, and corn. Prices are dropping now, but they'll come up. We don't have enough acreage for a big cash crop. Besides, the sunflowers grown in this region are for birdseed and oil. They don't bring the price that the confectionary varieties do."

Owen tugged a pamphlet from his lunch box. "Marty went to a meeting the Kansas Sunflower Commission had in Salina. The representative said they're a good rotation crop and they're drought tolerant. They have deep roots. He gave me a copy of the pamphlet they handed out."

"What's this really about?" Father ignored the papers. Instead he took a long swallow from a can of lemonade, set it down, and went back to his sandwich. "Your onkel Wayne has already planted the corn and cut the first round of hay."

"You've talked about selling the acreage to Onkel Wayne. I'd like to see us keep it." The pamphlet called sunflowers a high-value crop. A company in Hutchinson cleaned and packaged several million tons

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of Kansas-grown sunflower seeds each year. Mostly for birdseed, more when it snowed. “Sunflowers can be a cash crop for us.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Daed hid a burp behind his big hand. How could he and Owen be so alike on the outside and so different on the inside? “We need to focus on our business here. It’s enough work to keep us all busy and keep food on the table. Farming doesn’t pay anymore—not for small farms.”

“Four hundred acres isn’t small.”

“Compared to two thousand acres, it is. I thought you liked working with your bruder and me and Denny. It’s honest, decent work. A job you can start a family on.”

“I’ve been saving my money. I want to have my own house and my own plot of land to reap and sow on.”

“That’s a gut, honorable goal.”

“What I’m trying to say is that at a certain point, I might not continue to work for you.”

“As your younger brieder finish school, they’ll join the business. You need only be patient.”

Daed worked hard and took care of the whole family. He didn’t need a naysayer making life more difficult. “Or we could keep the farm and I could farm it while you, Lee, Eli, and Micah can eventually work here. If one of them is interested in farming, he could help me out. Then we’d continue to have two sources of income.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought.” Father patted his mouth with a paper napkin. The lines around his blue eyes deepened. “We’re spread too thin. Farming takes every ounce of determination and energy to turn a profit. Building engineered structures is a more stable way to earn a living these days.”

Still, he pulled the pamphlet toward him. “I don’t have my head in the sand, Suh. I’ve heard talk about these so-called green crops. They draw butterflies and birds. They take toxins out of the air—”

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“They do. Plus they don’t need a lot of rain—”

“A lot of weeds grow in the fields, and they draw insects in addition to those butterflies. Both affect the yield. Plus there’s a risk for combine fires during harvests. I read about three of them during last year’s harvest because of the high oil content.”

“If we know that going in, we can adjust for it.”

“I’m not inclined in that direction. I’ll allow that sunflowers are right pretty. There’s a reason they’re the state flower. That’s why the sunflower farmers have all those Englisch people showing up to take pictures of themselves in the fields. We don’t need that either.” The finality in his tone was unmistakable. Father snapped his lunch box closed, flipped down the latches, and stood. “Wayne will want to stick to what he knows. We’ll see how the milo does this fall. If yields and prices are down again, I’ll likely sell. Wayne’s been more than patient. Time to give him the acreage he needs to grow winter wheat.”

“It still won’t be enough.”

“You need to think about getting yourself a fraa and starting a family in that house and plot of land you’re talking about.” Father tucked the box on the shelf in the refrigerator squeezed in next to a soda machine. “You know as well as I do that working here is a better option for a man with a family.”

“Sometimes things don’t work out like we plan. As you know.”

Father paused at the table, a curiously diffident look on his face. He put both hands on the back of the chair and leaned in. “It’s not my place to ask, so I won’t. All I’m saying is don’t wait too long.”

“I won’t.” Owen bit the inside of his cheek to keep from saying more. The time had to be right for a man and a woman to join in marriage. Forever vows demanded that. It wasn’t his place to ask about his father’s visits to the Wagner farm either. Were Dad and Mary approaching that moment? “You shouldn’t either.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

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“Nothing.”

His father’s face turned a peculiar shade of red. “I’ve always done the best I can for you kinner. A man without a fraa does that.”

“I didn’t say anything different.” This conversation had gone off the rails. Father had given them everything they needed in food and clothing on their backs. Some things only a mother could provide. They both knew that. “I miss Mudder, though. We never even talk about her anymore.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Your mudder’s days were numbered different from mine or yours. You know that.”

He did. Owen had been told this fact enough times.

“And we have to keep living. We have to do what’s best for us.”

Did Mary Wagner figure into that equation? “I know that too.”

“That includes working here, earning a keep, and helping the family.” His father let go of the chair and moved toward the door. “Both our own and our *Gmay*.”

Faith, family, community—in that order. Bowing to the greater good. Owen rose and followed his father into the reception area. “Understood.”

“Do you dislike working here so much?”

He didn’t dislike it. The smell of dirt and rain, the sound of the tractor, the sight of green plants sprouting, the taste of homegrown corn on the cob—those were the sensations that called to him every day. “Nee. I just like farming more.”

“When you finish eating, get back to the Cotters’ place. You should be ready to finish the roof later today. We need to wrap up that project.”

“Will do. We will.” Conversation over.

Owen left his father in the reception area, peering over Alma’s shoulder as she proofread the horse barn contract. He slipped out the front door. Lee and Denny were tossing bits of bologna to a stray dog

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who'd taken up residence on the property. Owen slid onto the picnic table bench and opened his lunch box.

"So what'd he say?" Lee tried to steal Owen's cookies. He brushed his brother's hand away. Lee pretended to fuss. "Is he open to suggestions?"

"How did you know what I wanted to talk to him about?"

"I just knew it wasn't your health, Bruder."

"As it happens, he's not open to suggestions." Disappointment sat heavy on Owen's shoulders. He shrugged, trying to loosen up his muscles. "He'll wait to see how our crops do, but he's determined to sell to Onkel Wayne."

"It's not surprising." Denny tossed another chunk of bologna to the dog he'd named Hairy. For obvious reasons. "He likes building things. He has a family to feed."

His family might get bigger. Mary had five children, the oldest fifteen or thereabouts, the youngest two. "I know. It's his farm and this is his business—his and Rob's. It's his call." Owen opened his lunch box and pulled out a sandwich of thick homemade bread slathered with peanut butter and homemade strawberry preserves. All this jawing had given him a powerful hunger. "What I want or need is secondary."

"You could work for Onkel Wayne." Lee snatched a potato chip from Owen's bag. "He can always use help."

"Hey." Owen popped his brother's hand. "You had your lunch."

"I'm a growing boy."

"Right now Daed needs us. He'd have to pay other workers more if he hired outside the family—that includes you, Denny."

Denny inclined his head as if in appreciation.

Owen pulled out his thermos. Kayla's homemade root beer to wet his whistle might wash the disappointment out of his mouth. "I'll get over it."

Kelly Irvin

“Start by counting your blessings that you have a place to work and a paycheck.” Denny tossed a fat green grape at Owen, who caught it with one hand while sipping his drink. “Turn your thoughts to finding a *fraa*.”

Good advice but unneeded.

“I think Daed has.” Lee never bothered to censure his thoughts. They seemed to simply fly out of his mouth. “Did you see him talking to Mary after church last Sunday?”

So did the rest of the Gmay. “Hush up, *bobblemoul*. That’s how rumors get started. She was just serving him sandwiches.”

Lee made googly eyes at Owen. “Made with love?”

“So what do you think of the idea?”

“I’ve eaten Mary’s strawberry-rhubarb pie.” Lee closed his eyes and pretended to swoon. “She’s a way better cook than Kayla and Claire. No one can replace Mudder, but Daed needs a *fraa*. It’s expected.”

Indeed it was. Families with both mothers and fathers did better.

“So do you.” Denny pointed at Owen and smirked. “Time’s a-wastin’.”

They seemed to think Owen didn’t want to find a wife. He did. He had his heart set on a particular woman. But now that woman had a difficult road to travel before she could think about love and marriage. He had to give her the room to do that. “Just because you’re ready to tie the knot doesn’t mean I am.”

“Speaking of which, I’d like you to be one of my witnesses.” His tone suddenly sober, Denny tipped his straw hat in Owen’s direction. “If you’re willing.”

“I would be honored.” To stand up with his best friend on the second most important day of his life was indeed an honor. “I’m happy for you.”

“It’s settled then.” His lunch box in one hand, Denny dumped his trash into the trash can a few feet from the table. “Me and Lee better

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get back to work. Are you coming our way after you finish the Cotter house?"

"Jah."

After they took off in Denny's buggy, Owen patted the open spot on the wooden bench. "Come on, Hairy, I reckon it's just you and me."

Hairy hopped up on the bench and nudged Owen's arm with his nose. Owen shared every other bite of his sandwich with the dog. After a while he went inside, found an old plastic bowl, filled it with water, and set it on the ground next to the table. "If you're like me, you find peanut butter tends to stick in your throat."

Hairy was too busy lapping up the water to respond. Water and slobber dripped from his jowls.

"Hunds are gut company." Owen washed down the last of the sandwich with a slug of the root beer. "I could do worse."

If Abigail's English mother held sway over her daughter, Owen might be in need of company. He ate his cookies, threw away his trash, and strode to his buggy. Hairy followed in his wake. Owen studied the dog's graying jowls. Who did he belong to? He didn't have a collar. His ribs stuck out. "Come on, you might as well get on board."

Hairy didn't hesitate. He barked twice and jumped into the buggy.

Owen's father would think he was a crazy for bringing home another dog. But then, Father already thought he was foolish for wanting to farm sunflowers. What would he think if he knew Owen's heart was set on a clumsy girl who once spilled a whole platter of sandwiches in Father's lap at a school picnic?

Foolish or not, he wasn't giving up on the girl or his dream. Patience was a virtue, and he would need a wagon full of it.