

Every Good Gift



AMISH BLESSING

KELLY IRVIN

ZONDERVAN

Every Good Gift
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To Tim, love always.



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I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Psalm 139:14

And we know that in all things God works for the good of
those who love him, who have been called according to his
purpose.

Romans 8:28

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Glossary of Deutsch*

aamen: amen

aenti: aunt

bewillkumm: welcome

blos: bubbles

bopli, boplin: baby, babies

bruder, brieder: brother, brothers

bu, buwe: boy, boys

daed: father

danki: thank you

Das Loblied: Amish hymn of praise sung at all church services

dawdy haus: attached home for grandparents when they retire

dochder, dechder: daughter, daughters

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

eldre: parents

Englischer: English or non-Amish

eppies: cookies

faeriwell: good-bye

fehla: sin

fraa: wife

Froh Neiyaahr: Happy New Year

gaul: horse

Glossary

gern gschehme: you're welcome

Gmay: church district

groosmammi, groosmammis: grandmother, grandmothers

Gott: God

guder mariye: good morning

gut: good

gut nacht: good night

hallo: hello

hund, hunde: dog, dogs

jah: yes

kaffi: coffee

kind, kinner: child, children

kossin: cousin

maedel, maed: girl, girls

mann: husband

meidung: shunning, excommunication from the Amish faith. Shunning is a practice in which church members isolate, ignore, or otherwise punish someone for breaking community rules.

Mennischt: Mennonite

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 they decide whether they want to be baptized into the Amish faith and seek a mate

schtarem: storm

schweschder, schwesdchdre: sister, sisters

seelich gebortsdaag: happy birthday

sei so gut: please (be so kind)

soh: son

wasser: water

weddermann: weatherman

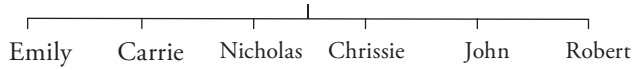
wunderbarr: wonderful

*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.

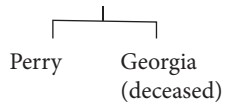


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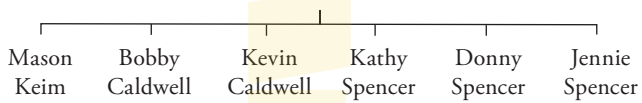
Delbert (minister) and Loretta Byler



Job and Dinah Keim



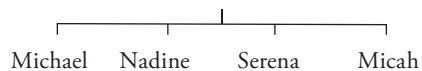
Georgia Keim-Carter and Clayton Carter



Caleb and Elizabeth Mast



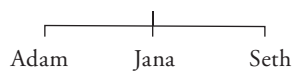
Bryan (bishop) and Esther Miller



Leroy and Connie Weaver



Samuel (deacon) and Anita Zimmerman



Chapter 1

THE NAUSEA THAT HAD PLAGUED MAISY Glick for three months pummeled her. Her hands went to her still-flat stomach as if she could calm it with a mere touch. She swallowed the bile in the back of her throat.

“Nate, say something. Please.”

Nate Taylor was already mentally a hundred miles gone, racing down Missouri’s back roads, Jamesport in his rearview mirror. They sat in his pickup, headlights blazing in the darkness, under an enormous bur oak just outside the fence. His lazy grin had disappeared when Maisy said the words “in a family way.” His hickory-brown eyes that always warmed her with the slightest glance filled with fear. He didn’t meet her gaze.

Instead he got out of the truck and hopped over the barbed-wire fence that separated the dirt road from the meadow where Maisy’s neighbors pastured their horses. A quiet place with no ears to overhear. Except the beautiful Morgans that grazed nearby. One raised its head and whinnied.

Nate stopped, but his desire to put space between Maisy and himself had been apparent in his hurried stride through the tall

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grass and weeds. “I don’t know what to say. We were done. I haven’t seen you in two months.”

Say it’ll be all right. Say you know what to do.

They’d both known it couldn’t last. He was English. She was Plain. He was headed to college in a few weeks. Maisy knew she would never leave her faith—not even for a man who’d stolen her heart in the most unexpected manner.

Nate with his Wrangler jeans and his straw cowboy hat covering his thick tangle of wheat-colored curls. He loved his truck—probably more than he’d ever cared for her. His family went to the Baptist church in Gallatin most Sunday mornings. He called himself a backsliding Baptist when Maisy had asked him if he believed in God.

Maisy slipped through the gate—her days of climbing fences in a dress had passed not so long ago—and followed him. Grasshoppers whizzed past her, their bodies dark against the brilliant headlights. Searching for words adequate to the occasion, she brushed away gnats and mosquitoes with sweaty hands.

Nate still didn’t meet her gaze. “This isn’t the first time this has happened to a Plain girl.”

That didn’t make it right. It made it worse. Maisy was stuck. She hadn’t been baptized. She wasn’t a member of the church so they couldn’t officially shun her.

No, but it could be far worse. At least as a member she could do a kneeling confession and be forgiven. If the father had been baptized in the church, they could marry in a quiet wedding and move on. But the *Gmay* held no sway over an unbaptized teenager. Only her family. Her parents. What would they do?

Her father’s fierce, stony face loomed in Maisy’s mind. If a smart retort to his instruction earned her a whipping as a child, what would the sin of fornication get her? Would he forbid her

to speak to her brothers and sisters? Would she be banished from Gmay activities? Church?

Would he send her away?

Forgiveness. Surely he would obey a basic tenet of their faith and forgive her.

Missouri's humid August air pressed on Maisy. Sweat trickled down her temples. If only there were a breeze. "My parents will forgive me. They have to forgive me. What will yours say?"

If he told them. Would he tell them? Would he feel any obligation toward his unborn child?

"What do you think they'd say?" He lifted his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "Besides, you're the one who called it off."

They'd met at a kegger the previous summer in an English farmer's pasture. Her friend Lana had dragged Maisy to it. She'd turned seventeen earlier in the week. It was a birthday celebration, according to Lana. Nate had strode across the field toward her like a cowboy from one of the western romances she loved to read with a flashlight under the covers after her parents went to bed.

From the first howdy, complete with a bow and a flourish of his black Stetson, Nate had pursued Maisy. He never left her side. He gave her and their friends rides in his pickup—Maisy up front, his high school basketball teammates and the other girls in the bed. He took her to the movies and taught her to bowl. He taught her to line dance to country music.

With each day, with each shared experience, her feelings for him had grown. *Rumspringa* was meant to be a time for finding a spouse. A Plain man. She always knew that, but none of the boys in her district made her feel like Nate did. So full of life.

He'd said he loved her. Even those words couldn't make it right, as much as she told herself they mattered. She'd been deceiving

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herself. Ignoring the obvious because her heart and her body wanted what they wanted with no thought for the consequences.

“If I hadn’t, you would’ve.”

Nate gave her his back. Hands on his hips, he planted his dress-up cowboy boots wide and stared at something Maisy couldn’t see. His deep bass voice—the one that sent a pleasant wave of heat through her body every time she heard it—sounded hoarse, unsure. Nate was never unsure.

“The reasons it wouldn’t work haven’t changed,” he said. “I’m only eighteen. I haven’t even started college. I’m gonna study agribusiness so I can take over my dad’s dairy farm someday. I’m too young to be a daddy. I can’t let one mistake derail my whole life.”

The breath swooshed from Maisy’s lungs. Blood pounded in her ears. Her head floated, disconnected from her body. She was a mistake. Their baby, a mistake. He’d said he loved her when he oh-so-gently laid her down on a plaid fleece blanket in the bed of his truck under a full moon’s streaming light and stars so bright they hurt Maisy’s eyes.

It was wrong. Terribly wrong. She’d held out for months. A kiss led to a hug to more kissing and more hugging that led them to the cliff’s edge. Before she knew it, the cliff crumbled under their feet and they were in a free fall.

She’d promised herself it would never happen again. Then Nate would whisper in her ear how much he loved her, and didn’t she love him? She did. She was sure she did. How could something so wonderful be so awful at the same time?

“A baby isn’t a mistake. Babies are gifts from God.”

Nate paced to the fence and back, his heavy tread leaving a path of smashed weeds bending to his frustration and uncertainty. His dimpled face with its high cheekbones and full lips twisted in sorrow. “I’m sorry. I can’t marry you.”

He acted as if there were a choice. Maisy certainly didn't have one. "What would you have me do?"

"You think this happened the last time we . . ."

"I think it's at least three months since I, you know . . ." Heat scalded her face. She stepped away from the headlights, mortified, thankful for the darkness. She'd never talked to anyone about such personal things, not even her own mother. "It's likely three months."

Her body had been telling Maisy for a while what she didn't want to believe. She ignored it, sure she was wrong, hoping she was wrong, praying she was wrong. Would she be condemned to hell for praying to God that there be no child growing inside her when the baby was conceived in her sin? God was gracious and merciful. He would forgive Maisy. Her family would be hard-pressed to do it, but they would.

Wouldn't they?

With a groan, Nate climbed back over the fence, then into the truck. No holding her hand, no hug, no expression of awe that they'd made a new life together—however the circumstances. "I guess it's too late."

"Too late for what?"

"Too late, you know, to . . . terminate it."

Horror struck Maisy full force, running into walls and stumbling over its own feet. The man climbing into the pickup truck was a complete stranger. Her decision to break up with him had been the right one. She climbed into the truck and slammed her door.

"I would never do that." Her voice didn't tremble. No tears. "Babies are special gifts from God."

"I get that you feel that way, but it's different for guys like me. You can keep the baby, but you'll be raising it on your own." He twisted the key in the ignition. The truck's engine rumbled to life. "What did you think would happen? I'd marry you and you'd

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come with me to Columbia? We'd live happily ever after in married student housing?"

She hadn't imagined such a thing. Every road led to a dead end. They had no options that worked. Her stomach lurched. Vomit rose in her throat. She shoved the door open, hopped from the truck, and fought her way through the tall grass to a spot where she could vomit in private.

After a few minutes, hands grasped her shoulders. They rubbed her back. "I'm sorry, little Amish girl. I'm truly sorry," Nate whispered. An orange-and-black butterfly danced across her periphery until it landed, wings flapping on her sleeve. "You would never be happy away from your mom and dad and the rest of your family. Imagine what it would be like to meet your mom on the street in Jamesport and have her cross to the other side to avoid talking to you. Or leaving Jamesport and never coming back so you don't have to see your brothers and sisters and know you can't ever talk to them."

Nate had grown up around Plain folks. He understood the consequences. At least she should be thankful for that. Leave behind the smell of her mother's peanut-butter-chocolate-chip cookies, the aroma of coffee and bacon early in the morning, the sound of her sisters laughing over the *chug-a-chug-chug* of the wringer washing machine as they did laundry. The women giggling and chatting while they worked on another quilt for the quilt consignment store. The sun shining on Maisy's face while she planted tomatoes, radishes, peas, green beans, cucumbers, and a host of other vegetables in the garden behind the house.

Then there was her father. He followed the *Ordnung* down to the letter. His children never doubted his love, shown in the way he worked hard on a construction crew to feed and clothe them. He wasn't one to crack a joke or offer a hug, but he taught them how to be the Plain people they were born to be.

To tell him how horribly she'd failed seemed unimaginable. He would be so disappointed in her. So ashamed. So angry.

Her father would be even more devastated if she married an English man. Not being baptized in the church led to eternal damnation. Despite the heat, Maisy shivered. "I can't marry you. You can't marry me. So I guess that's that."

They drove back to the intersection with the dirt road that led to her family's farm without talking. Nate didn't even turn on the radio to that twangy country music he loved so much. He stopped the truck and put it in Park. Still he didn't speak.

"This is it, then." Maisy swallowed back sobs. She gritted her teeth. He could simply turn away. She would be left to walk this road alone, the proof of her sin on display for all to see. "Have a good life."

"You too." He bit out the words through stiff lips. "You're a better person than me. Always remember that."

"You'll never wonder if our baby has your eyes? Whether it's a boy or a girl?"

He studied the tops of his hands on the wheel. "I suppose I will, but I'll get over it."

Alone, she started the long trek on the dark dirt road that led to an uncertain future. The hot wind whistled through the sycamore and oak trees that lined the simple thoroughfare. Leaves rustled, keeping her company. A dog howled, a lonesome sound in tune with her heart so heavy she fought to carry it forward.

To be so alone, so bereft, was unbearable.

You're not alone.

The wind whipped the words into a frenzy until they settled in a soft cloak around her shoulders. She raised her face to the moon's light filtered through passing clouds. "It's you and me, *Bopli*, you and me."

Chapter 2

SOMETHING COLD AND WET POKED AT Maisy's fingers. A soft *woof* forced her to open her eyes. Skeeter's tail beat a steady *whap, whap, whap* in the air. His breath stank—as usual. She pulled up the Log Cabin quilt that covered the bed she shared with her sister Sarah until it touched her chin. The light flooding the bedroom window announced that dawn was long gone. The day had begun without her. Another *woof*. “I know, I know. I need to get up.”

Woof.

“Give me a minute.”

The roly-poly mutt, covered in semiwhite fur that obscured his eyes and usually dripped with slobber around his mouth, sat.

“Gut hund.”

Maisy stared at the ceiling. People liked to say everything would seem better in the morning. A good night's sleep could fix what ailed a person. Not so. Nothing had changed overnight. Yesterday's meeting with Nate had left Maisy to forge ahead alone in her dilemma. How to tell Mother and Father? She had to do it soon—before she started to show. But first she had to get up, help make breakfast, and take the buggy to her job cleaning an English family's house.

She threw her legs over the side of the bed and picked up her tattered composition notebook. She kept it within easy reach so she could choose her word of the day to memorize. The list of words she learned in books she'd read was what her mother had called her odd little hobby. Other people collected pretty rocks, thimbles, bird feeders, or coffee mugs. Maisy collected words.

Skeeter spread out on the rag-tie rug at her feet, his head propped on his paws. He knew this would take a while.

Tenacious: tending to keep a firm hold of something; clinging or adhering closely; not readily relinquishing a position, principle, or course of action; determined.

Tenacious. *Ach, Gott. This word?* Maisy had not held closely to her principles, to the Ordnung. She'd relinquished them before she drowned in Nate's gaze, his feel, his everything.

Her family laughed at her propensity—another good word—to use big words. But she liked reading, and reading meant understanding words, small and big. She needed to understand something. Even if it changed nothing.

Woof: This time Skeeter's bark held a worried note. *Woof:* "I know, I know."

She battled nausea as she dressed and went to help with breakfast. Skeeter followed at her heels like a dog herding sheep. Maybe that was what he was supposed to be doing instead of herding the Glick children. It was hard to say. He'd shown up one day, muddy, flea-infested, and skinny. Mother took one gander at him and sent Maisy to wash him down in the laundry room. That had been that. Now he followed her everywhere.

Now her mother, who was bent over the pine table that seated twelve, wiping up food with quick, efficient movements, looked back to see Maisy standing in the kitchen doorway. "I thought maybe you were sick."

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“Where is everyone?”

“Breakfast is over. The girls are gathering up the laundry. Jake and Ian went to work. Your *daed* had to pick up a part in town for his boss. Martin is mowing the yard.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You seemed like you didn’t feel good at supper last night. Then Sarah said you tossed and turned and moaned in your sleep all night. She said it was like sleeping next to a hot baked potato tied to a jumping bean. She begged me not to wake you.”

Maisy went to clear the table. Skeeter, satisfied she was where she should be, threw himself onto the faded welcome rug in front of the back door. His favorite spot to monitor *his* children’s comings and goings. “What did Daed say?”

“Nothing. He doesn’t have a heart of stone.”

Humming “I Surrender All,” Mother bustled over to the sink with the dirty washcloth. “The boys have such big mouths when it comes to talking in church. I don’t understand how they can miss their mouths so often when it comes to food.” She dropped cold scrambled eggs and toast crumbs into the sink. “You still look peaked. Maybe you need to go into town to see Doc Nelson. You shouldn’t go to work sick.”

Mother had a way of running thoughts and words together pell-mell that made it hard to get a word in edgewise. “I’m fine. They’re expecting me.” Maisy moved to the table and picked up a stack of dirty plates. The mingled smells of maple syrup, fried potatoes, coffee, and eggs gagged her. “*Ach, nee, nee.*”

She dumped the plates back on the table, shot from the kitchen, and sprinted to the bathroom. She made it by a whisker. Her belly’s sour contents burned her throat. She retched long after it was empty.

“Ach. Nee. *Dochder*, do you have the flu?” Mother touched

Maisy's forehead. "You don't have a fever. How long have you felt bad?"

Her mother's anguished voice, soft and hoarse, surrounded Maisy. She swiveled on the floor so she could draw her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. The loving concern on Mother's face only brought more shame, more regret, more fear. *Tell the truth. Tell it now before it gets worse.* "It's not the flu. I'm not sick. Not that way." She swallowed another wave of nausea. "I'm so sorry, *Mamm*. It's morning sickness."

Mother slipped to the floor onto her knees. She touched Maisy's cheeks with both hands. Her forehead wrinkled. She shook her head. "Nee. It's not possible. You know better. You would never . . . you would never."

"I didn't mean for it to happen."

Her face a deep purplish-red, Mother closed her eyes and bowed her head. "Ach, *Dochder*, no one in this situation ever does." Tears slipped down her plump cheeks. She didn't seem to notice.

Maisy grabbed a sheet of toilet paper and dabbed at her face. Mother batted her hand away. Her eyes opened. "How long has it been . . . ? How far along are you?"

"I've been feeling poorly for three months and there's been no . . . nothing."

Skeeter whined at the door. "Go away, hund, get." Mother's eyes seemed to devour Maisy as if she could see every inch of her daughter's skin, as if she could imagine the scene of her daughter's downfall. "You're not showing. All the throwing up, I suppose. You never said a word." The disappointment and the shame looming large in her downturned, trembling lips were far harder to bear than anger.

Anger, Maisy could've handled. She deserved anger. She'd

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brought shame on her entire family. “I thought maybe I was wrong. Maybe it would go away. I prayed I was wrong.”

“You prayed to Gott that He’d take away evidence of your *fehla*?” *Mudder* cleared her throat. The disappointment faded into a grim acceptance. “Nee, you must bear the consequences. We all must.”

“Just me—”

“The shame is on your daed and me. We failed to teach you. We failed.”

“It’s my fault.”

And Nate’s. Mother hadn’t even asked who the father was. Because it didn’t matter. He wouldn’t bear the physical reminder of his sin. He could go about his business each day, the darkness simmering under the surface, hidden.

“*Jah*, but mine also. It never occurred to me that you would do this. No *bu* came calling. I thought you were still searching for your special friend. You said you were going to the singings, but you came home alone.”

Parents might give their youngies more free rein during rum-springa, but that didn’t mean they weren’t paying attention to their comings and goings. And praying they wouldn’t stray far from their upbringing.

“*Mudder*, what’s going on?” Sarah rapped on the open bathroom door. Short for a ten-year-old, she hung on the knob with one hand and rested her head against the door. Her blue eyes were bright with curiosity. “The laundry is sorted. I can’t reach the soap on the top shelf. Are you crying? Why are you crying?”

Sarah was a mini-mother, with the same blonde curls that refused to be tamed under her prayer covering, the same avid interest in everything and everyone. And the same penchant for talking a person’s ear off.

“I’m not crying.” Mother sniffed. She used the toilet seat to hoist herself to her feet. “Use the step stool to get the soap. Be careful. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Skeeter is whining and crying. What’s—?”

“Just never you mind.”

“But—”

“Go. Take Skeeter with you.”

Sarah went but not without resting her lingering gaze on Maisy.

Maisy put her palms to her cheeks, trying to hide her tears. Not that it really mattered if Sarah found out now. Soon everyone would know. Sarah and Shelly would be painted with the same brush as their older sister. They would bear the brunt of her shame in equal measure.

“I need to leave, Mudder. I need to go away.”

“Nee. Your daed and the deacon will want to talk to the bu’s parents. He’ll need counseling. You both will, before the wedding.”

“He’s not Plain.”

Mother sank back to the floor. “You’ll not yoke yourself to an *Englisch* boy.”

“He’s off to college next week. He wants no part of this.”

“That only reflects how poor your judgment and self-control are.” Mother spat the words out as if they tasted bitter in her mouth. “You gave yourself to a bu not worthy to be called *mann* or daed. I knew reading those trashy novels would lead to no gut.”

“How did you know—?”

“I clean better than you do. I saw them under your bed—behind the suitcase. When you have to hide something, you know it’s sinful.”

They weren’t trashy. They were romantic. Or was that the same thing?

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Heavy footsteps sounded in the hall. The *clomp, clomp* of work boots. Mother's pinched face went white. "Your daed."

"*Fraa?* Where are you?"

Maisy scrambled to her feet. Mother did the same. Maisy smoothed her wrinkled apron and set her prayer covering straight.

"I'm here. In the bathroom."

"I forgot the paper with the specs that the boss gave me. What are you two doing in here?" Father filled the doorway. What he lacked in bulk, he made up for in height. "Sarah says Maisy is sick."

"Not sick." Maisy's voice petered out. The words wouldn't come. Her throat closed.

"She's in a family way." Mother thrust the words into the space between them like orphans rejected and thrown out into the world on their own. "She's only just told me."

The concern in Father's face drained away, leaving behind a bleak sickness Maisy had never seen before. His straw hat dropped to the floor. His big hands fisted. "Are you sure?"

"She says jah."

Anger carved deep grooves in his sun-damaged skin. His gaze bounced from Mother to Maisy. "Go to your room, *Dochder*. Don't speak to your *schwesdchdre* or *brieder*. Don't speak at all."

Mother stepped away from Maisy. The tears and the quiver in her voice had receded. She and Father became as one. Mother clutched her hands together. "The daed is English."

Father seemed to grow taller, his visage more terrible. A muscle twitched in his jaw. "Get out of my sight before I do something far worse."

Maisy edged toward the door. If only she could melt into a puddle that would seep through the pine floorboards and soak into the earth below the house. Mother drew back as if she didn't dare touch Maisy. Father simply stood there, blocking the way.

She sought to squeeze herself between his angular body and the door.

“Roy.” Mother touched Father’s sleeve. “We have to tell Abel. Word will spread quickly. He’ll counsel us.”

Mother’s plaintive words moved him where Maisy could not. He stepped back.

She slid past him and ran.

His half-muffled sobs chased her down the hallway.



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Chapter 3

THE STIFLING AIR IN THE PHONE shack hung heavy on Maisy's shoulders. She shooed away the rooster that had followed her down the dirt road that led from the house to the solar-powered shack. He squawked and strutted away, only to return seconds later. It was too hot to close the door. "Go on, get, get!"

"Bawk, bawk, bawk."

He wasn't any happier than Maisy was. She had to hurry. Mother and Father had left for the bishop's house within minutes of sending her to her room. It wouldn't take them long to sort out the situation with Abel and receive his instructions. The receiver slipped in her sweaty hand. Her own scent wafted in the air. It stank. Hell must be something like it. *Please answer. Please answer. Gott, please let him answer.*

Her half-baked prayers were answered a few seconds later. Nate's hello held a note of trepidation. "Maisy? Why are you calling me?"

Why indeed? He wanted to erase her from his life. He could easily do that. She would never be able to do the same with him. The last thing she wanted in this world was to ask this man for a

favor. She had no choice. “I need you to do this one thing for me. I’ll never ask you for anything ever again.”

“If it’s money you need—”

“I need you to take me to Kansas City to the Amtrak station.”

Silence on the line sent Maisy’s already battered heart smashing against her rib cage. “Today. As soon as possible.”

“Why?”

Nate didn’t get to ask why. “I don’t have much time. My parents are talking to the bishop right now.”

“You’re running away from home?”

She was sparing her parents months of watching her belly grow and grow until the day when her baby entered this world fatherless. She was sparing her brothers and sisters the bewildering world in which they could have nothing to do with her, not even speak a word to her for months—maybe longer. Sparing them from the furtive, judgmental glances of the entire community. “Could you do this one thing for me?”

“I’m on my way.”

“Don’t come to the house. Meet me at the intersection.”

Where the dirt road on her father’s property intersected with the paved one that led to the highway. Where Nate had parked off the road by the gate to wait for her on the nights he picked her up so they could steal away to movies, skating, playing pool, or dancing in St. Joseph—or St. Joe, as Nate called it. “If you see a buggy, turn around.”

“I know the routine.” He hung up.

Maisy wiped her hands on her apron. Mr. Rooster stuck his head through the door. She stuck out her foot and nudged him back.

“*Bawk, bawk.*”

“Right back at you.”

Next up, Mrs. Elliott.

Kelly Irvin

The English woman answered the phone with the same brisk tone she always used. Maisy made quick work of notifying her employer that she would no longer be cleaning her house.

One more call. This one would be simple. An answering machine would pick up. A few seconds later Amos Plank's voice, tinny on the old-fashioned tape recorder, instructed her to leave a message. He might return the call in a day or a week. It depended on how busy he was.

"Ruth, it's Maisy. I'm coming to Haven. I'm taking the train. I'll be there tonight or tomorrow, I hope. I'll find a ride from Hutchinson. If I could stay with you for a bit, I'd be so grateful."

She hung up. It was the best she could do. What if Ruth's husband said her young cousin couldn't stay with them? "*Cross that bridge when you get to it.*" Grandma Irene's no-nonsense tone delivered that sage piece of advice. She'd been gone for almost two years. Yet her voice still held sway in almost any internal debate that raged inside Maisy.

She settled the receiver back on the phone's base, picked up her oversized, faded canvas bag, and set out for the road. The rooster trotted behind her for a few yards, then changed his mind and headed back.

Danki, Gott, for one small favor.

The hot sun beat down on her head. Sweat trickled between her shoulder blades. Dust bloomed with each step on the dirt road. *Sei so gut, Gott, don't let my eldre come down the road and see me. Sei so gut, let me go without causing them more pain. Sei so gut.*

"Maisy! Maisy! Stop! Where are you going?"

Her head down, Maisy halted in the middle of the road. She didn't turn around. "Go back, Sarah. Go back to the house."

"What's wrong? Why's everyone mad?"

Maisy turned to face her sister. "I'm not mad, but I have to go."

“Go where?” Breathless, the little girl churned toward her, Skeeter close on her heels. He barked twice as if to repeat her question. Sarah’s dress puffed up in the hot wind. Finally she stopped within arm’s reach. Her face was covered with sweat. Her skinny chest heaved. “Why did you take your clothes? Where did Mudder and Daed go?”

Skeeter kept coming. Panting, his tongue hanging out, he jumped up and nearly knocked Maisy over. She stumbled back, grabbed to him, and steadied herself. “Easy, easy, you silly hund.”

He yipped anxiously.

“I know, I know.” She petted and murmured comforting mumbo jumbo. “Settle down. You’ll be fine. You’ll have Sarah and Shelly and the *buwe*.”

“Answer me, *Schweschder*.”

“They went to talk to Abel.” Sarah would know talking to the bishop meant this was something big, something important. “I did something I shouldn’t have done, something bad. So I’m leaving.”

“What could be so bad you have to leave?” Sarah’s expression grew more bewildered. “Mudder says there’s nothing that can’t be forgiven. You can come back, right?”

“It’ll take some time. Hopefully.” Someday. “Mudder will tell you more. Now take Skeeter and go back to the house.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll write you a letter and tell you all about it. Okay?” Maisy drew her sister into her arms for one quick, soggy hug. “Now go.”

“You’ll be okay?”

“I’ll be okay. Go.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

“Sarah. Go make sure Shelly is okay. Hang the clothes on the line. Now.”

Kelly Irvin

A fierce frown darkened Sarah's face. She stomped both feet. "That's your job."

"Now it's yours."

Maisy turned her back on her little sister and marched away. Sarah's wails nipped at her heels. Only sheer determination kept her from racing back to comfort her. *Keep going. Keep going. It's for the best. The best for Sarah. The best for Shelly. The best for everyone.*

The wails died away, replaced by an eerie silence. Not even the birds sang. Only the occasional whisper of leaves rustling in a dank breeze that shook the boughs of the sycamore trees offered company.

Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye.

Good-bye to her childhood. Good-bye to her family. Good-bye to the future she'd once thought just around the corner.

By the time Maisy made it to the intersection, Nate's truck idled in the shade of a poplar tree that stretched its branches over the fence toward the road. An almost painful rush of relief flooded Maisy. The passenger door swung open. Nate had reached across the cab and shoved it. She climbed in.

Without a word, he maneuvered the truck back onto the road. They traveled in silence to the highway. The pickup smelled different. It usually made her think of Christmas and pine trees. Now it smelled like sweat and stale beer. She hazarded a quick glance at Nate. His shirt was wrinkled. It was the same one he'd worn the night before. Sweat stains darkened his armpits. His eyes were bloodshot.

He halted at the stop sign and glanced both ways. "So are you gonna talk or what?"

"Talk about what?" Maisy clutched her bag to her chest. Her arms and legs were heavy with fatigue, her eyes gritty with unshed tears and dust. The cool air wafting from the vents dried the sweat

on her face. She heaved a breath somewhere between a sob and a sigh. “We said it all last night.”

“At least tell me where you’re going.”

“Why?”

“Because.” He beat a rhythm with his thumbs on the wheel. “Because it feels weird to think I won’t know where you are. You’re carrying around a part of me. I figure I should know where you are.”

“I didn’t think you cared.”

“That’s bull and you know it.” He ran one hand through his hair. It stood up, tousled like a little boy who’d just gotten out of bed. “I care. A lot. I don’t do what we did with just anybody.”

“It’s hard to tell.”

He pulled onto the highway, gunned the motor, and shot past an eighteen-wheeler. “You have a right to be mad at me.”

“I’m not mad—”

“Just let me get this out.” He wiped at his face with his sleeve and sniffed. “You caught me by surprise. It took me a minute to wrap my head around it.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I could tell my parents. We could get married. If that’s what you want. I think my mom would be okay with it. She’s always after my big brother Tommy to give her grandkids and my sister Amanda too. You could stay with my parents while I finish school. My dad will have a cow, but hey, he’s a dairy farmer. What’s one more?”

Married to a English man. Living in an English world. Maisy closed her eyes. What would her life be like cut off from her family but living in the same small community? Would she wear pants, drive a car, and go to the Baptist church? She might be able to do the first two, but not the last one. Never the last one. Her plan had always been to join her church. Her rumspringa was a time for finding a man to share her life. Not for finding her faith. That she had.

Kelly Irvin

“I can’t. I just can’t.” She silently ordered her voice to cooperate. *Stop shaking.* “It’s nice of you to offer, but you don’t want to marry me and I can’t marry you.”

“I figured.”

“I’m going to Haven, Kansas. I have a cousin there. She’s older, more like an aunt than a cousin, but she was always nice to me. We went to her wedding in Haven. She writes me letters, and she always says at the end that I should come for a visit.”

Never dreaming it would be under these circumstances, no doubt.

“Okay. That’s good, I guess.”

“I’m really tired, Nate.”

“Relax. I’ll get you to KC, no worries.”

Maisy closed her eyes and let the world pass her by. Sleep would be a relief. No need to think, to worry, to wonder about the future. Sweet relief.

“Hey, hey.”

Fingers caressed her cheeks. A soft, warm, familiar touch. “Nate . . . Nate?”

Maisy sat up with a start. She opened her eyes.

His handsome face filled with regret, Nate eased away from her. “You were sleeping hard, girl.”

“Where are we?”

“The Amtrak station. You slept the whole way.”

If only she could sleep away this entire season of her life. Not just eighty minutes. She straightened. Her muscles and bones protested. It had to be how an old woman felt. The view from her window had changed. No more open wheat, alfalfa, and cornfields decorated along the edges with huge, brilliant sunflowers beckoning to the sun. No cattle and horses. Instead, cars, trucks, and

taxis clogged the road, moving like snails into the station's vast parking lot.

Nate held up his phone. "I got on the website. The closest you can get to Haven is Hutchinson. There's only one train. It leaves at 10:42 tonight. You'll get there in the middle of the night. I tried Wichita, but it's the same deal. Are you sure you want to do this? What about a Greyhound bus?"

She'd traveled on Amtrak with her family, never a bus. They were already at the train station. Still, the middle of the night? Would she be safe traveling alone? She had the money she'd saved from her cleaning jobs, a tiny nest egg intended for when she married. A sob bubbled in her throat. She swallowed it. "How much does it cost?"

His forehead furrowed, Nate did some fancy thumb work on his phone. After a few minutes he shook his head and shrugged. "There's not much difference in the tickets, if you do economy. Like less than sixty bucks. The next bus out of KC to Hutchinson doesn't leave until 8:20 a.m. tomorrow. You'd have to spend the night at the bus station. Or get a hotel room—"

"No, no, I can't do that." A shudder ran through Maisy. She'd heard the horror stories about the big city. And the bus stations. Better to leave tonight and pass the darkness on the train where everyone would be sleeping.

Nate scooped around on the seat so he was facing her. He leaned against his door. "I could stay with you."

"No. You've done enough."

"Too much, I guess."

"No more than I did."

"I can't just drop you off at the curb."

"It costs money to park, doesn't it?"

"I have money." He opened the console divider and pulled out a bulging, white envelope. "Here. It's for you."

Kelly Irvin

He held it out. Maisy didn't move.

"Go on, take it."

"I told you I'm not . . . I'm keeping this baby."

"So you'll need money for stuff, like doctor's appointments, bigger clothes, healthy food and diapers and bottles, baby stuff." He leaned forward and tucked the envelope into her bag. "It's part of the money from the grand champion steer I sold at the county fair this summer."

"That's your college money."

"I've sold a steer or a pig every year since grade school. Plus Mom and Dad will help me. I'll be fine."

It didn't feel right. Or maybe it was. Pride couldn't be allowed to get in the way of what was best for her baby. Not their baby. Her baby. She would have to put him—or her—first from now on.

Maisy sucked in a long breath. She opened her door and took one quick look back at the father of this baby. "Thank you. And thank you for the ride."

"Let me go in with you. I can stay until the train comes."

"You should go home." If she was going to be on her own from here on out, she might as well start now. "I'll be fine."

"You're just a girl. You're hardly even grown up. You'd be a senior in high school if you were—"

"Not Amish? I haven't been baptized yet, but I *am* Amish in every other way. I'm a grown-up." And getting older by the minute. Old enough to make a baby, old enough to take care of him and herself. "Good-bye, Nate."

"Send me a picture."

"We don't take pictures."

Maisy hopped from the truck, hitched her bag's straps up on her shoulder, and set out for her future.