

Prologue

Spring

Honestly, I thought the worst was past.

A full month has come and gone since the day of that chilly barn raising southeast of Strasburg. Mamma and I had traveled all that way, taking a hamper of food to help feed the men building the new barn. The plea to lend a hand had traveled along the Amish grapevine, which some said spread word faster than radio news.

There we were, sitting at the table with the other womenfolk, when Mamma let out a little gasp, jumped up, and rushed over to greet a woman I'd never seen in my life.

Then if she and that stranger didn't go off walking together for the longest time, just up and left without a word to me or anyone.

From then on my mother seemed preoccupied ... even *ferhoodled*. Most worrisome of all, she began rising and wandering outside in the middle of the night. Sometimes I would see her cutting through the cornfield, always going in the same direction until she disappeared from view. She leaned forward as if shouldering the weight of the world.

Here lately, though--in the past few days--she had begun to settle down some, cooking and cleaning and doing a bit of needlework. I'd even noticed her wearing an occasional smile, a sweet softness in her face once again.

But lo and behold, last night, when talk of my twenty-first birthday came up, silent tears streamed down her ivory face while she rinsed and stacked the dishes. My heart sank like a stone. "Mamma ... what is it?"

She merely shrugged and I kept drying, squelching the flood of questions throbbing in my head.

Then today, while carrying a thermos of cold lemonade out to the sheep barn, I saw my older brother, Adam, over in the birthing stall with *Dat*. I heard Adam say in a low and serious voice, "Something's botherin' *Mamm*, ain't so?" My soon-to-be-wed brother must've assumed he was on equal footing, or about to be, to dare utter such a question to our father. Either that or he felt it safe to stick his neck out and speak man-to-man out there, surrounded by the musky, earthy smells, with only the sheep as witness.

I held my breath and kept myself hidden from view. A man of few words, *Dat* gave no immediate reply. I waited, hoping he might offer a reason for Mamma's behavior. Surely it was something connected to the stranger at the March barn raising. For as long as I remember, Mamma has always been somewhat moody, but I was just certain something had gone off-kilter that day. She kept to herself more and more--even staying away twice from Sunday Preaching. *Jah*, there was much for me to ponder about my mother. And ponder I did.

Now, as I waited stubbornly for my father to acknowledge Adam's question, the only sound I heard was the laboring cry of the miserable ewe, her bleats signaling a difficult delivery. I swallowed my disappointment. But I shouldn't have been surprised that *Dat* made no response whatsoever. This was his way when cornered. *Dat*'s way in general, especially with women.

I continued to stand motionless there in the stuffy sheep barn, observing my father's serious face, his downturned mouth. Adam, blond and lean, knelt in the deep straw as he waited to assist the struggling ewe deliver the next wee lamb--a twin to the first one already wobbling onto its feet within moments of birth. Tenderness for my blue-eyed brother tugged at my heart. In no time, we'd be saying our good-byes, once Adam tied the knot with Henry Stahl's sister, nineteen-year-old Priscilla. I'd happened upon them the other evening while walking to visit my good friend Becky Riehl. Of course, I'm not supposed to know they are

engaged till they are "published" in the fall, several Sundays before the wedding. Frankly I cringed when I saw Priscilla riding with Adam, and I wondered how my sensible brother had fallen for the biggest *Schnuffelbox* in all of Lancaster County. Everyone knew what a busybody she was.

Now I backed away from the barn door, still gripping the thermos. Perturbed by Dat's steadfast silence, I fled the sheep barn for the house.

Adam's obvious apprehension--and his unanswered question--plagued me long into the night as I pitched back and forth in bed, my cotton gown all bunched up in knots. In vain, I tried to fall asleep, wanting to be wide awake for work tomorrow. After all, it would be a shame if I didn't preserve my reputation as an industrious part-time employee at Eli's Natural Foods. I might be especially glad for this job if I ended up a *Maidel*.

Being single was a concern for any young Amishwoman. But I supposed it wasn't the worst thing not to have a husband, even though I'd cared for Henry quite a while already. Sometimes it was just hard to tell if the feelings were mutual, perhaps because he was reticent by nature. In spite of that, he was a kind and faithful companion, and mighty *gut* at playing volleyball, too. If nothing more, I knew I could count on quiet Henry to be a devoted friend. He was as dependable as the daybreak.

Too restless to sleep, I rose and walked the length of the hallway. The dim glow from the full moon cast an eerie light at the end of the house, down where the dormers jutted out at the east end. From the window, I stared at the deserted yard below, looking for any sign of Mamma. But the road and yard were empty.

Downstairs the day clock began to chime, as if on cue. Mamma had stilled the pendulum, stopping the clock on the hour she learned her beloved sister Naomi had passed away, leaving it unwound for months. Now the brassy sound traveled up the steep staircase to my ears--twelve lingering chimes. Something about the marking of hours in the deep of night disturbed me.

I paced the hall, scooting past the narrow stairs leading to the third story, where Adam and Joe slept in two small rooms. Safely out of earshot of Mamma's mysterious comings and goings.

Was Dat such a sound sleeper that he didn't hear Mamma's footsteps?

What would cause her to be so restless? I'd asked myself a dozen times. Yet, as much as I longed to be privy to my mother's secrets, something told me I might come to wish I never knew.

Chapter One

April in Bird-in-Hand was heralded by brilliant sunrises and brisk, tingling evenings. Every thicket was alive with new greenery, and streams ran swift and clear.

Known for its fertile soil, the idyllic town nestled between the city of Lancaster on the west and the village of Intercourse to the east. In spite of the encroachment of town homes and newly developed subdivisions on nearly all sides, the fertile farmland remained as appealing to outsiders as it did to Judah Byler and his farming neighbors.

Judah's big white clapboard house was newer than most of the farmhouses in the area. Its double chimney and sweeping gables lent an air of style to the otherwise ordinary siding and black-shuttered windows. He'd drawn up the plans twenty-some years before, situating the house on a piece of property divided from a vast parcel of pastureland owned by his father. Judah took great care to locate an ideal sloping spot on which to pour the foundation, since the house would be situated on a floodplain. Together he and his *Daed* planted a windbreak of trees and erected several martin birdhouses in the yard. His married brothers, father, and uncles had all pitched in and built the large ten-bedroom house. A house that, if cut in two, was identical on both sides.

Just after breaking ground, Judah took as his bride Lettie Esh, the prettiest girl in the church district. They'd lived with relatives for the first few months of their marriage, receiving numerous wedding gifts as they visited, until the house was completed.

Eyeing the place now, Judah was pleased the exterior paint was still good from three summers ago. He could put all of his energies into lambing this spring. It was still coat weather, and he breathed in the peppery scent of black earth this morning as he went to check on his new lambs again. He had risen numerous times in the night to make sure the ewes were nursing their babies. A newborn lamb was encouraged to nurse at will, at least as frequently as six to eight times in a twenty-four hour period.

Two plump robins strutted on the sidewalk, but Judah paid them little mind as he walked to the sheep barn, groggily recalling the day he'd carried Lettie's things up the stairs to the second floor. To the room that was to become their own. As *husband and wife*, he thought wryly.

Momentarily he considered Lettie's current dejected state, wondering if he shouldn't stay put today. But on second thought, he could not endure more questions from Adam or furtive glances from Grace. His eldest daughter had slipped into the barn last night and tried to hide in the shadows, as if wanting to inquire about Lettie, too. *Grace is as perceptive as her big brother is bold.*

At twenty-two Adam was the oldest of their four, and then Grace, followed by nineteen-year-old Amanda--their Mandy--and fifteen-year-old Joseph, whom they called Joe. All of them still at home and mighty Plain clear down to their toes. Adam had joined church two years ago and Grace last September, along with Mandy, who'd always wanted to be baptized with her only sister. He was thankful indeed for his God-fearing offspring, having been privy to some of the fiery trials other parents suffered.

Is Lettie still grieving Naomi? Her sister had died in her sleep several years earlier, within days of Gracie's birthday, as he recalled. A heart attack, he'd heard it was. Poor Lettie had worn black for a full year to show her respect, twice as long as the expected time. There had been other signs, too, that she was locked up in sorrow for longer than most siblings might mourn. Lettie couldn't bring herself to speak of Naomi, which worried her parents, Jakob and Adah, who lived across the wide middle hall on their own side of Judah's house.

Presently Judah looked in on the ewe and her twin lambs, certain that Adam and Joe, with a little help from their grandfather Jakob, could tend to the newly birthed lambs, at least for today. When he was finished checking, he hurried back to the house. He'd seen Lettie stirring up eggs and milk for scrambling as he'd rushed past her to the side door. Disheveled and still in her bathrobe, her fair hair quickly pulled into a loose bun at the nape of her neck, she'd said nary a word.

Returning now, he made his way to the sink to wash up for the meal. Drying his hands, he moseyed over to the table, avoiding Lettie's solemn gaze as she set the table for his solitary early morning breakfast.

"S'pose we ought to have us a talk." Her big blue eyes nearly stared a hole in him.

"Well, I'll be leavin' soon for the animal auction up yonder," he replied.

She grimaced and placed two cups and saucers on the table before preparing to pour the coffee. "It shouldn't take much of your time."

His stomach tensed up and he motioned for her to sit. They bowed their heads for the silent prayer of blessing, which concluded when he uttered a quick amen. Judah reached for the eggs and generously salted them, then spread Lettie's raspberry jam on two pieces of toast. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed his wife's occasional glance. She was scarcely eating.

When Lettie didn't say what was on her mind, he mentioned wanting to buy another mare for road driving. "I'll know for certain when I see what's up for auction this morning. We'll need another horse with Adam most likely marryin' come fall."

"Can't we rely on his horse later on?" she asked, her voice a thin, sad thread.

"A young man needs his own mare."

"Well, driving horses ain't on my mind today." She sighed loudly. "Judah ... I need to tell you something."

He braced himself. "What is it?"

A long pause ensued as she attempted to gather herself. He wondered what had caused his wife to go from periodic moodiness to whatever this was. "You ain't sick, are ya, Lettie?"

"*Ach* no."

"*Des gut.*" Yet the tension hung in the air, nearly visible. Neither food nor drink eased the lingering silence.

"I truly do not know how ... or where ... to begin." She did not raise her eyes to meet his as she drank her coffee, not until Judah was done eating and wiping his face on his sleeve. She glanced out the window, eyes glistening. "It's awful hard, really...."

He folded his hands near his plate, waiting. Would she finally tell him what was bothering her--let down this everlasting barrier?

She opened her mouth to speak, lips parted as she turned to look at him. Then slowly she shook her head. "Perhaps it's better this way."

Better what way? Though she'd never before seemed as upset as she had these last few weeks, he'd tried before to pull answers from her but he scarcely ever knew what to say. Truth be known, he'd given up attempting conversation over the years--least where anything sticky was concerned. Nor did he have hope that things would change.

"Ach, you've got yourself a full day," she said again.

He leaned over the table, baffled by her deep sadness. "Keep yourself busy, won't ya?"

She looked his way and nodded. "Jah, we've both got our work...."

He reached for his coffee, taking a slow swallow, and Lettie moved the sugar bowl closer to him. Suddenly, her cool hand was covering his, her eyes pleading. He tensed and withdrew his hand.

"Are you displeased, Judah?"

He saw the deep lines in her sallow face. "Displeased?"

"With *me.*" She leaned her head into her hands.

He reached for the sugar bowl, at a loss for words. Then she was on her feet and clearing the table, her face grim as she reached for his dirty plate.

Judah pushed back his chair. "Well, I s'pose I should be goin'." He made his way to the side door, still alert to her presence.

Taking the few steps gingerly, he was conscious of a painful gnawing in his stomach as he headed down the lane past the martin birdhouses. It was then that he realized he hadn't said good-bye.

With a small pang of regret, he was tempted to turn back ... to say something to smooth things over, if that was even possible.

What good would it do? He stopped for a moment, then resumed his pace.

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Grace Byler slipped into her cozy gray slippers and put on her white cotton bathrobe. Having awakened before the alarm, she lit the gas lantern on her dresser and set about redding up the room. She made her bed, then plumped her pale green and white crocheted pillows on the settee in the corner, where she liked to sit and read a psalm or two before dressing. Her favorite way to start the day.

She counted two clean dresses and matching aprons left for the weekend, each garment on its hanger on the wooden pegs along one wall. Going to sit on the settee, she reached for the Good Book.

When she finished reading, she dressed, weaving the straight pins sideways on the front of her loose-fitting bodice, hungry for a good breakfast. Last evening's supper seemed far too long ago as she brushed her blond hair away from her face and wound its thickness into the customary bun. She set her Kapp on her head, letting its ties dangle free.

That done, she glanced in the dresser mirror and straightened her brown cape dress. Soon it would be time to sew up some new dresses. She yawned as she moved to the window and peered out at the rising sun. Her father stood at the end of the driveway, waving down a van. *Must be he's traveling farther than usual today.* Typically their family preferred to use the horse and carriage for transportation--the team--although Dat frequently used an English driver for longer distances.

Stepping away from the window, Grace was curious to know where he was headed so early, but her father rarely shared his comings and goings. She paused to smooth the lightweight bed quilt, made from an antique pattern they'd copied from Dat's mother. Grace recalled the fun she'd had piecing it together several years ago with Mamma, Mandy, and *Mammi* Adah.

Sweet memories.

On her way to the door, she eyed the braided rug between her bed and the dresser and decided it needed a good beating. She'd do that after breakfast, before Mamma and she took the horse and buggy into town to her job at Eli's. Mamma planned to stop at the general store.

Downstairs, she found her mother frying up eggs and sausage. "Mornin', Mamma," she said, surprised at her mother's already soiled black apron and unkempt hair. Stray strands of blond-gray hair were wispy at her neck, nothing like the neat bun Grace was used to seeing. "How'd ya sleep?" she asked.

"All right, I guess. You?"

"I've had better nights."

"Oh?" Mamma kept her eyes low, but she couldn't disguise their puffy redness.

Grace drew in a breath. Something was terribly wrong.

"You work so hard over at Eli's," her mother said. "You really need your rest, Gracie."

"We *all* do," she whispered. Then, going to the utensil drawer, she said, "I'll be home later than usual today, but I'll get a ride. You won't have to bother pickin' me up."

"Tis never a bother." Mamma adjusted the flame under a pot of stew for the noon meal. Quickly, she returned to kneading a mass of bread dough, her lips drawn in a taut line.

Oh, but Grace wanted to throw her arms around Mamma and tell her that everyone knew she was troubled, no matter how much she pretended otherwise. "I saw Dat out early, waitin' for a driver," she said, making small talk.

"Jah, and he was mighty hungry at breakfast." Mamma raised the lid on the pot filled with stew meat and vegetables, and a gust of steam rose out of the top.

"Dat sure enjoys your cooking." Grace was thankful for the gas that powered the range and oven, and the refrigerator and water heater, as well. The bishop had declared it acceptable to sell the old cookstove and icebox before she was born. That must have been a wonderful-good day for Mamma, who enjoyed working in the kitchen, whipping up one delicious meal after another. All the womenfolk had benefited in scores of ways.

She assumed someone had coaxed Dat to replace their kitchen appliances back then. Most likely her maternal grandmother, Mammi Adah, had stepped in to plead Mamma's case. To this day an unspoken tension over such things continued between her standoffish father and outspoken grandmother.

Grace placed the knives, forks, and spoons around the table, glancing at her tired mother, still so pretty nearly everyone looked at her twice upon first meeting her. The milky blue of Mamma's eyes was remarkable, and sometimes Grace wondered if her mother knew just how striking she really was.

When Grace had poured the juice and milk, she called up the stairs to Mandy, their only sleepyhead. "Hurry, sister ... breakfast is nearly ready."

At this hour Adam and Joe were out watering the sheep and looking after the newborn lambs, with more wee lambs on the way. Any minute, though, they would be in, hungry as ever, unless they'd eaten earlier with Dat.

"Your sister's ev'ry bit a slowpoke, just as she was as a schoolgirl," Mamma said while pouring coffee. "She's goin' to need more prodding, I daresay."

Grace wiped the counter and agreed. "Mandy's a good help, though, once the sleep's washed out of her eyes."

"Well, she's not near the worker you are."

Grace's breath caught in her throat. She stepped closer. "Ach, Mamma," she said, embarrassed.

Her mother offered a hint of her old warm smile and a good-natured wink. She carried her coffee cup over and sat at her regular spot next to the head of the table. "Best be callin' your brothers."

Heartened by the shift in Mamma's mood, Grace obliged and made her way out to the wide hallway, where pairs of shoes were neatly lined up on low wooden shelves. *More of Mammi Adah's doing.*

Along one wall of the entryway, Dat had positioned pegs for work coats, as well as sweaters, an equal distance apart. The sight of Dat's empty coat peg sobered her, and she wished she might brush away the heaviness she sensed in Mamma. If only Grace could manage the way her father somehow did, letting her mother's sadness slide off him. *Letting everything slide off, really.*