

MATTERS OF
the Heart



ZONDERVAN®
KELLY IRVIN

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Matters of the Heart

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*To Tim, thanks for making it possible
for me to go on. Love always.*



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So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

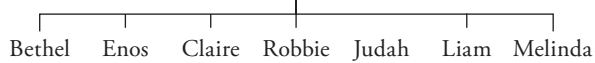
2 Corinthians 12:7–10

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Featured Families

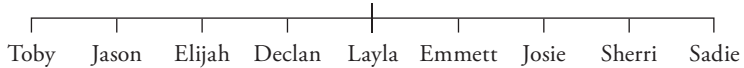
Lee's Gulch, Virginia

Aaron and Katherine King

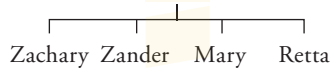


Silas and Joanna Miller (grandparents)

Charlie and Elizabeth Miller (parents)

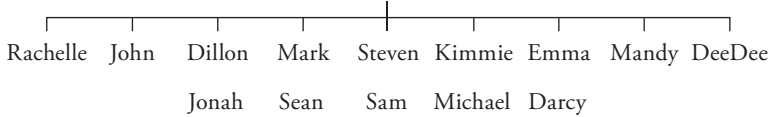


Jason (brother) and Caitlin Miller

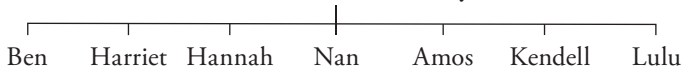


Karl and Cara Lapp (grandparents)

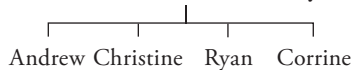
Adam and Leah Lapp



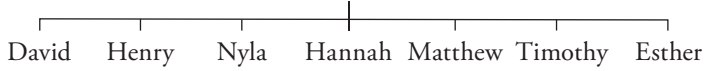
Atlee and Hilda Schrock (nursery owners)



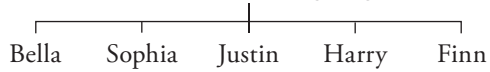
Luke and Deana Beachy



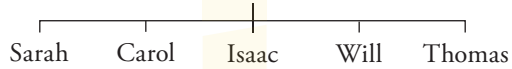
Bartholomew “Bart” (bishop) and Miriam Plank



Martin (deacon) and Cindy Hershberger (grocery store owners)



Jedediah “Jed” (minister) and Martha Knepp



Noah and Mary Eash (parents' committee member)



Micah and Layla (Miller sister) Troyer

Glossary of Pennsylvania Deutsch*

aamen: amen

ach: oh

aenti: aunt

bewillkumm: welcome

bopli(n): baby, babies

bruder, brieder: brother, brothers

bu, buwe: boy, boys

bussi: cat

daadi: grandpa

daed: father

danki: thank you

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

dat: dad

dochder: daughter

dumkopf: blockhead

eck: corner table where newly married couple sits during wedding reception

eldre: parents

Englischer: English or non-Amish

eppies: cookies

es dutt mer: I am sorry

faeriwell: good-bye

Glossary

fraa: wife

Froh gebortsdaag: Happy birthday

fuhl: fool

gaul: horse

Gelassenheit: a German word, yielding fully to God's will and forsaking all selfishness

gern gsehme: you're welcome

Gmay: Church district

Gott: God

gut nacht: good night

gut: good

hallo: hello

hanswascht: clown, silly fellow

hochmut: pride

hund: dog

jah: yes

kaffi: coffee

kapp: prayer cap or head covering worn by Amish women

kind, kinner: child, children

kinnskind, kinnskinner: grandchild, grandchildren

kossin, kossins: cousin(s)

kuss, koss: (noun) kiss, kisses

maedel, maed: girl, girls

mamm: mom

mammi: grandma

mann: husband

mudder: mother

narrisch: foolish, silly

nee: no

niess: niece

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

schweschder, schweschdre: sister, sisters

sei so gut: please (be so kind)

sub: son

tietschern: teacher

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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A Note from the Author

Matters of the Heart continues the exploration of both developmental and intellectual disabilities through the lens of its Amish characters and their corresponding worldview begun in *The Heart's Bidding*. As I mentioned in the author's note for that first book in the Amish Calling series, I want to note that I'm keenly aware of the tender issues that may be raised by the disability community when encountering the Amish term "special" children and their view that these children are "gifts from God."

As a writer, I know better than most the power of words to hurt, demean, make feel less than, and perpetuate stereotypes. First know that I'm a Christian writer living with a disability. I came by my disability later in life. My struggle to accept this disability is ongoing. I don't see it as a gift from God. However, I respect and value the Amish perspective as Christlike and beautifully loving. Readers will see that Amish believe all children are gifts from God. They employ the term "special" for these babies as a term of affection and love. Therefore I use it in the context of my Amish characters' points of view. These are their views, not mine, as I walk a narrow path between what the "English" world finds acceptable and representing an authentic Amish voice.

A Note from the Author

I say all this to respectfully ask readers to honor the Amish view as loving, kind, and so much more Christlike than the worldly view of some would-be “English” parents who hold the belief that bringing a child into the world with disabilities is a choice that can be rejected. I have no doubt that Amish parents agonize, worry, and even shed tears over their “special children.” But they choose an attitude of gratitude. I hope you will read and enjoy *Matters of the Heart* in the spirit in which the Amish Calling series is offered—to edify, provoke thought, and shed Christ’s light in the world. God bless.



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Chapter 1

Not even a blustery March wind propelling a heavy mist across the Knowles County, Virginia, fairgrounds to the auction platform could stop Declan Miller. Not when he had a microphone in one hand and a beautiful surrey-style buggy parked in front of an enormous crowd hanging on his every word.

“Here we go, folks, only a few items left, so get those bid cards ready for another workout.” Declan pointed at the buggy. “Take a good gander, folks. This will make a fine surrey for a family. It’s practically new.” He switched to Pennsylvania Dutch. “Let’s give the Hershbergers a great send-off to Pinecraft. You know what a buggy like this should go for.”

And then back to English. “This excellent piece of workmanship has headlights, taillights, warning lights, and running lights. In addition to the bench seat in front, it has two smaller flat seats in the back and plenty of storage. Nice green carpet in the interior, a dashboard made of inlaid pine with a roomy glove compartment, and two cupholders. I’d be tempted to bid on it myself, if I had a wife and kids. Maybe this buggy would be just the thing to get a woman to finally say yes to me.”

“You have to ask her out first, *hanswascht!*”

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Silly fellow. Grandpa's deep bass, once his best auctioneering tool, carried from his spot in a lawn chair on the front row. Since his retirement a year ago as the founder of Miller Family Auctioneering, Grandpa liked to attend the local auctions to watch his grandsons in action so he could critique them afterward.

Silly fellow indeed. That was Declan. The clown, the class cutup. With three older brothers and one younger one all working in the family auctioneering business, clowning around was his way of standing out. "Someday I'll catch up to the right one, *Daadi*, I will. Even if all that running after her wears me out."

A big grin split Grandpa's face. Laughter ran through the crowd. The folks around Lee's Gulch's three Plain districts had known Declan since he was a kid. At twenty-four he was a little on the old side to still be a bachelor, but no one was stewing about it yet—except his mother. Mom wanted all of her older children happily married as soon as possible—if not sooner.

"Declan."

Despite the noisy crowd, the sound of his father's voice—that same deep bass as Grandpa's—filtered through to Declan from where the older man stood checking off auction items as they were moved to the front of the line. He waggled his index finger toward the sky. The clouds had turned black. They were poised to lower the boom. *Stop messing around. Get a move on.* Dad could say so much in two syllables.

Right.

"We could get some rain any minute, so we better get busy. Here we go. I'll start the bidding at \$2,500. Who'll give me \$2,500?" The buggy was worth far more and the Plain men and women knew it. Bidding would be fast and furious. Declan let his gaze rove the crowd. His brother Elijah pointed out a Plain

man from Nathalie. Declan nodded. “Fine, 2,500, Who’ll give me 3,000? 3,000, 3,000 . . . got it. Who’ll give me 3,500?”

The bids soared rapidly to \$5,000, becoming a three-way fight among the Plain stranger from Nathalie, newlywed Mark Schrock, and an Englisher named Kyle Jenkins. Kyle had a business hauling English tourists around who had a hankering to see Plain farms outside Lee’s Gulch and visit their stores.

“\$5,500. Who’ll give me 5,500. Bid 6000. Now 6,000—”

“\$6,000.” A man wearing a purple windbreaker and a Norfolk Tides cap stuck his bid card in the air for the first time. “I’ll give you \$6,000.”

“Whoa! We’ve got some serious competition going on here. That’s what I like to see.” Chuckling, Declan swung around and pointed at the Nathalie bidder. “What do you say? Are you still in the game?”

Nathalie shook his head. Same with Mark. Kyle’s grin was grim, but he nodded. Declan cleared his throat again. His voice was getting scratchier. “All righty then. Who’ll give me 6,500? Bid 6,500. 6,500. Now 6,500.”

Kyle lifted his bid card. “\$6,200.”

“I can work with that. 6,200. Bid 6,200. Now 6,200. Bid 6,200 . . .”

The newcomer’s bid card popped up. “6,500.”

“6,500. Bid 6,500. Come on, folks, you know this buggy is worth more. Now 6,500. Bid 6,500 . . .”

“Too rich for me.” Kyle tucked his card under his arm and shot darts with his eyes at the newcomer.

A few more scans of the crowd. His bid spotters, Elijah and Emmett, both shook their heads. Declan lifted his flat-brimmed straw hat toward the newcomer. “Going once, going twice, sold to the gentleman in the purple jacket. What’s your number, sir?”

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Leaving Elijah to get the man's particulars, Declan grabbed his water bottle and emptied it in a few swallows.

"Hey, *Bruder*, why don't I finish up?"

Declan turned. His oldest brother, Toby, strode across the platform. It was like catching himself in a mirror—not that he ever did that. Toby had the Miller look—tall, broad shoulders, blond hair, slate-blue eyes, dimples. Declan was slightly shorter, but otherwise a carbon copy. "Did you finish your auction already?"

"*Jah*, all the livestock is done." He picked up the mic Declan had laid on the podium. "*Dat* says you sound terrible. All hoarse and scratchy. Are you catching a cold?"

Declan's throat had been sore when he hopped out of bed this morning. Nothing a cup of hot tea and some of Mom's homemade horehound syrup wouldn't fix. "*Nee*. It's likely allergies. All the trees are budding like crazy." He nodded at the crowd. "They're getting antsy. There's only a few items left. I can handle it."

"*Dat* wants you to give it a rest."

Dad and Toby shared supervision of Miller Family Auctioneering since Grandpa's retirement. Declan glanced over Toby's shoulder at their dad. He was in front of the platform. He jerked his head toward the two trailers that sat to the right of the auction site. His intention was clear. *Get off the stage.*

No way. Nothing was more enjoyable than auctioneering. As a boy Declan had lived for the day when he could take over the platform. He'd worked his way up from checking inventory, unpacking and packing equipment, and bid spotting, to auctioneer school and then the best job in the world—one he'd been doing for three years now. Dad and his brothers would have to pry the microphone out of his cold, dead fingers. Declan shook his head and mouthed. *I've got this.*

Dad scowled. *Nee. You don't.*

“It’s about to pour.” Declan tugged the mic from Toby. “We don’t have time for this. I’ll wrap it up quick.”

“I don’t know who’s more stubborn, you or Dat.” Pulling his black rain slicker’s hood over his straw hat, Toby glanced at the sky. “I’ll let you two thrash it out.”

There would be no thrashing. “Tell Emmett to get that pony cart moved up front.”

“Will do.”

Declan took the microphone and swung around to face the crowd. “Come on, folks, let’s finish up quick so you can get home, dry off, and eat a hot supper.”

Many of the English attendees had already scattered for the makeshift parking lot on the Hershbergers’ east pasture. Rains earlier in the month had softened the ground covered with only sparse weeds. It would quickly turn to mud, as would the dirt road that led to the highway. Visions of their pickup trucks stuck in the mud surely danced in their heads.

“I reckon you’ve already taken a peek at this sturdy pony cart, great for *kinner* to drive to school or church. I’m starting the bidding at \$500. Who’ll give me 500, 500, bid 500—”

A jagged bolt of lightning crackled across the sky. Thunder belled. The mist turned into a deluge of rain driven by a suddenly fierce, icy north wind.

“Sorry, folks, we’re done here.” Declan pulled his windbreaker’s hood up over his straw hat before the wind could send it sailing. “Get to your buggies. Be safe. Drive safe.”

Everyone swarmed at once.

Declan didn’t take time to tug on his raincoat. The speakers were already covered. He stuck the mic in its hard-shell plastic case and went to work moving equipment. In seconds rain soaked his jacket and his thin cotton shirt. His black denim pants hung

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heavy on his legs. Shivering, he pushed a dolly loaded with speakers toward the trailers parked a few hundred yards from the platform.

As expected, the ground had already turned to the consistency of corn mush. The dolly's wheels clung to it, resisting forward movement. Declan's steel-toed leather boots sank into the mud. He mustered all his strength to pull them out. The mud made a sucking sound with each determined step. Rain sloshed from the exposed brim of his hat, making it hard to see.

"Watch where you're going, *sei so gut*."

The entreaty delivered in a soft, concerned tone brought Declan to a halt. He released the dolly handle long enough to shove his hat back and wipe at his face with the back of his hand. Bethel King stood in his path, both hands on her brother Robbie's wheelchair handles. Her younger sister Claire pushed brother Judah's chair. The younger kids' clothes were bedraggled and their faces unhappy.

Bethel's clothes and bonnet were soaked. Her lilac cotton dress clung to her pleasing form. Yes, the dress's hem was black with mud, but her cheeks were red with exertion and her eyes the color of hot cocoa were dark and serious. She was still as pretty as she had been during their days in school together. Declan put both hands in the air. "Sorry I didn't see you there. After you."

Nerves zinged from the tip of his nose to his toes. As usual. Whenever he saw Bethel he turned into a blathering buffoon.

"It's okay. I just didn't want you to run into my *brieder*." Bethel strove to move Robbie's chair forward. The wheels sank deeper into the mud. She lifted the handles and heaved. The chair lurched forward. "We'll get out of your way."

Despite doing her best to deliver on that promise, she wasn't able to move the wheelchair more than a few inches. She had plenty of practice pushing her brothers' wheelchairs. Robbie, eleven, and Judah, ten, lived with a rare form of muscular dystrophy seen mostly

in Plain families. They'd been stricken almost simultaneously as four- and five-year-olds.

"I can't, *Schweschder*." Claire, a skinnier, shorter version of Bethel, struggled valiantly, but Judah's chair remained mired. She glanced at Declan. "*Es dutt mer*. Could you give me a push?"

"Don't be sorry. I'm happy to help—"

"I'll do it." Bethel let go of her charge's chair and hustled back to Claire's. "Declan has expensive equipment that shouldn't get wet."

Everyone in the district knew the Millers' sound systems had been stolen the previous year. They'd only recently raised enough money through fundraisers and generous donations from their Plain community to replace them.

"The speakers are covered. They're in no danger." Here was his chance to do something nice for a girl—now a woman—who was known for her kindness but never seemed to warm up to Declan. Ignoring the *shmuck shmuck* sucking of his boots, Declan waded over to Judah's chair. He bent low, so as not to tower over the boy. "I reckon I needed a bath. How about you?"

"Just in time for church tomorrow. I wish I'd brought soap." Judah pushed back his slicker's hood and grinned. "*Mamm* says it doesn't count unless I use soap."

"Es dutt mer, I can't help you there." Declan straightened and reached for the handles. His hand collided with Bethel's smaller one. She startled as if a boogey man had popped out from behind the closest tree. Why was she so jumpy around him? He summoned a reassuring smile. "I don't bite, and I don't have cooties—contrary to what my *schweschdre* say."

"I don't want to put you out. We're fine."

"You can't push both of them. You push Robbie. I'll get Judah. We'll be a team."

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Could she read between the lines? Did she even consider in the furthest corner of her mind what it would be like to be a two-person team with Declan?

It was so unlikely. Bethel had been the smartest girl in the class—in the school—but she never let her head swell. When the other kids played baseball at recess, she sat on the sidelines reading a book, pausing to cheer them on at exactly the right time.

He became a base-hitting machine just to earn her cheers. And she had been generous with them. Sometimes she even jumped up and clapped as he ran the bases. Hearing her yell, “Way to go, Declan,” had spurred him on to more than one headfirst slide into home plate.

She worried her lower lip with her teeth for a few seconds. “What about your equipment?”

“It’s in its covering and then double-wrapped with heavy plastic. Plus, folks around here are far more likely to push it to the trailer than take it.”

Her forehead wrinkled. She nodded as if coming to an important decision. “*Danki*. We really appreciate your help.”

A chance to be helpful. Bethel always seemed so competent, so self-contained. She didn’t need anyone’s help, let alone Declan’s. Head bent against the wind and pelting rain, he followed her lead toward the line of buggies, his hands tight on the chair handles. “Knock, knock.”

Judah yelled over the wind, “Who’s there?”

“Oink, oink.”

“Oink, oink who?”

“Make up your mind. Are you a pig or an owl?”

Judah and Robbie chortled. Bethel, her shoulders hunched over the wheelchair, didn’t seem to hear.

Declan kept up a steady stream of jokes as they slogged through

the field, across the muddy road, and into the pasture where the buggies were parked in the sprigs of grass foolish enough to sprout so early in the spring season. Wasn't entertaining the boys another way of helping? Plus laughter was excellent free medicine.

Fortunately, the King buggy was close to the road. Her voice high and breathless, rain dripping from her bonnet and nose, Bethel waved at Declan. "I'm sure Claire can get it from here. Danki."

"I've come this far—"

"Really, we're fine."

"Was it the jokes?"

"Nee, of course not. They were . . . funny." She sputtered. "The boys love silly jokes."

Declan swiveled. Claire lagged behind by several yards. She had a strange waddle-like walk. "What do you think, Claire?"

"I can get it from here." She didn't sound convinced, but she marched forward. "Danki."

A gust of wind knocked Declan back a step. A fit of coughing overcame him. He hunched over. Between the wind and the cough, he couldn't breathe.

"Go, go, you need to get out of this wind." Bethel took the wheelchair handles. "Go home and have a cup of hot tea with plenty of honey and lemon. Sit by the fire."

"I'll be fine." Bethel had enough on her plate without worrying about Declan. He sought a more serious tone—she seemed to prefer serious. "I promise. You get yourself and these *buwe* home and do the same."

"Go!"

"Going." Declan turned. Having his back to the wind would help. He needed to skedaddle before Dad found the abandoned speakers. He picked up speed. His boots encountered a wet, slick clump of grass. They slid out from under him.

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Whomp. He landed flat on his back, cold rain running into his nostrils and open mouth. Not great. Not great at all. Gasping for air like a stunned fish, he stared up at the clouds. Two of them looked like old men with long gray beards grinning down at him.

“*Ach*, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Bethel’s concerned face appeared over him, along with Claire’s. The rain dripping from their bonnets joined the deluge threatening to drown Declan.

His back and behind hurt.

But not as much as his pride. Or was it his dignity? So much for impressing Bethel with his strength and dexterity or whatever else it took to get her brothers squared away.

“Knock, knock.”

Frowning, Bethel swiped rain from her face. “I’m serious. Are you hurt?”

Too late to backtrack now. “Knock, knock.”

She shook her head. Rain sluiced down her face. Claire had no such compunction. She jumped in. “Who’s there?”

“Pecan.”

“Pecan who?”

“Pecan someone your own size.”

Chapter 2

It wasn't funny. Okay, maybe a little. The joke. Not the fall. Laughing would be unkind. What've Declan had been hurt? Bethel allowed herself a small smile as she peered down at him. A fallen giant. Not really a giant, but he *was* tall compared to her five-foot-four-inch frame. Here he was doing them the huge favor of helping with the wheelchairs in the middle of a deluge and he'd fallen. And still he'd managed to keep his sense of humor. That should count for a lot—it took strength of character, really. She held out her hand. “Let me help you up.”

Instead, Declan rolled over on his knees, pushed off the ground, and hopped up. He whirled around and bowed with an elaborate flourish. “I meant to do that.”

“You did not.” Maybe he had. He was such a cutup. That's what she remembered from their school days. Quick with a joke, a harmless prank, and a smile. He had a nice smile. A really nice smile. Then and now. He also didn't have a serious bone in his body then. Or now. “Are you sure you aren't hurt? You didn't hit your head, did you?”

“I know how to fall. There's an art to it.” Mud coated his shirt and pants. Smudges decorated his clean-shaven cheeks and

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forehead. He'd lost his hat. Rain flattened thick blond hair. He was a mess, and yet he seemed pleased with himself. His grin widened. His dimples deepened. "Go ahead, laugh. It was funnier than the joke."

They were standing in the middle of an open field in the pouring rain. A flash of sizzling lightning lit up the sky. Thunder boomed only seconds later. "Danki, but nee. There's a time and place for fun, but this isn't it. It's lightning out. The kinner are soaked and chilled to the bone."

"Jah. Of course. You're right. Going." Declan scooped up his hat. He slapped it on his head. Raindrops rolled down his face. "Be careful getting home. The roads will be full of water."

"You too. Very careful."

Coughing, he took off across the field.

He really was kind. Over the years his signs of interest had been obvious. Yet he'd never actually asked her to take a buggy ride. Why remained a mystery. He always spoke to her at the singings. He never failed to say hello at frolics and at church. A few times he appeared on the verge of saying something serious, but a joke sallied forth instead. He was nice, funny, and kind. And pleasing to the eye. But somehow Bethel couldn't imagine Declan stepping into the trials her family faced. A woman in her situation needed a serious man to stand with her. No matter how his sunny smile and sweet attitude tugged at her heart, Declan didn't seem like that man.

She went to work getting Robbie into the buggy. He didn't weigh much. The wheelchair folded up neatly. "Claire, can you get Judah in?"

A wail met Bethel's inquiry. She turned. Claire had her arms under Judah's armpits. She struggled to lift her brother from his chair. Frustration shone on her freckled face. "I don't know what's wrong with me today. I can't get him out."

A shiver that had nothing to do with the icy wind ran through Bethel. She clomped through the mud to Judah's chair. "Did you eat your oatmeal for breakfast?"

"Nee, I didn't have time. I dropped my bowl, and I had to clean up the mess."

"That must be it, then." Bethel patted her shoulder. "You're just low on fuel, that's all."

Sei so gut, Gott, sei so gut.

Together they lifted Judah into the buggy. Bethel stowed his chair in the back. She wiped her hands on her muddy apron, for all the good it did. "Let's get home. We could all use a hot cup of tea and one of Mamm's cinnamon rolls."

Ninety minutes later the boys, dressed in dry clothes, were ensconced in thick quilts in front of the fireplace holding mugs of chamomile tea spiked with lemon and honey. Little sister Melinda had talked them into playing Connect 4 with her. Mom had lit a fire in the wood-burning stove in the laundry room and heated water so Claire could take a bath after her cup of hot tea and a handful of gingersnaps.

"This weather. The sun was shining when we left the house this morning. It's supposed to be spring, but winter just doesn't want to let go." Following the tantalizing aromas of onion, chili powder, and sweet cornbread baking, Bethel went to the huge cast-iron pot of chili bubbling on the propane stove. She picked up the ladle and stirred. The heat warmed her cold hands and feet. "I wouldn't have taken the boys if I'd known it was going to storm."

"You should've brought them home as soon as it started to sprinkle." Mom pulled a huge pan of jalapeño cornbread from the oven. The billowing heat turned her cheeks red. Her tone held no condemnation, only concern. "You know how easily they catch colds."

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“Colds are caused by viruses, not rain.” Bethel softened her tone. Mom meant well. She and Dad had spent more than their share of time at the Center for Special Children in Lancaster County, where Robbie was first diagnosed with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy, and then Judah. The realization that intermarrying among the Plain people resulted in this rare genetic disease had been hard on both her parents. They never complained, but occasionally the weight of the yoke of guilt showed itself in their slumped shoulders. “But the cold wind probably carries a lot of germs with so many people gathered in one place. And then all the pollen in the air might cause them to be congested. We’ll keep a close eye on them.”

“When did you get your medical degree?” Mom didn’t have a mean cell in her body. She set the cornbread on a trivet and closed the oven. The oven mitts landed next to the pan. She sighed. “I know the boys can’t stay home all the time. They deserve some fun. I keep reminding myself of that.”

“The doctor said fresh air is good medicine.”

“Fresh air, not gale-force winds, and sunshine, not a cold rain.” Mom trotted over to the stove. She took the ladle from Bethel. “Did you try the chili? Is it spicy enough for your dat?”

Bethel accepted the bite her mother offered. The tangy concoction woke up her taste buds. Garlic, chili powder, canned tomatoes from their garden, chopped onion, green and red bell pepper, and tender chunks of beef stew meat. Mom’s chili was legendary at church picnics and school fundraisers. “That’s yummy, Mamm, as usual.”

She handed the ladle back. Mom took a bite herself. “It just needs to simmer. Your dat, Enos, and Liam won’t be back from delivering the bed set to Farmville for at least another hour. That’ll give the spices time to meld.”

The lyrics of an old Plain hymn floated through the open door

that led to the laundry room. Claire loved to sing. She had a high, clear voice that hit every note with a sweetness that made Bethel's heart squeeze. "Mamm, have you noticed anything odd about Claire lately?"

Mamm dropped the ladle. She scooped it up and laid it on the counter. She turned her back on Bethel and trotted over to the shelves where the dishes were kept. "Nee. What do you mean?"

Her words said one thing, her tone another.

"She couldn't push Robbie's chair through the field today. Fortunately, Declan Miller came by and helped us out or I would've had to push them both. She had trouble lifting Robbie from his chair." Bethel went to her mother. She took the stack of plates from her. "She dropped her bowl of oatmeal this morning."

"Gott provides." Her expression was stoic, but Mom's voice quivered. "I'd hoped Claire was getting too old to be affected, but Gott's will be done."

Even with her fourteenth birthday coming up next week, Claire wasn't too old. This form of LGMD was as unpredictable as it was vicious. Bethel could cite all the symptoms. They all could. They'd watched them consume Judah and Robbie. They still watched and waited to see if Enos, Liam, and Melinda would be spared. The age of onset could be anywhere from three years old to early adulthood, but the average was thirteen and a half. Usually it involved the legs first, causing difficulty walking, climbing stairs, and causing falls. In three to five years, the muscles wasted. The earlier the onset, the more rapid the progression. That might be the silver lining, if Claire was indeed affected.

People with the disease could still live to a ripe old age. Women could still have children, but being in a family way made the weakness worse, making it even harder to care for the baby. Plain women were expected to cook, bake, clean, garden, and care for as many

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children as God gave them. Almost impossible with LGMD. And then there was the probability of passing the disease on to her children.

Bethel could only aspire to be as stoic and as strong as her parents' faith. She set the plates on the table and went to her mother. She hugged her quick and hard. "Whatever happens, we'll deal with it. I'm always here for you."

"Nee. You must marry, have a *mann*, have kinner. That's your place in this world." Her mother drew back. Her expression lightened. A sly smile stole over her face. "Declan Miller, eh? He's a hard worker, that one. A bit of a clown, but a sense of humor is a good thing. It can help a family get through tough times. It's certainly better than being married to a sourpuss."

So true. "I've always thought he was nice, but to *never* be serious?"

Serious problems required serious people who knew how to solve them.

In the days when she never missed a singing, Bethel had taken a few buggy rides, but none of the men—still boys, really—interested her because she had too much responsibility at home to fritter away her time on courting. Declan had spent most of his time horsing around with his buddies, pulling pranks, and singing at the top of his lungs—often off-key—trying to impress the girls. Occasionally Bethel would catch him staring at her, a curiously somber look on his face, but then his glance would dart away, followed by more hilarity.

He'd taken Jana Yoder for buggy rides for at least a year, but next thing everyone knew Jana was married to a man from Bird-in-Hand and moved away.

The gossipers didn't know why, and Bethel didn't want to know. It wasn't her business.

“There’s nothing wrong with making people laugh. If you ask me, and even if you don’t, you’re far too serious. Your laugh muscles could use a workout.”

“I laugh plenty, but when it comes to spending the rest of my life with a man, I need to be sure he can be serious when the need arises.”

“Some boys take longer to mature than others.” Mudder had plenty of brothers and cousins to use as examples plus Bethel’s brother Enos, but he was one of the most serious people Bethel knew. “My experience has been they’re worth the wait. Declan’s not bad to look at either.”

“Mamm!” The kitchen suddenly seemed too warm. Bethel waved a dish towel at her mom. Who could help noticing a man built like he came from a long line of laborers used to swinging an ax and pushing a plow? Add that to the perpetual smile, dimples, and blue eyes, and a woman might be a bit tongue-tied in his presence. “Was Dat the class clown?”

“More of a smooth talker, I guess.” Mom smiled at the memory. “But I wasn’t one to fall for smooth talk. I made him work for it—two long years.”

And now they’d been married twenty-seven. What did that kind of love feel like? To weather the hard times as well as the good ones? Which brought Bethel right back to the topic at hand—babies born with a terrible disease inside them waiting to unveil a litany of dreadful symptoms like painful falls and wasting muscles.

“You are blessed.” The words cut Bethel’s tongue like a finely honed knife. Blessed by a curiously heavy yoke. Babies were gifts from God—all babies. “I just want to help with the buwe however I can.”

“Your *daed* and I will care for the buwe until we can’t. Then you and those who can will take care of those who can’t.”

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It was the way of the Plain people. Bethel's throat ached. Her stomach roiled. Her dreams of having lots of babies had begun in childhood when she'd been blissfully ignorant about genes and hereditary diseases like limb-girdle muscular dystrophy. Chances were far too great that her children would inherit this disease as well. She had a deep well of strength, but she'd used so much of it caring for her brothers. One day her parents would no longer be able to do it. Then it would be up to her again. Enos and her. Maybe Claire. Maybe Liam. Or maybe not. And what about little Melinda, who just turned four?

Should a man be asked to marry into such a quagmire? What hidden genes as a Plain man from her community would her as-yet-unknown groom bring to the marriage? It was like opening Pandora's box as a wedding present.

"What's wrong? You both look like the sky is falling." Claire stood in the doorway. Her freshly scrubbed face glowed a healthy pink. Her hair neatly pinned under her prayer covering, her dress clean. "Don't be mad, Mamm. The buwe will be fine."

"I'm not mad, you silly goose." Mamm rushed to the stove. "Get the pitcher of water from the refrigerator and fill the glasses. Your dat and brieder will be here any minute."

Still humming the hymn, Claire did as she was told.

Bethel went to work setting the table.

Glass shattered. Claire shrieked. Bethel whirled. Her sister had dropped the pitcher. It shattered on the vinyl floor. Water puddled at her feet. She dropped to her knees. "Ach! Es dutt mer, Mamm. Es dutt mer."

"It's okay. It was an accident." Bethel strode to her side. She knelt and brushed Claire's hands away. "Let me. You'll cut yourself."

She glanced up at their mother. Her expression wooden, Mom

shook her head. She twisted the dishrag in her hands. “Jah, just an accident.”



ZONDERVAN®

Chapter 3

The patter of rain on the metal roof usually lulled Declan to sleep. Not tonight. He gritted his teeth, willing the tickle in his throat to disappear, taking with it an annoying cough. No such luck. He coughed into the crook of his arm. Not only did his throat hurt but his ears as well.

Elijah's steady breathing didn't change. His brother had worked hard for the last two days. He needed his sleep. Declan rolled over on his side. He rearranged his pillows so his head was higher. Another coughing fit burst out. This time Elijah moved restlessly. Toby's wedding likely couldn't come soon enough for him. Then he would move into his bedroom. As the oldest sons they'd both have their own rooms.

Or maybe Declan should have his own house. If he started his own auctioneering business he would need his own property from which to launch it. Declan contemplated the thought that liked to tiptoe into his brain late at night when he couldn't sleep. The Miller Brothers Auctioneering Company covered five states. His grandpa and dad had expanded it steadily over the years. They had more business than they could handle.

A man who had his own business was a man to be taken seriously.

A spate of coughing consumed Declan. Along with a dervish of guilt. What made him the son who would split from the family business? Amish families stuck together.

To be taken seriously by a woman like Bethel, whom he had known since they were both learning to walk, would take some doing. Especially when jokes were his fallback whenever he was nervous. Bethel made him nervous. Women made him nervous. He'd learned early on that people liked to laugh. Making them laugh was nice.

More coughing.

"Bruder, sei so gut." Elijah muttered, rolled over, and stuck a pillow over his head.

"Es dutt mer." Declan sat up. He threw his legs over the side of his single bed pushed against the wall to make a walkway between the two beds. And immediately coughed. The muscles in his stomach ached. Poor Elijah. Listening to someone else cough was almost as annoying as listening to a guy snore. Declan slipped from the room and padded barefoot down the stairs. A light flickered in the kitchen. He wasn't the only one not sleeping.

Reading glasses perched on the end of his nose, his father sat at the kitchen table engrossed in a thick book. After six months of tutoring by Toby's special friend, Rachele Lapp, Dad had made great strides in overcoming his reading disability. He was making up for lost time.

"You couldn't sleep either?" Dad picked up a mug with a tea-bag string hanging over the side and took a sip. "I heard you coughing before I came downstairs."

"Allergies, I reckon."

"Or a cold from being out in the rain and wind today."

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“Colds are caused by viruses, not cold, wet air. Plus it wouldn’t happen that fast.” Declan wanted the words back as soon as he uttered them. His father meant well. He had no idea his words made Declan feel like a six-year-old. He softened his tone. “I’m fine. Nothing a cup of chamomile with honey and lemon won’t fix. And some of Mamm’s cough syrup.”

“Since when did you get a medical degree?”

About the same time you did.

Thankful the words didn’t pass through his lips, Declan clenched his jaw. He was twenty-four, a full-grown man, still living at home, and working year-around with family. The Plain people counted that as a good thing. Most of the time it was.

But a little wiggle room would be nice. To be able to stretch out his arms and not bump into someone with the same last name. That was a most un-Plain sentiment, one Dad wouldn’t understand.

What was wrong with him? Maybe he *was* coming down with something. Declan concentrated on pouring the already steaming water from the teapot on the stove into his mug. He cut up some lemon and helped himself to a large dollop of honey. He sat across from his father. “Did you ever think about doing something besides auctioneering?”

Dad laid the book on the table. Frowning, he removed his reading glasses. “I thought you loved auctioneering. You’ve been chomping at the bit to get on the platform since you were five years old.”

“I do. It’s the best.” Declan dunked his tea bag a few times. “Did you ever think about going out on your own?”

Dad’s lips turned down. He shook his head and shrugged. “Nee. Why would I? Your daadi needed my help. And I liked it.”

“But your brieder didn’t go into the business.”

“Nee, my brieder chose other paths.”

“We cover a lot of territory. Maybe too much.”

“What’s your point?”

“What would you think if I split off? Maybe started my own . . . branch, so to speak? What the Englishers call a satellite location.”

“You want to compete with Miller Family Auctioneering?” Dat’s incredulous tone matched his scowl. “Why would you do that?”

“I’m . . .” A spasm of coughing hit Declan. He sipped his tea. The hot liquid helped. “It’s just a thought that keeps niggling at me. It wouldn’t be competing; it’d be supplementing. There’s so many of us. Elijah and Emmett coming up behind me. Toby and Jason already full-time auctioneers. We don’t have a lot of auctions big enough to need three auctioneers, four with you.”

“You’re not getting enough time in the spotlight?”

Acerbic sarcasm soaked his words.

“Nee. It’s not like that.”

“What is it like?”

“People see me as the clown. I want them to know I can be serious. I am serious.”

“Serious men don’t leave a dolly filled with speakers all by their lonesome in the middle of a field during a thunderstorm.” Dad’s voice was almost as hoarse as Declan’s. “It seems to me you earned the clown title. It always seemed like you wanted people to laugh at you. Never understood it myself.”

Dad never missed a thing.

“They were wrapped up good and tight. They didn’t get wet.”

“Gut thing they didn’t get stolen.”

“Only Plain folks were around.”

“You know that for sure? Where’d you run off to?”

Timing was everything. He’d given his dad a reason to discard his idea out of hand. Dad didn’t see him as capable of running his own business. The realization cut like a finely honed ax. Heat that

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had nothing to do with the steaming cup of tea coursing through Declan. His pulse beat in his ears. “I was helping Bethel King get her brieder into their buggy.”

One hand stroking his gray beard that hung almost to his waist, Dad stirred more honey into his tea with the other. His frown faded, replaced with a small grin. “That was kind of you. Wasn’t Bethel in your class at school?”

“I know what you’re thinking.” Declan rose and went to the window over the sink. The conversation about his business plan would go nowhere. Not tonight. Another day. He would show his dad he could handle a business on his own. “You’re as bad as Mamm with her matchmaking. Jah she was in my class. She was—and still is—one of the smartest girls I know. I reckon she’s too smart to put up with the likes of me.”

The rain had stopped, but the wind still shook the branches of a Japanese maple near the back porch, causing a shower of drops. Nothing like the rain that poured on Bethel as she frowned down at him while he lay staring up at her. He’d been clumsy and played it off like a buffoon. Leaving her with the same impression as his dad’s. The Miller brother clown.

“I would never matchmake.” With a chuckle, Dad picked up his book and turned the page as if he were not the least interested in talking about such a ridiculous topic. “I leave that nonsense to your mamm. She did *gut* with your schweschdre and brieder.”

His sister Layla and her husband, Micah, had beaten Toby and Rachelle to the altar by several months.

Dad’s satisfied tone tickled Declan. He turned around to face his father. A sip of tea soothed his throat for a few seconds. “At least wait until after Toby and Rachelle’s wedding to start on Elijah and me.”

“I’m not starting on anybody.” Dad displayed his best innocent

look. “I’m just saying everyone knows Bethel King works hard taking care of her breeder. She is a gut and faithful believer. She even works at the nursery to earn extra money to help out her family. She’ll make somebody a gut *fraa*.”

“No doubt.”

But would she take a man with a reputation for being a jokester seriously? Jana Yoder had tried and given up. Her point was well-taken. He’d never opened up to her. The truth was he should’ve ended the relationship himself much earlier. He’d liked Jana. He was sure it would grow into more, but it never did. He’d started dating Jana because he didn’t have the guts to ask Bethel and risk rejection.

“No doubt what?” Elijah wandered into the kitchen. He stretched and scratched his armpit. “What are you two doing up?”

“Just getting something for my throat. You?”

“I can’t sleep without you tossing and turning and coughing in the other bed. It was too quiet.” Elijah went to the counter where he removed the lid from a plastic container filled with Mom’s butterscotch-chip-pecan cookies. “Besides, I’m hungry.”

Elijah was the one brother who didn’t want to auctioneer. No point in rehashing Declan’s business idea with him. “Dat’s matchmaking.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.” Declan rummaged through the cupboards where Mom kept her store of medicines out of the little ones’ reach. “Dat’s trying to marry me off, when it’s your turn first.”

“Elijah needs to come out of his shell before he’ll have a special friend.” Dad accepted the cookie container as his due. Elijah was the shy brother. He’d yet to call his first auction even though he was two years older than Declan. “Get me a glass of milk, will you?”

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“I don’t have a shell.” Elijah stacked another cookie on his napkin. “I’m fine just the way I am.”

Like Declan. Another brother in denial.

Declan stowed cough syrup on the counter and took care of his father’s request. Cookies and milk sounded good, but the cookie would make his throat hurt and the milk would only add to his congestion.

“What’s going on here? A family meeting?”

Toby had joined the crowd.

“What are you doing up?” Elijah picked up the cookie container and held it out. “You’re just in time. Dat almost grabbed the last ones.”

Toby waved away the container. “I’m hungry, but I want eggs. With toast.”

He pulled the cast-iron skillet to the front burner on the stove. “Anybody else?”

“It’s four hours until breakfast.” Dad brushed crumbs from his beard. “Your *mudder* will be irritated if she makes breakfast and we don’t eat it.”

“That’ll never happen. We’re growing buwe.” Toby grabbed the eggs from the refrigerator and set them on the counter. “She’ll be more upset if we leave a mess in her kitchen.”

“Or she’ll be upset when she realizes you can actually cook for yourself.” Declan coughed into the crook of his arm. He squeezed past his big brother to retrieve the syrup. “Personally I don’t want to be around when she finds out you used her gut skillet without her supervision.”

Unperturbed, Toby dumped a chunk of congealed bacon fat into the skillet. He adjusted the flame under it. “I heard you coughing earlier. Is your throat sore?”

“It’s fine.” Declan dumped a few ounces of syrup in a cup. He

pinched his nostrils closed and gulped it down. Despite a bitter taste that was a cross between licorice and root beer, the syrup went down easy. Likely because of all the honey Mamm's recipe included. "This syrup will fix me up."

"You're only supposed to take a teaspoon," Elijah objected. "That's gross."

"This bug—if it is a bug—calls for a double dose."

Maybe triple.

"That's what happens when you don't rest your vocal cords the night before an auction." Toby had switched from his big brother voice to his boss voice. "You went to a singing at the Eashes' last night, didn't you?"

"Not even. I went to pick up the band saw Noah borrowed from us last week. James challenged me to a game of chess. Mary and the girls started singing while they were working on their sewing." Music soothed Declan. Singing was a joy, especially when Mary and her daughters had such fine voices. "It was an impromptu thing. They were having fun, and James, Noah, and I joined in."

"I can see that, but singing strains your voice. Did you drink plenty of water?"

Toby was such a big brother. They all knew how to take care of their voices. The "rules" had been impressed upon them in auctioneer school, and first Grandpa, and then Dad, had kept them fresh in their minds. "I did. I promise."

"Your voice is the most—"

"Your voice is your most important tool as an auctioneer!" Declan, Elijah, and Dad chorused. "We know."

"Just saying." Toby turned back to the stove. The scent of bacon wafted in the air accompanied by the melted lard's crackle in the skillet. Toby cracked a dozen eggs into a bowl in quick succession. He picked up a fork and whisked them together. "After all, pretty

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soon I won't be around to remind you. I'm going to miss playing big bruder in the middle of the night. There's always someone in this kitchen, day or night."

"I reckon Rachelle will be happy to keep you company in the kitchen any time, day or night." Declan returned the syrup to the cupboard, then leaned against the counter to watch Elijah make toast while Toby dumped the eggs into the skillet. The blossoming scent stirred memories of many mornings gathered around the breakfast table, talking, planning, and laughing with his brothers. "Are you getting cold feet?"

"Nee. Never."

Toby had always been popular with the Plain women in their community. He was good-natured, smart, worked hard, and he was a striking figure on the auction platform. Heads turned when he walked by. The only reason he'd waited so long to marry was his concern over bringing a wife into his life as an auctioneer on the road for six months out of the year.

Growing up in Toby's shadow—not to mention brother Jason's, who was already married—wasn't easy. It didn't seem to bother Elijah. He was happiest in the woodworking shop he'd built out back of the house. His children's furniture and wooden toys were beautiful. His needs few.

Toby, Jason, and Elijah seemed to have found their places in the scheme of life. Why couldn't Declan? After a minute or two, the scent of toasted bread became less appealing. More acrid. Elijah didn't seem to notice. Declan tapped his arm. "Hey, you're burning the toast!"

Elijah jumped. He jerked the long-handled, multipronged fork back. One of the slices fell to the floor. "Whoops. Who likes their toast well done? Open a window, will you?"

Declan obliged. Elijah tossed out the remaining slices. “I like to share with the birds.”

“*Dumkopf!*” Chuckling, Toby shook his head. “Always daydreaming—even at night.”

“Hey, no name-calling.” Declan scooped up the errant slice and threw it in the trash. “Everyone gets distracted.”

“Enough with the bickering.” Dad stood, stretched, and picked up his book. “I like spending time with my *seh*. But there can be a thing as too much togetherness. See you in the morning.”

Exactly Declan’s point. Although these middle-of-the-night gatherings were among some of his best memories. On the road, they sometimes sat in diners and talked until the wee hours of the morning. It became a tradition or a habit. He would miss these moments as his brothers married and moved into their own homes.

Every business plan had pros and cons.

“Don’t leave now, Dat. The eggs are ready.” Toby scooped scrambled eggs that also appeared overly done onto plates as he spoke. “We don’t have to have toast.”

“I’ll wait until your mudder makes breakfast in the morning.” Dad shuffled toward the door. “Don’t leave a mess and don’t stay up too long. Daylight will be here before you know it. No one in this family has a pass to be late for church.”

“I smell food.” Sadie, her blonde hair loose, no glasses, zipped into the room. The ten-year-old’s tendency to run when her clumsy gait—caused by her Down syndrome—kept her off-kilter often resulted in tumbles. “I am hungry.”

“Nee, nee, now this really is out of control.” Dad tucked his book under his arm. He reached for her, but Sadie danced away. “Come now, back to bed, *maedel*. Mamm will make you breakfast before church in the morning. You won’t want to get up if you don’t

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sleep now. And if you sleep in church, Bishop Bart will be upset with you.”

Sadie wouldn't want to upset Bart. He kept Tootsie Pops in his pockets, and he liked to share with the kids.

“I'll bring her, Dat.” Declan caught his sister from behind and swung her into the air. She smelled of homemade lavender soap and shampoo after her Saturday night bath. “Sadie, how long do chickens work?”

“I don't know.”

“Around the cluck.”

A chorus of groans greeted the joke, but Sadie giggled and clapped her hands. “More, more.”

“Why shouldn't you play basketball with a pig?”

“Why, Bruder, why?”

“Because he'll hog the ball.”

“Sei so gut, make him stop.” Toby tilted his head back and raised his hands as if appealing to God himself. “I can't take it.”

“You love it.” Declan kissed Sadie's mussed hair. “Schweschder, how did you see to get down here without your glasses?”

“My nose show me.”

“Interesting. Big bruder will show your nose how to get back to bed.”

“*Eppies.*”

“Nee. No eppies, no toast, no eggs. Sleep.” Declan tossed her over his shoulder. He took the stairs two at a time. His sister's sweet tooth legendary. Sadie would eat cookies—or cake or pie or fry pies or whoopie pies—for breakfast if no one saw her helping herself. “You don't want to oversleep and miss church. Jonah will be there.”

Jonah Lapp, who also attended classes for children with developmental and intellectual disabilities at the English school in

Lee's Gulch, was Sadie's best friend. Giggling, Sadie patted Declan's tousled hair. "Mamm take eppies to church."

Not if her sons had eaten them all while she blissfully slept. Declan smiled and kept that thought to himself. No matter how many times belonging to this big, messy family made him feel hemmed in, there were just as many times when family felt good. Very good.

He halted in the doorway, torn between futures that appeared so different. Which one was best?

Sadie tweaked Declan's nose. "You fall asleep, Bruder?"

"Nee, nee," he whispered. He slid the girl down so she landed on her feet. "Shhhh. Don't wake your schweschdre."

"*Gut nacht*, Bruder."

"Sweet dreams."

Declan withdrew. Sweet dreams. That's all they were. As the fourth brother behind his dad, Declan earned less than his three older brothers. Everyone received a salary, but while living at home, all of them contributed to the family's budget. Soon Toby would have his own home and family but still would be number two behind Dad. Then Jason and then Elijah. Declan was number five in the hierarchy.

The numbers for sound systems, trailers, drivers, insurance, property, and other expenses ran through his brain as Declan returned to his bedroom. The numbers, his cough, and the memory of Bethel peering down at him and laughing took turns keeping him awake long after Elijah returned and slipped back into slumberland.

Chapter 4

A delighted whoop followed the slap of the red bag on the wooden cornhole board. Grinning at her little brother's enthusiasm, Bethel high-fived Robbie. She stepped out of the way to allow Judah his turn in the bishop's backyard they'd commandeered for a game after church and lunch. Robbie's black bag not only hit the board, it slid into the hole. He beamed and pumped his fist. "Three points!"

"See, I knew you two had a knack for this game." Bethel stood between the two boys' chairs, her hands on their bony, bent shoulders, waiting for Sadie Miller and Jonah Lapp to take their turns from behind the other board. "You just have to aim and calculate the distance."

Moving the boards closer than the regulation twenty-seven feet had helped. Giving the kids do-overs as needed also helped. Rules were made to be broken when fun was the object of the game. The previous day's storm had brought a cold front with it. Despite the sunshine, the March breeze still held a chill. The rain had made it too muddy for baseball or volleyball the kids usually played after church. Which was just fine. Bethel's brothers couldn't play those sports, and it was hard to see the longing on their faces when they

watched other kids their age run the bases after a hit or jump high to spike the volleyball.

Robbie and Judah went to school with Sadie and Jonah in Lee's Gulch. They were best buddies on the weekends too—especially after church when the others sometimes forgot to include them in their games.

“Hah, it's not over until it's over.” Rachelle Lapp nudged her little brother, who hopped up to a spot behind the foul line in front of the other board. “Fire away when ready, Bruder.”

Jonah dumped his winter coat on the ground and shoved his church hat back on his head of dark-brown hair. He settled his black-rimmed glasses on his nose. His tongue came out and curled across the corner of his mouth. He let the red bag fly. It landed on the board just shy of the hole.

“Yay!” Robbie stuck both of his skinny arms in the air, hands fisted. “Gut shot, Jonah.”

Claire, who was stretched out in a lawn chair next to her best friend Nyla Plank, Bethel's best friend Hattie Schrock, and Layla Troyer, Declan's married sister, led them in applause and noisy congratulations. Every game needed enthusiastic spectators.

Why did Bethel now think of Layla, whom she had known since her diaper days, as Declan's sister? No reason. No reason at all. She brushed the thought away.

“How many points is that, Jonah?” Rachelle had been their teacher before the English school district invited Plain parents to send their children with developmental and intellectual delays to their school in town. All the occupational, speech, and physical therapy that came with that offer plus the fact the families already paid school district taxes and previously received nothing in return made it an offer they couldn't refuse. Now Rachelle never let a

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teaching moment pass. She simply couldn't. Jonah rolled his eyes. Rachele shook her finger at him. "Come on, you know."

"One."

"See, that wasn't so hard."

Next up Sadie, Judah's partner. The ten-year-old didn't bother to shed her heavy coat. She was a doll of a little girl with Declan's blonde hair, blue eyes—Miller family traits. Her eyes were made big by her thick brown-rimmed glasses. Her dimples popped up whenever she smiled—which was all the time. Another feature shared with Declan. Something about yesterday's encounter in the muddy field had left Bethel with Declan on her mind. She'd known him her whole life. *Why now? Stop it!*

Giggling, Sadie sashayed up to the line, tucked the bag under her arm, and proceeded to go through a series of exaggerated stretches of her throwing arm.

"You're such a ham." Bethel threw her hands in the air in mock despair. "Come on, maedel, my hair is turning gray standing here. Let it rip before we die of old age."

Sadie spun with her arm in the air like a windmill and did just that. The bag sailed through the air far beyond the boards, the boys, just missed Bethel, who ducked, and finally landed at the feet of Jonah's dog, Runt. Runt dropped the hot dog he'd stolen from Sadie's plate. He snapped up the bag and raced it back to Jonah.

The kids roared with laughter as did their cheering section. "Way to go Runt," Claire yelled. "Five points!"

Hattie and Layla joined in a chorus of "Five points, five points for the *hund*."

"Ten points." Sadie danced around the dog. "Ten points for Runt."

"Uh-uh. No points. Gut job, hund." Laughing so hard he

tumbled to his knees, Jonah hugged the dog. “Take to Robbie. Go on. Go.”

His tail whapping back and forth, Runt did as he was told. He gently deposited the bag in Robbie’s lap and backed away, panting, his tongue hanging from his mouth.

Tears of laughter on his cheeks, Robbie patted his head. “Gut hund.”

Still grinning, he peered at the cornhole board with deep concentration. “Here we go.” Robbie let the bag fly. It plopped into the hole. “Three points. Three points!”

Doing the math in her head, Bethel knelt so she could hold up the peg board. Elijah Miller had done a beautiful job building the cornhole boards with compartments underneath to store the bags and another for the pegs. “The score’s tied up at twenty-one—all. I think we can call it a game. Everybody wins.”

Judah and Robbie grumbled, but neither one outright argued. Jonah and Sadie cheered. “We won, we won.”

“Everyone won.” Rachelle nudged them toward the boys. “Go tell Robbie and Judah gut game.”

Sadie immediately dashed over to Judah. “Gut game. I win. You win. We all win.”

Judah smiled for real then. “Gut game, Sadie.”

“You like eppie? I bring you eppie. And lemonade. Come on, Jonah.”

She dashed away. Grinning, Jonah shrugged and turned to follow.

“Jonah, your coat,” Rachelle called after him. “Mamm will get you if you lose your coat.”

Scowling, he stomped back to the coat. He threw it over his shoulder.

“Wear it, Bruder.”

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More scowls, but he tugged on the coat, then took off at a dead run.

“They have so much energy. I love that about kinner. Keeping up with them makes me feel like a *kind* again.” Most days Hattie had no problem acting like a child. Her parents probably wished she acted a bit more grown-up. “I don’t mind mopping floors or doing laundry as long as I can turn them into a game. Being a grown-up should be fun too.”

“Chores are fun, but by the time I get done, I’m too tired to play.” Claire had a dusting of freckles across her turned-up nose and cheeks, products of the bright sunshine. “I could sleep all day and all night.”

“Not today.” Nyla hopped up. She grabbed Claire’s arm and tugged. “Let’s go find the other girls. I’m tired of sitting around. We can walk to my house. We have a new batch of kittens that are the cutest ever. Maybe we can take a ride on the horses.”

Claire tugged back. She remained firmly seated in the chair. “You go ahead. I think I’m coming down with something.”

Nyla Plank, a round girl with wheat-colored hair and green eyes half hidden behind thick glasses, stuck her hands on her hips. “Are you sure? You didn’t come hiking with us last weekend. You don’t want to do anything anymore.”

“Next time, I promise.”

“I’m holding you to that.”

Nyla turned and nearly collided with Enos and Liam, who took turns sidestepping her.

“Whew! Where’s the fire?” Enos’s booming laugh, though rarely heard, echoed the one their father had. He and Liam were the spitting image of Dad—hair the color of dark toast, cocoa-brown eyes, and built like bulldogs—solid, all chest, and not much height. “No need to knock us down.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Nyla’s face turned tomato red. She ducked her head and rushed away, still muttering, “Sorry.”

Apparently unaware of the effect he had on the girl, Enos cocked his head toward Bethel. “We just came to steal the boys from you, Beth. Mamm wants us to take them home. Are you ready, guys?”

“Mamm is worried we caught cold in the rain yesterday.” Judah’s disgruntled tone matched his scowl. “Tell her we kept our coats on, like she said. We’re fine. Aren’t we, Beth?”

“You’re fine, but you have school tomorrow, so it’s not a bad idea to call it a day.” Bethel tucked a scarf Mom had insisted Judah wear more snugly around his neck. “I can come along.”

“Nee. No need.” Enos cocked his head toward Claire. “Mamm says you should come too, Schweschder.”

Frowning, Claire struggled to rise from her chair. It wobbled. So did Claire.

Hattie popped up and steadied her from behind. “Do you need a push?”

“I’m fine. Just tired.”

Enos took Claire’s hand and pulled her upright. “You need to eat your spinach, maedel.”

“Like I said, I must be coming down with something.” Claire’s cheeks, dusted pink from the sun, turned a deep red. “Or maybe it’s just because yesterday was a long day.”

No teenage girl should be tired after a good night’s sleep. Bethel swallowed those words. They left a bitter taste in their throat. “I’ll bring your chair. See you back at the house.”

“Danki.” Her shoulders hunched, Claire waved good-bye to the other women. “See you soon.”

Bethel heaved a sigh and relaxed in her chair. It was nice to

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be relieved of duty. God knew what He was doing when He made Sunday a day of rest.

“Does Claire have it?” Her dark-brown eyes full of concern, Rachele’s voice was soft. “Muscular dystrophy?”

Rachele was so observant and so empathetic. Bethel forced a nod. “We think so, but Mamm’s calling tomorrow to make an appointment at the Clinic for Special Children. They’ll do the tests to confirm.”

Another five-and-a-half-hour trip through Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Maryland to Strasburg in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. More medical bills. The clinic thrived on fundraisers and donations that allowed them to keep their fees down, but the costs still added up.

If Claire had the disease, surgery, braces, canes, ankle and foot orthotics, walkers, mobility scooters, and eventually a wheelchair would likely be needed. Both Judah and Robbie had surgery to lengthen their tendons in an effort to prolong their ability to walk. Eventually, their leg muscles became too weak even then. Robbie’s had progressed more quickly than Judah’s. There was no way of knowing how quickly Claire’s would affect her.

“I’m so sorry.” Layla laid her hand on Bethel’s. “It’s a hard row to hoe.”

“I know we have to believe Gott’s will is being done in all this, but it’s hard to see.” Another sibling who would need care. How many would there be? They were sweet, loving boys. It broke Bethel’s heart to see them struggle. “Mamm keeps saying Gott has a plan for the buwe. He has a plan for Claire too. I know it’s true. I don’t begrudge a single second of taking care of them. I just can’t understand why He allows them to suffer like this.”

“What is that saying?” Hattie rubbed her crinkled forehead as if

thinking hurt. “Sometimes the test comes first, then the lesson . . . That’s it.”

“Is it wrong to say I don’t like this test?”

“Nobody does.” Rachelle pulled her lawn chair closer. “Everyone in our family has had to think about Gott’s hand in Jonah’s life. Every family ponders these issues when a special *kind* joins it. All we know for sure is that every bopli is a gift from Gott.”

“Kinner come in all shapes and sizes. Look at me. The silly goose.” Hattie, short for Harriet Rose Schrock, the daughter of nursery owner Atlee Schrock, had a penchant for saying odd things. One of her many traits that had turned her into Bethel’s best friend in first grade. She held out her paper plate. She’d filled it with monster cookies, snickerdoodles, gingersnaps, kiss cookies, and brownies. Hattie had a sweet tooth and loved to share. “Just looking at me makes people laugh.”

It wasn’t the wiry orange-red hair or immense sea of freckles across her nose that made Hattie stand out among her friends. It tended to be the lopsided prayer cover, wrinkled dress, and inevitably stained apron along with a propensity for talking nonstop.

“Gott made you in His image and you’re only a silly goose when you want to be.” The steel binding around Bethel’s heart loosened a tad. Serious Hattie appeared at the least expected moments. Bethel took a kiss cookie and passed the plate to Rachelle. Kiss cookies were the best because they were a two for one: a cookie and a chocolate candy. “You always make me smile. I just need to stop whining.”

“You’re no whiner. I wish I had your patience.” Rachelle pulled her crocheted shawl more tightly around her shoulders against a frisky north wind that had loosened a lock of dark-brown hair from her prayer covering. Her fair cheeks were rosy. “I’ve been where you are. Wondering what Gott’s plan was for me in all this. I struggled

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with giving up teaching our special children because I wasn't sure of my future. I wished He'd use the clouds to spell it out across the sky or in the fields like those crop circles people talk about. Something plain as day."

"Mamm needs me. The buwe need me. Not only will Claire be less help, but she will need more help as time goes on."

"Remember, though, it's not all on your shoulders. It's *hochmut* to think you're the only one who can take care of their needs." Rachelle tempered the words with a smile. "I was sure I was what was best for my special kinner. Come to find out, they're doing just fine at the Englisch school without me. I only made it harder for them by hanging on so tightly."

The sound of a child counting at the top of his lungs mingled with laughter and shouts as kids raced through the yard, intent on a game of hide-and-seek. So carefree. Their bodies so strong and able. Such joy for them. Such blessing. For that, she would always be grateful. She simply had to work harder to find the blessings in the trials borne by the people she loved. "When did you figure it out? Was it because of Toby?" She put her hand to her mouth for a second, then let it drop. "I'm sorry. That's awfully personal, isn't it."

"Maedel, Rachelle loves to talk about Toby." With a snort, Hattie flipped her hand in the air as if she were tossing out Bethel's comment. "Go on, tell Bethel how he wore you down until you knew you couldn't live without him."

"Ewww, this is my bruder we're talking about." Layla pretended to cover her ears. "Toby is a gut guy, but I don't want to think of him like that."

Bethel joined in their laughter. When it died away, she broached the subject that was most worrisome. "You don't have a history of muscular dystrophy in your family, do you?"

"Ach, is that what you're worried about? More special children?"

Rachelle's eyebrows arched, but her ochre eyes filled with empathy. "We Lapps have our own special child as do Toby and Layla's family. I consider it an honor to care for Jonah and will happily do the same for Sadie someday. If Toby and I have more, then Gott's will be done."

"Absolutely. I hope and plan to do the same." Bethel felt her way gingerly along the narrow, pitfall-filled path this conversation followed. To compare diseases or disabilities was unthinkable. Each had its own challenges, each its own means of coping and overcoming. "It's just that LGMD is so hard on the kinner. It doesn't show up right away. After a while you forget to keep your guard up, and that's when it pounces. Watching the kinner struggle to understand and to accept is hard. I would never say anything to them. They're so resilient, so determined to live life the best they can."

"I'm the one who falls short, Gott forgive me. To watch them struggle breaks my heart. First it's no more running, no more baseball or volleyball and other sports. Then it's walking. No hiking. No hunting. It's harder and harder to finish simple tasks. They start to realize they won't be able to farm or do most jobs. Even with physical and occupational therapy twice a week, the simple tasks like taking a bath or combing their hair get hard. After a while, even brushing their teeth is hard. They're so brave. I'm the one who questions. If they do, they never do it in front of me. I try to trust in Gott. I try to have faith. I try."

Bethel halted. The quiver in her voice was shameful. It was the most she'd ever shared. Why today? Why now? Because the disease seemed to have skipped her and gone for Claire instead. Why her little sister and not Bethel? "If I could somehow spare Claire this trial I would. I'd gladly carry it for her."

"I believe you would. I know you would." Rachelle tipped her chair to one side. She gave Bethel a one-armed hug. "But it's not up

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to you to question Gott's plan—for her or for you. We don't have to know why Claire will bear this cross and not you. We only have to accept it as Gott's will and do everything we can to support her. You also have to think about your mamm. She needs you to help with the younger kinner."

"I know. How can I marry and leave her to take care of three kinner—or more—with the disease? The therapy sessions, the stretching, all the care they need." Bethel kneaded her apron's soft cotton with both hands. "Setting that I aside, I wonder if it's fair to ask a man to marry me, knowing what the future may bring."

"Getting married won't keep you from helping your mudder. Others will step in to help too. That is the way of our community and our faith. The key word is *may* bring." Her tone gentle, Layla patted Bethel's shoulder. "If we worried about these diseases, none of us would get married or have *boplin*. I can't wait for my first bopli to come along."

Come what may.

"That's for sure and for certain." Hattie passed the dessert plate again. Bethel passed it right back. The last thing she needed was more sugar. Hattie's expression said *yay, more for me*. She selected a snickerdoodle and held it up as if inspecting it. "I want to have as many kinner as possible. If James ever gets around to asking me the big question."

Of course she did. All Plain women did.

"I heard you and Declan had a run-in yesterday." Rachele's observation came with a slight smile. "Maybe that's why the subject of kinner is on your mind."

Declan helped them in a deluge of rain despite a terrible cough. He'd gone out of his way to be helpful and all she'd done was judge him. "Nee, nee, that's not it. It was nothing like that. He just helped us out."

“Then why is your face turning red?”

The more the women laughed, the more heat toasted Bethel’s face. “Stop!” She couldn’t help herself. Their laughter was contagious. Declan knew how to make people laugh. Maybe that was the gift God had bestowed on him. “Stop it. It’s not that funny.”

Yet she giggled with them.

“What’s so funny?”

Bethel swiveled in her chair. So did her companions. Declan strode across the gravel driveway toward them. Her friends’ peals of laughter grew. Bethel bit back her own. Declan frowned, then glanced down. “What? Did I spill something on my clothes?”

“Nee. It’s not you.” Her fit of giggles fled as quickly as it had come. “It’s nothing.”

That set Hattie off again. Which sent Rachelle and Layla into another gale of laughter.

“Really. It’s nothing.”

Suddenly it *was* all about him. Or maybe it was simply the power of suggestion. Bethel allowed herself a glance at Declan’s half-bewildered, half-willing-to-smile expression. He wanted to make the world a happier place.

Who could argue with that?