

THE HEART'S
Bidding
AMISH CALLINGS

KELLY IRVIN

 ZONDERVAN®

ZONDERVAN

The Heart's Bidding

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To Grandma Irene and Grandpa Roy Elliott, Uncle Duane Elliott, and Mom (Janice Elliott Lyne) for the lessons in empathy, kindness, and human nature. Whether you realized it or not, you were good teachers.



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Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Colossians 3:23–24

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

1 Corinthians 1:26–29

Glossary of Deutsch*

aamen: amen

ach: oh

aenti: aunt

bewillkumm: welcome

botching: clapping game

bopli, boplin: baby, babies

bruder, brieder: brother, brothers

bu, buwe: boy, boys

bussi, bussis: cat, cats

daadi: grandpa

daed: father

danki: thank you

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

dat: dad

dawdy haus: attached home for grandparents when they retire

dochder, dechder: daughter, daughters

dumm: dumb

eldre: parents

Englischer: English or Non-Amish

enkel: grandson

eppies: cookies

Es dutt mer leed: I am sorry

Glossary

faeriwell: good-bye

fraa, fraas: wife, wives

Froh Neiyaahr: Happy New Year

gaul: horse

gern gschehme: you're welcome

Gmay: church district

groosmammi, groosmammis: grandmother, grandmothers

Gott: God

groosdaadi: grandfather

guder mariye: good morning

gut nacht: good night

gut: good

hallo: hello

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[®]

kossin: cousin

kuss, koss: kiss (singular/plural noun)

maedel, maed: girl, girls

mamm: mom

mammi: grandma

mann, menner: husband, husbands

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

schieler: scholar, scholars

schtarem: storm

schweschder, schwesdchdre: sister, sisters

seelich gebortsdaag: happy birthday

sei so gut: please (be so kind)

suh: son

tietschern, tietschere: teacher, teachers

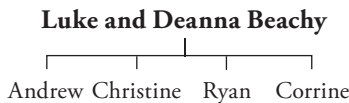
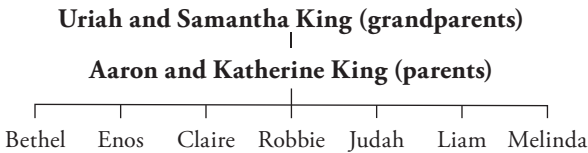
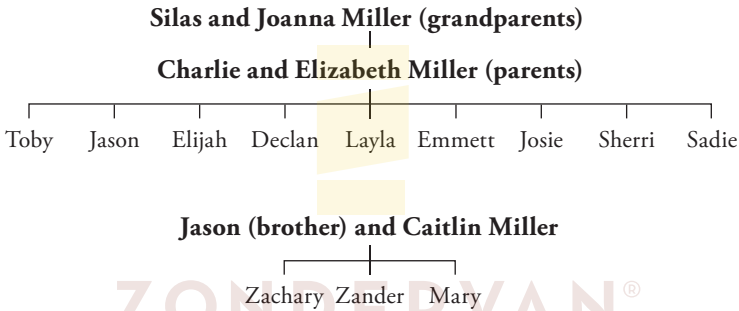
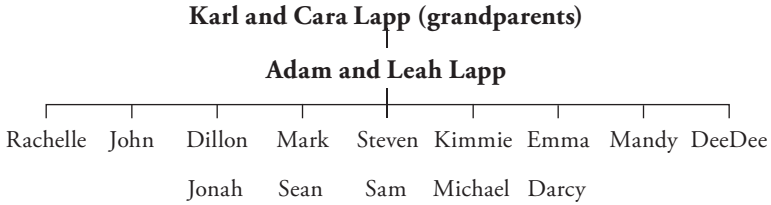
weddermann: weatherman

wunderbarr: wonderful

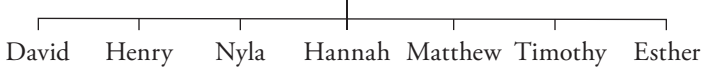
✱The German dialect commonly referred to as Pennsylvania Dutch is not a written language and varies depending on the location and origin of the Amish settlement. These spellings are approximations. Most Amish children learn English after they start school. They also learn high German, which is used in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

Featured Families

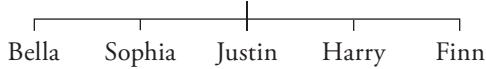
Lee's Gulch, Virginia



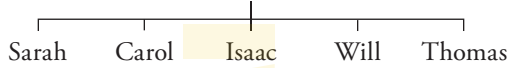
Bartholomew “Bart” (bishop) and Miriam Plank



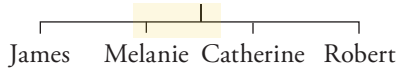
Martin and Cindy Hershberger (deacon)



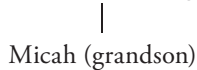
Jedediah “Jed” and Martha Knepp (minister)



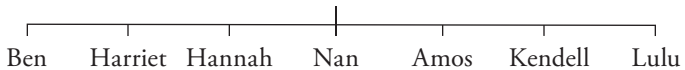
Noah and Mary Eash (parents' committee member)



Jeremiah and Naomi Troyer (grandparents)



Atlee and Hilda Schrock



Chapter 1

The single candle stuck in Toby Miller's oversized banana-nut muffin spoke volumes, but it didn't say anything worth hearing.

His brother Jason, a grin plastered across his bearded face, struck a match and lit the candle. "*Seelich gebortsdaag, Bruder,*" he sang off tune. "And many more, old man."

Twenty-nine wasn't old. Not by the world's standard. What Jason really meant was old to be a Plain bachelor. He was right, but he didn't need to know that. Jason already had a big head. "*Danki,* but this isn't the time for this right now. You know *Mamm* will have a birthday cake tonight." Toby blew out the candle and tossed it in the wastebasket. He laid the muffin next to his lunch box on the counter that ran below the back window of the Miller Family Auctioneering Company's largest trailer, currently parked at the Knowles County, Virginia, fairgrounds. "Did you double-check the sound system?"

"I did. So did *Dat.*"

Toby glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes until he had to be on the platform ready to call the first piece of furniture. "And the furniture's on the stage?"

Kelly Irvin

“*Jah*. A six-piece, handcrafted, oak bedroom set.” Grandpa Silas squeezed through the trailer door, bringing with him the mingled scents of nearby grills barbecuing chicken, sausage, brisket, hamburgers, hot dogs, and an assortment of other tasty meats. Like his grandsons, Grandpa’s height stretched to only a few inches below the trailer’s ceiling. He still stood ramrod straight despite his sixty-plus years and the painful osteoarthritis that attacked his joints. “Everything’s ready. When did you become a worrywart?”

“He didn’t. He’s just trying to change the subject.” Jason brushed crumbs from his blond, runaway beard and threw his muffin wrapper into the trash.

Toby didn’t need a mirror to know what he looked like. His younger brother had the same slate-blue eyes, blond hair, broad shoulders, and height as Toby did. Except Jason’s marital status had been rewarded with the beard. “He’s twenty-nine and no closer to being married than he was a year ago. I don’t care, but Mamm sure does.”

Mom had a good heart and a streak of stubbornness when it came to her children’s happiness. They’d better be content or she would know why. Maybe this would be the year Toby made her happy and gave her another daughter-in-law. How would he do that? Toby caught himself shaking his head. A man his age didn’t go to singings, that was for sure. The words of his once-special friend echoed in his head: “*What woman would want to spend half the year raising children by herself while her husband plied his trade at auctions across five states?*”

His mother, grandmother, and Jason’s wife all did it, but not Janey Hershberger. It took her two years of courting to figure out she couldn’t see herself living that way. “*You may think it’s normal, Toby, but no fraa wants to be at home alone half the year while you gallivant across the countryside.*”

Toby shrugged on his jacket and settled his black hat farther back on his head. He was content with his life. Really, he was. Absolutely content. Really.

“Your mamm knows how important family is to a Plain man.” A faint grimace etched on his grizzled face, Grandpa rubbed his swollen knuckles. “Family comes second only to faith.”

Silas Miller started the auctioneering company in his midtwenties at a time when Plain communities frowned on the use of microphones and electricity for auctions. He overcame the objections and gained permission from the district to build a business that now supported three generations of Millers. A grandson didn't argue with a man of his experience. “Mamm also knows what it costs a *fraa* to have her *mamm* traveling away from home half the year. It hasn't been easy for her.”

“Nor for your *groosmamma* either.” Grandpa tugged a prescription bottle from a knapsack on the counter. He winced as he turned the lid and dumped two pills into his callused palm. “But I've never heard either one of them complain. Whatever you decide about courting is your business.”

“Danki, *Daadi*.” Toby rolled his eyes at his brother. Jason stuck out his tongue. He didn't always act like a married man with three kids and another on the way. Toby gave him another eye roll. “Grow up, Bruder.”

“You first.”

The trailer door swung open and stayed open, bringing with it a gust of cold air. Dad stood at the bottom of the steps. “Did you all fall asleep in there? It's time to get this show started.”

“They were jawing me to death.” Grandpa bolted for the steps faster than a man half his age. “You know how they are right before they get on the platform.”

Antsy. That's how they got. Full of pee and vinegar, to quote Grandma Joanna.

Toby hopped over the steps and landed in the sparse, tender blades of grass just beginning to sprout this first week of March after a long, cold winter. Jason settled in beside him. Their brothers Declan and Elijah joined them with the two oldest Miller men in the lead. They were on the job.

At the platform they parted ways, ready to do their parts. Declan would handle the second auction of garden and farming equipment, while Jason had the third auction of livestock. Orville Katzman, who'd hired their company to handle the huge multi-family moving-slash-estate auction, met Toby at the bottom of the wooden steps. He handed Toby an updated list for the household goods auction. "How're you, Toby? Are you ready? I hear you're a bit older today."

"I'm ready, willing, and able."

To prove his point Toby snared the list and bounded up the steps. Taking his turn as auctioneer today served as the best birthday present ever. First up, get a feel for the crowd. He gazed out at the sea of farm equipment hats, baseball caps, straw hats, bonnets, black wool coats, and scarves that protected heads from a brisk, chilly March breeze. Some folks, coffee travel mugs in hand, lounged in their canvas camp chairs.

Others stood in clusters along the periphery or settled onto two sets of portable bleachers toward the back of the grassy field. They all talked at once, creating a swell of noise not unlike a flock of blue jays chattering. As casual as they might appear to the untrained eye, they were ready. They had their auction bid cards in their laps. They'd come to buy. And it was Toby's job to sell. Nothing could be better than the first auction of the spring season.

The usual bevy of young girls—sixteen, seventeen, eighteen

years old—occupied the first row. It happened at every auction. They occasionally bid on small items but rarely bought anything. Jason called them Toby's fan club. Emmett mostly glowered at them. Toby ignored them. They were harmless, but he was careful not to encourage them.

Adrenaline made his heart pump harder. His fingers tingled with anticipation. His whole body warmed. His cadence organized words in his head and prepared to slide toward the tip of his tongue. *Who'll give me ten dollars. Bid ten. Ten. Ten. Bid. Now fifteen.*

He strode to the auctioneer's table and picked up the microphone. His fingers held it lightly. Otherwise they would cramp before the end of the day. He took a swig from his water bottle and cleared his throat. The crowd quieted. He nodded at Elijah and Emmett. They would act as bid spotters, pointing out bidders he might miss. Elijah ducked his head and nodded. Emmett, who was younger but more outgoing, gave Toby a big thumbs-up. "Ready when you are, Bruder."

"Wait a minute." A smirk stretched across his face, Orville strolled over to Toby. He held out his hand. "Let me make a quick announcement."

What was he up to? A change in the consignments wouldn't give Orville an expression like a kid about to snatch a cookie from the cookie jar. Warily Toby handed over the mic.

"Folks, could I have your attention please? I want to take a quick moment to share two pieces of news with you." Orville had a high-pitched, whiny voice not suited to amplification. "Number one, today is our auctioneer's birthday. Can you folks give Toby Miller a nice, big happy birthday round of applause?"

Heat singed Toby's neck and face. He ducked his head. It was one thing to be the center of attention for the sake of his job,

another for a birthday—everyone had them. No need to make a public spectacle about it. “Orville—”

A chorus of birthday wishes in both English and Pennsylvania Dutch drowned out his protest. Several folks began to sing. Applause rang out. Toby shook his head. “Thank you, thank you.”

“Announcement number two, folks.” The crowd quieted. Orville moved to the platform’s edge. He pointed at Toby’s grandpa, who’d been busy making sure the furniture was properly lined up. “Many of you have been coming to these auctions for years. You know Silas Miller, founder of Miller Family Auctioneers Company. You know he started this business many moons ago, and his company has been our go-to company every year since. I thought you should know this will be his last auction here at the Knowles County Fairgrounds. He’s retiring. Could you give him a hand, let him know how much you appreciate all his years of hard work?”

What? Something was wrong with Toby’s hearing.

Grandpa never sat still. He loved to work. He loved auctioneering. He loved traveling. For a few seconds no one reacted. Toby opened his mouth. He closed it.

Then the people were on their feet, clapping. Grandpa hardly seemed to notice. He kept right on working, the way he always had.

As if nothing had changed.

His absence would change everything. He wasn’t just the boss, the administrator, the founder. He was a fixture in every good memory Toby had growing up—on and off the road. He was the level that kept the Miller men on an even keel mile after mile, year after year.

Such thoughts were selfish. Toby shoved them aside. If Grandpa felt the need to rest easy more permanently, he’d earned the right. Time for Toby to step up and take the load from his elder.

Dad couldn’t do it, much as he might try. Grandpa handled the

bookkeeping, record keeping, and bill paying. Dad had an aversion to anything that involved reading or writing. Nor was he a fan of the technology required to promote their business now that it covered an ever-growing region. Who would take over scheduling, maintenance of the trailers and equipment, and working with the folks who handled the company's website and computer work?

Toby sought out his father, who was moving an oak curio cabinet with Emmett. His expression grim, he shook his head and mouthed the words, *I'll explain later.*

Right now they had an auction to run.

Later, indeed.



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Chapter 2

English women had it easy. They didn't have to figure out how to use a porta potty while wearing long dresses. Rachelle Lapp smiled to herself as stepped from the squat structure that smelled of a mixture of cloying, fruity air freshener and other things she'd rather not think about. A small challenge among life's many. Plus it gave her three minutes of solitude.

She chuckled. Did a porta potty qualify as a good place to be alone? She wasn't that desperate. She loved her little brothers and sisters. Her siblings would be champing at the bit to get back to the carnival packed into a small piece of Knowles County Fairground this first Saturday in March. She hated to disappoint them, but they were out of tickets.

Rachelle had saved enough money to buy them each a treat from one of the dozens of food booths that provided a buffer between the carnival and the adjacent auction. That would soften the sting. Using the portion of her salary not needed to help her parents support their big family to take them to the carnival and the auction was as much fun for her as it was for them. They loved auction days, and having a carnival plant itself on the fairgrounds at the same time was almost too good to be true. Rachelle didn't

ride the rides, but she did live vicariously in their shining faces and laughter.

She let the door close behind her. The cold breeze blew away the porta potty's stink. Shivering, she buttoned her gray jacket. "All done. Who wants a funnel cake?"

"Me, me!" Sam's small frame came into dark focus against the sun behind him. "Me and Sean want funnel cakes."

"*Nee*, I don't either." Sam's twin brother shook his head so hard his straw hat shifted. "I want fried Oreos ice cream."

"Sean and I," Rachelle gently corrected. She encouraged the kids to speak English with her for practice. Most of the time they forgot or resorted to Pennsylvania Dutch when they became excited. When they did speak English, her teacher genes kicked in. "It's pretty chilly for ice cream, but it's your call. Why don't you get one of each and share?"

The twins sat cross-legged on the sparse sprigs of grass forcing themselves through the winter-hardened ground outside the row of porta potties. Where were the others? "Emma? DeeDee? Mandy?"

The girls sat on top of a picnic table several yards from the endless line of porta potties, *botching*. From the sounds of their breathless words, claps, and giggles, they were doing "Rockin' Robin." Mandy waved. "We voted. We decided on Frito pies and caramel apples, if there's enough money for two things. If not, we'll be happy with fried Twinkies."

All good choices. Rachelle did a mental head count. Three girls and two boys. She was missing two boys. Her heartbeat did a weird two-step. "Where's Michael? And Jonah?"

Sam cocked his head and wrinkled his upturned nose. He scanned the grounds as if his brothers would suddenly reappear. "They were here a minute ago."

"I know that. I was only in the bathroom for three minutes."

Rachelle swung around for a full 360-degree review of the area. No chunky five-year-old missing a front tooth. No skinny eight-year-old wearing black-framed glasses with an elastic strip to keep them firmly in place. “Emma, where are Michael and Jonah?”

At eleven Emma was the oldest of the siblings on this outing. She should’ve been watching over them in Rachelle’s brief absence. She popped off the picnic table and stuck her hands on her hips. “Michael wanted Jonah to win a teddy bear for him at the ring-toss booth. I told him nee because we don’t have any more tickets.”

“And then what happened?” Rachelle squeezed hand sanitizer from the bottle on a nearby stand. She rubbed her hands together harder than necessary. “Did he take nee for an answer?”

“You know Michael.”

She did. The little boy had a stubborn streak longer than a country mile and a city block. Nothing Dad and Mom had done to guide him toward obedience seemed to work. “They can’t be out there on their own, Emma. Michael’s too young and Jonah’s too sweet for this world.”

A stranger could easily take advantage of them. Or take them away. It happened even in places like Lee’s Gulch.

“I’m sorry, *Schweschder*. I was botching and I thought they were playing with Sam and Sean.” Emma’s face crumpled. Tears threatened. “I’ll find them. I should’ve kept a better watch.”

A small boy with no fear of strangers—no fear of anything in the world, really—and a boy with limited ability to understand all the ways the world could be dangerous were traipsing around together. Rachelle had been responsible for caring for her younger siblings for as long as she could remember. She was good at it. She changed her first diaper at five. Taught her little brothers and sisters to tie their shoes and say their prayers. Even as a grade school

kid who herded her younger brothers and sisters like a gangly fair-headed shepherd. She reveled in it. Until just now.

"It's okay. I'll find them." She patted Emma's shoulder. "You need to stay here. Stay together, all of you. No one else runs off. I'll find them and bring them back."

"If we all search for them, we'll find them faster." Sam hopped to his feet and dusted off his hands. Sean did the same. They were so identical even Grandma and Grandpa had trouble telling them apart. "Me and Sean will go to the ring-toss booth. I reckon that's where they are."

And then Rachelle would be scouring the grounds for four boys instead of two. "Nee, someone else will get lost." Mom and Dad had entrusted her with the children. She was responsible for keeping them safe. "I'll be back as soon as I find them."

Sei so gut, Gott, let no harm come to them. Sei so gut. Direct me to them, sei so gut.

Following Sam's logic, she headed to the game booths first. The boys had no money, no tickets. How did they think they'd play? Did Jonah even understand he needed a ticket to play? Brushing the thought aside, Rachelle dodged a lady pushing a stroller over the uneven ground while eating a sausage on a stick with one hand. Then a man carrying a boy on his shoulders. The child was eating cotton candy. Some of it stuck to the man's hair. The crowd thickened as she approached the booths. Balloon pop, bean bag toss, milk-bottle knockdown, ring toss, spin the wheel. Any one of them would fascinate her boys.

Mom would chuckle if she could hear Rachelle's thoughts. They weren't her boys, they were her brothers, but somehow they were lodged in that place in her heart where there was so much love to give. Until she had her own, she poured it on these little guys

along with her scholars at school. She had more than enough to go around. The more she gave, the more her supply grew.

Funny how that worked. God was love. Scripture said so. No wonder the supply never ended.

No boys in matching blue shirts, denim pants, suspenders, and matching jackets. No little boy whose dark hair stuck out from under his straw hat in scraggly tufts because he needed a haircut and never wanted to sit still long enough for Mom to give him one. No short-for-his-age boy with that same hair and ocher eyes enlarged by thick lenses who always wanted to please.

“Where are you?” Rachele whispered. “Gott, where are they?”

She stopped at the ring-toss booth. The lady running it nodded at Rachele’s description of Michael and Jonah. “They were here about ten minutes ago. Two of the cutest little whippersnappers I’ve seen in days.” She had the raspy voice of someone who smoked a lot. Her thin face creased in a jagged, yellow-toothed smile at the memory. “I explained that they needed tickets to play. The littlest one was so disappointed I let him toss a few rings to perk him up.”

“Then what happened?”

“Dang if he didn’t get a ring on a bottle.” The lady chortled. “Beginner’s luck. So I gave them each one of the little penguins.”

The stuffed animal would’ve fit in the palms of their hands. “Did you see where they went from here?”

“Honey, I had a crowd by then. All I know is they were thrilled with those little penguins. Kept thanking me over and over again.” She stuck her hands with yellowed fingernails so long they curled into her smudged apron pockets and produced a crumpled pack of cigarettes. “Go to the fairgrounds office. They get lots of lost kids. They have a procedure for finding them.”

Worry an ever-tightening iron ring around her heart, Rachele squeezed past a cluster of high school boys crowding the booth.

Should she report them missing? Nausea rose in her throat. With every minute that ticked by, the more the possibility loomed that they could get into serious trouble.

Much longer and she'd have no choice.

Gott? Where are they?



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Chapter 3

*A*n auctioneer focused solely on his job, nothing else from the time he picked up the mic until he called the last wringer-wash machine, quilt, or buggy. Toby took a deep breath and let it out. *Do the job. Focus.* He nodded at Elijah. His brother pulled the canvas drop cloth from the bedroom set.

“Next up we have a six-piece, handcrafted oak bed set with a mirror, king-size bed, end tables, dresser, and blanket chest. Number 33.”

A ripple of “ahs” and “ohs” ran through the crowd. It was easy to tell who had scoped out this set beforehand. Those savvy bidders sat forward, bid cards grasped in their fisted hands, eyes squinting, expressions fierce.

Toby took another deep breath. *Here we go.* “Jump right in, folks. Who’ll give me \$1,000 . . . ?” The rapid-fire cadence was there, waiting for him. After ten years as a bid caller, the rhythm came as easy as breathing even after a five-month hiatus. The beautiful bedroom set was an easy sell. The bids rose steadily until the price hit \$3,300. Then he had to apply some pressure. “Come on, folks, this is a gorgeous bed set. Handmade. You won’t find anything like this at a discount furniture store. It should’ve started at

this price. Look at this handiwork. Let's go for a nice even number. Who'll give me \$4,000?"

The white-haired English woman in the front row who'd been with him all the way held up her card. He pointed her out. "\$4,000. Who'll give me \$4,500? Bid \$4,500. Now \$4,500—"

"\$4,200." A man wearing a black cowboy hat who'd been neck and neck with the elderly woman from the first bid, thrust his card in the air. "I'll give you \$4,200."

"You want to do this the slow way?" Laughing, Tobias dabbed at his sweaty forehead with a towel from the pile next to his water bottle. "Fine. \$4,200. Who'll give me \$4,300? Bid \$4,300. \$4,300. Now \$4,300."

The elderly lady's card shot up.

"\$4,300. Bid \$4,500. Now \$4,500. \$4,500. Bid \$4,500 . . ."

A few more scans of the crowd. Elijah shook his head. So did Emmett. Toby offered Black Cowboy Hat a thumbs-up followed by a thumbs-down. Frowning, Black Cowboy Hat shook his head.

"Sold to the lady down front for \$4,300. Ma'am, what's your number?"

Next up a treadle sewing machine on a beautifully handcrafted stand. Then an oak table and eight chairs. A set of hickory rockers. The sun rose in the sky, warming the stage. Toby shed his jacket. Then he rolled up his sleeves.

The crowd was a good one. They'd brought their sense of humor with their wallets. They responded to Toby's jokes and stepped up their bids at his prodding. Now and then he switched to Pennsylvania Dutch to make the Plain families feel at home. On days like today no better job existed.

Apparently two little boys standing near the platform's right side thought so too. Toby caught him mimicking Toby's words and his every move. He chuckled. A mini-auctioneer in the making.

Another quick look told him the boys were Michael and Jonah Lapp, children of Adam and Leah Lapp who lived down the road from the Millers. What were these two youngsters doing at the auction alone? Most Plain kids were able to take care of themselves at a younger age than their English counterparts, but Jonah was what English folks called developmentally delayed. Plain parents preferred special.

Michael probably thought he could take care of his brother. He was an independent soul. He had arm wrapped around Jonah's waist. With his other hand, he mimicked Toby's efficient hand gestures aimed at the various bidders. His mouth moved as if he could follow Toby's every word.

Why not give him a chance? The crowd would love it. Keeping their attention and providing bits of entertainment were part of the gig. Toby squatted at the platform's edge. "Hey, Michael, do you want my job?"

Michael's grin stretched. His dimples deepened. He let go of Jonah and clapped. "Jah, jah!"

His expression confused, Jonah cocked his head. "Jah?"

"Jah! Don't you want Michael to be an auctioneer?" Toby swept his free arm out in a flourish. "Bring him on up here, Jonah. Come by my co-auctioneer, Michael."

Jonah ducked his head, but he trudged toward the wooden steps that led to the platform stage with Michael in tow.

"Let's give them an encouraging hand, folks!"

The crowd obliged. By the time Jonah's grin matched Michael's, the younger boy whooped and waved. Jonah mimicked his brother's moves. The more the English spectators clapped, the more the boys responded.

"Okay, my friend, here we go." Toby pointed to another bed

set, this one solid oak, again handmade, with five pieces. “Where shall we start?”

Jonah let go of Michael’s hand and scampered back to the platform’s edge. Michael wrinkled his sun-freckled nose. “I think \$1,000.” The five-year-old had a lisp thanks to a missing front tooth. “Bid \$1,000. Who’ll give me \$1,000?”

He tried to employ Toby’s singsong cadence, but he immediately got stuck. Toby patted his shoulder. “That’s okay. Here’s how it goes. Bid \$1,000. \$1,000, \$1,000. Bid \$1,000. Now \$1,500?” Toby slowed way down, letting each word hold sway. Michael pointed and waved like an old pro. “Bid \$1,500, \$1,500, Bid \$1,500. You upfront. \$2,000? Who’ll give me \$2,000? Bid \$2,000? Bid \$2,500. \$2,500. Who wants in? Now \$3,000. \$3,000. Bid \$3,000—”

“Psst . . . psst . . . Michael . . . come down from there.”

The stage whisper emanated from just beyond the platform. His concentration broken, Toby glanced down. Rachelle Lapp stood at his feet. Her hands were on hips. Bright-red spots glowed on her cheeks. If looks could kill, Toby would be a deer hung on a hook ready to be dressed for its venison.

Rachelle shook her finger at him. “You too, Jonah.”

“He’s working with me.” Toby moved closer to the platform’s edge. Mic behind his back, he squatted and lowered his voice to match her whisper. “No harm done, really. I invited them up here.”

“You should know better.” Rachelle’s steely expression matched the fire in her other eyes. She was a lit torch. “You may have permission to use an electric microphone and stand on a stage in front of a crowd. These *buwe* do not. They don’t know any better, but you do.”

“*Es dutt mer—*”

“Sorry or not, you’re an adult. You shouldn’t take advantage of Jonah.” A tendril of dark, almost-black hair had escaped her prayer

Kelly Irvin

covering. The desire to brush it from her face came over Toby, as surprising as a cloudburst of rain in August. “Just send them down here, sei so gut.”

He would never take advantage of Jonah. The Millers had a child with an intellectual disability. Sadie was nine and she had Down syndrome. She was Toby’s favorite sibling—although he didn’t spread that around.

He scrambled back from the edge—of the platform and from the realization that he’d known Rachelle Lapp, seven years his junior, all her life, but he’d never really seen her. Rachelle had grown up far too pretty for her own good—or maybe it was for his good.



ZONDERVAN®

Chapter 4

The boys were safe. Nothing could be more important than that. Rachelle sucked in a breath and let it out. Her arms and legs quaked. Her heart hammered. The fact that Michael was on the platform, using a mic, the center of attention, wasn't the end of the world. He was five, after all. The stares pierced Rachelle like hot pokers. *Sorry, Gott.*

She straightened her shoulders and raised her chin. Women from her district likely were judging her—no matter how much Scripture said they shouldn't. The English folks probably wondered what the big deal was. Rachelle didn't care what either group thought—at least she tried not to care. But her parents worked hard to follow the *Ordnung*. Not only the rules themselves, but also the spirit of the law. After many years of tugging back and forth in Plain communities like Lee's Gulch, auctioneers had been given the right to use electric sound systems as a necessity for their jobs. They had to stand on stages and be the center of attention—their occupation required it.

On the other hand, people like Rachelle and the boys didn't use electricity. And they avoided the limelight. They were to keep themselves apart from the world. Not strut around on a stage. Toby

Miller knew that. The man stood above the crowd like a beardless Paul Bunyan with his height, wide shoulders, a shock of blond hair peeking from under his straw hat over eyes the color of slate—sometimes blue, sometimes gray—and a rich, deep baritone that carried even without a microphone.

Not that she'd been staring at him at the school picnic last year or the church lunch two weeks ago. Not much. Everyone knew Toby was a confirmed bachelor, married to his job. He was at least twenty-nine to Rachelle's twenty-two. Neither of those facts kept her breath from catching when he caught her gaze at a Sunday lunch or when their paths crossed at a frolic.

Get a grip, Rachelle. She ignored Toby's sweet smile. He couldn't get in her good graces with those dimples. "Come on, Jonah. You too, Michael, let's go."

His shoulders drooping, Jonah plodded down the steps. Michael peeked out from behind Toby. The auctioneer straightened and gave the boy a nudge toward the stairs. "Danki for the help, little guy. Maybe someday I can give you lessons."

Michael's frown disappeared. He skipped across the platform as if he wasn't in the least bit of trouble. It took a hardened soul to stay mad at such a happy-go-lucky child. In this case, Rachelle would harden her heart. He'd done something dangerous—for him and for his brother. Mom and Dad would see to his punishment.

"Danki for loaning him to me." Toby seemed to think this was funny. He beamed. "He's a *gut* helper."

She hadn't loaned Michael to anyone. This wasn't the time to make that point. Rachelle turned her back on Toby and prepared to wade through the crowd.

"Michael auctioneer." His forehead wrinkled in an effort to pronounce the last word, Jonah took her hand. His was cold, damp, and sticky. "Toby said."

Despite an obstinate streak, Jonah generally did as he was told by adults.

"I understand that. But you shouldn't have left the port a pot-ties. I told you to stay put." Rachele took Michael's hand. She wanted both of them close. Michael trotted along, offering a smile to everyone in their path. They smiled back even as they moved out of his way, such was his charm. "What if you and Michael had gotten lost? That would make Dat and Mamm very sad."

Jonah's chin trembled. His eyes filled with tears behind lenses smudged with his greasy fingerprints. "You too?"

"Me too." She squeezed his hand. "I found you, so it's okay now. Just don't do it again."

"Schweschder mad."

"I'm not mad."

"Gut. No like mad."

"Me neither."

Together they traipsed back through the fairgrounds, passing the carnival booths that had gotten them in trouble in the first place. Michael didn't seem to have learned much. He kept tugging at her arm, begging to stop. Just one game of darts. One game of bean bag toss. Keeping him on course was like trying to herd tadpoles. Finally Rachele halted in an empty spot between the fishing booth and the spin-the-wheel booth. She knelt so she could look at him eye to eye. "Stop asking, Michael. You don't get a reward for acting badly. You went off on your own and took Jonah with you. I'll not reward your behavior. Do you understand?"

Michael ducked his head. He kicked at a rock with his dusty boot. "Are you going to tell Dat and Mamm?"

"I have to tell them."

His lower lip protruded. "I didn't mean no harm."

"You have to remember Jonah is special. He may be older in

years, but in other ways, he's younger than you. If you ask him to do something, he'll do it. He likes to make you happy. You have to help him make gut decisions."

Herein lay the challenge of being a teacher and caregiver for a child like Jonah. Her job was to guide him as he grew older, while keeping him safe. He deserved some independence. But he also needed to be kept safe. A balancing act that some days seemed like walking across a narrow bridge with no handrails and a deep river flowing under it. She didn't swim all that well.

His chin jutting out, Michael glared. "But he's big. He's bigger than me."

"Jonah's body is getting bigger, but his mind isn't getting older. It won't, not like yours will."

Michael studied Jonah who'd squatted in the grass to pick up a rock. "I have to watch out for him?"

"Jah, we don't want anything to happen to him."

Michael's glare faded. He squeezed past Rachele and held out his hand to Jonah. "Let's go home, Bruder."

Jonah glanced up. His smile, the sunniest in all of Virginia, broke across his face. "Jah, Bruder, home."

He took Michael's hand and together the two led the way back to the spot where Rachele had left the other kids. Emma saw them first. She jumped up from the picnic table and raced across the field. "There you are. Finally. Where did you find them? Michael, what were you thinking—?"

"That's enough. We've already had that talk." Rachele stepped between the irate girl and her brothers. "Like Mamm loves to say, all's well that ends well. We're going home."

"No treats, I guess." Sam's exaggerated sigh was mournful. "I sure wanted a funnel cake."

"How about pie instead?" Rachele patted the canvas bag that

hung from her shoulder. “Mamm asked me to pick up three pies. She wants to support our school fundraiser. We’ll go home, do our chores, have supper, and then eat pie for dessert.”

Everyone seemed to agree that was a good plan. Thank goodness. Weariness invaded Rachele’s very soul. Every few feet she glanced back to make sure her charges were staying close. It took a full ten minutes to arrive at the pie booth. A line of customers signaled the booth’s popularity. All the families wanted to support the school, even if they were from other districts. Plus everyone loved pie. Several more minutes passed before they made it to the counter.

“Rachele, it’s gut to see you!” Elizabeth Miller waved to the kids who trailed after Rachele like ducklings parading behind a mama duck. “Sadie, Rachele’s here.”

Sadie turned around. A smear of cherry pie decorated one fair cheek. Her face lit up, her dimples—so like her brother Toby’s—deepened. With a squeal, she dropped the towel in her hand and sped across the booth. “*Tietschern, Tietschern.*”

The Millers’ sweet youngest child had graduated this past week to making change—a task that delighted her. She wanted to work in her family’s combination store this summer. Teaching her was a gift. “Sadie, how are you?”

“Gut. I’m gut.” Ignoring the booth counter between them, the girl threw her short arms around Rachele’s waist in an enthusiastic, sticky hug. When she stepped back and pushed her smudged, dark-rimmed glasses back up her flat nose, the pie stain had transferred to Rachele’s dress. “I happy to see you.”

“I’m happy to see you too.” Rachele straightened the girl’s prayer cap before it fell off. Her scholars’ hugs were the best—right up there with the ones from her family. “Are you having a gut time selling pie?”

“I love pie. *Cherry pie. Apple pie. Chocolate cream pie. Lemon*

m-meringue pie.” Sadie sang the flavors. Setting words to music seemed to make it easier for her to pronounce them. Only meringue came out in a stutter. Trying to talk clearly was hard for Rachelle’s scholars with Down syndrome. “*Banana cream, strawberry-rhubarb pie.*”

“You’re doing such a great job remembering all the flavors too.” Rachelle loved offering praise where it was due. Sadie’s short-term memory often failed her when trying to memorize English vocabulary, but anything involving food stuck with her. “I imagine you’re a great cheerleader for pie sales. We’ll have a nice sum of money to renovate the school building.”

The district’s school was showing its age. Funds raised would allow them to replace the roof, repaint the exterior, and buy a new chalkboard. Rachelle also needed to buy more supplies. She made many of her visuals needed for teaching children with developmental delays, whether they involved poor eyesight, hearing, or weak muscle control, but even then the supplies were expensive.

Maybe that was the topic of the specially called parents’ committee meeting this evening. Her dad hadn’t said. Just that she needed to be home in plenty of time for supper and then the meeting. But then why a meeting at their house? Meetings that included the teachers were usually conducted at the school. And never on a Saturday.

She tried to push the unsettling thought aside. No sense in wasting time worrying. As if a person could turn it off like a faucet.

“I like pie too.” Michael grabbed the counter with both hands and stood on his tippy-toes to peer over it. “I want shoofly pie and chocolate cream pie.”

“Us too.” Sam and Sean chimed in. “And peach pie.”

“Can we get four pies? It takes a lot of pie to feed sixteen

people.” Deedee and the girls didn’t want to be left out. “Especially when the boys are such hogs.”

“Whoa, whoa. Everybody hold your horses.” Laughing Rachelle shook her finger at the cluster of kids pressing against her from all sides. “Mamm decided already. Pecan, peach, and lemon meringue pies. Those are Dat’s favorite. You all need to back up a bit. Wait for me out of the way so other folks can get to the front of the line.”

They knew better than to argue—that might lead to no pie at all. Emma led them aside—but not so far away that Rachelle couldn’t still see them.

“And you, my dochder, need to get back to work.” Elizabeth patted Sadie’s shoulder. “Go get me some more plates and clean the pie servers. We don’t want to mix flavors.”

Sadie did as she was told. Elizabeth cut an apple pie in generous slices and slid them deftly onto Styrofoam plates for individual sales. “I heard you had a bit of a talk with my oldest *sub* earlier.”

The gossip grapevine had twisted its way across the fairgrounds in record time. Heat spiraled through Rachelle. “I’m sure he meant well, but the buwe shouldn’t have been up onstage, let alone using the mic.”

“Toby loves what he does so much he thinks everyone should do it, I reckon.” Elizabeth waved the pie server with abandon, seemingly unaware of the apple filling that plopped on the counter. She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Today’s his birthday, you know. Twenty-nine. He’s such a hard worker. A gut man.”

Toby’s good qualities were no secret. So why bring them to Rachelle’s attention? “Tell him I said seelich gebortstdaag and no hard feelings.”

“I will.” Elizabeth looked pleased. “I wish—”

“Mamm! Don’t be bending Rachelle’s ear about Toby.” Elizabeth’s oldest daughter, Layla, slid two chocolate meringue pies

onto the counter next to the apple pies. She shot Rachelle an *I'm-so-sorry* look. "He has only himself to blame for his lack of a fraa. If he can't make room for courting in his life, he'll never have one. No Plain woman will run after him. What can we get you today?"

A horrified cry split the air in the back of the booth. "Mamm, I drop pie on floor." Sadie's voice held tears. "It all dirty."

"Well, let's get it cleaned up." Elizabeth shrugged. "The first casualty today. That's not bad. I'll be right back."

Tutting like she was the mother instead of Elizabeth, Layla took a washrag to her mother's spills. "Forgive my *mudder*. She's not above matchmaking when it comes to her *kinner*."

"It's like you said, though. Talking to the women does no gut." By now Rachelle's cheeks had to be hot pink. She and Layla were about the same age, but they'd never been close friends in school. Beyond talking about assignments or being on the same team for volleyball and baseball games, they'd never really chatted about anything personal. "We're not in charge when it comes to courting."

"That's for sure." Layla's laugh brought out her dimples. The family resemblance was strong in the Miller clan. "If they were, it would be a lot easier and more organized. Everyone would be paired up and married in no time."

Rachelle managed her own laugh. Courting was a painful subject but laughing about it helped. The grapevine being what it was in Lee's Gulch—or anywhere in the world—Layla likely knew Rachelle had turned down two marriage proposals in the last three years. Neither felt right. Her feelings hadn't been strong enough to prompt her to give up teaching. Her beaus had moved too fast, been too anxious. Her scholars needed her. It wasn't that she didn't want to get married and have children of her own. She did. Some day. If the right man came along at the right time. If he didn't, then she would be content teaching. More than content. Happy.

The image of Toby's smiling face popped up. Rachelle squashed it back down. Toby was far too sure of himself. Not to mention, much older. He wasn't in any hurry to marry—that was obvious.

According to the grapevine, Layla and her beau, one of the Plank boys, had gone their separate ways after only six months. No one seemed to know whose idea it was. Either way Rachelle could commiserate over the difficulties of courting in a tiny Plain district. "That sure would be nice. But too much to ask, I reckon."

"Maybe. Maybe not." The other woman's mischievous expression didn't give Rachelle any idea what that noncommittal response meant.

Layla ducked away from the counter and immediately returned with Rachelle's pies. Rachelle paid and thanked Layla and the other women for all their hard work on behalf of the school fundraiser. She beckoned to the girls to carry the pies. "We better get going. Bye, Sadie," Rachelle called out. "See you Monday. Don't be late."

"I never late." Sadie trotted back to the counter and waved. "I love school."

"Gut for you!"

Halfway down the dirt road toward the buggy parking lot, Rachelle glanced back. Layla stood at the booth counter, arm around Sadie, still staring.