

THE AMISH SEAMSTRESS

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*Mindy:
For my niece Gabriella Rose Clark,
who is a ray of sunshine in my life,
and
Leslie:
For my father, Bruce Egger,
a gentle man who still stands for those in need.*

“I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.”

PSALM 121:1-2



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ONE

Was that Zed, already?

The generator powering my sewing machine was right outside the window, and it was so loud I couldn't hear much, but I felt sure I was picking up the sound of his voice coming from the kitchen.

Smiling, I finished the seam, cut the threads, and carefully folded up the half-finished dress I'd been working on. Then I stood and slid open the window, leaned down, and turned the generator off. In the looming silence that followed, the noises of the household came through to my little side room much more clearly. Sure enough, it was Zed, and though I couldn't make out the words he was saying, his familiar tones were warm and sweet as always.

I pulled down the screen and hurriedly straightened my work area so we could be on our way. Though it was a hot August afternoon I grabbed my wrap, knowing the temperature might drop if we were still out in the woods when the sun began to go down. I did a quick check in the mirror on my way out of the room and saw that my hair was a mess. Brown strands hung loose and framed my face, as usual, thanks to the busy morning I'd spent in a caregiving class at a local nursing home, followed by

several hardworking hours here at the sewing machine at home. I made a halfhearted attempt to smooth everything back down before moving into the hallway. At least my *kapp* was still on straight.

Zed had told me to wear shoes I didn't mind getting "disgustingly muddy," so I paused to slide my feet into the giant pair of work boots I had put there earlier. You would think with so many siblings—nine total, five of us still living at home—that I could have come up with a decent pair of boots, yet the only thing I'd been able to find that wasn't currently in use were these pontoon boats that once belonged to my much-larger-footed older brother Melvin.

Feeling ridiculous, I clomped into the kitchen. Zed was leaning against the counter near the door, his frame lanky and long, and his blond bangs hanging nearly to his eyes. When he saw me, he stood up straight and gave me a broad smile. His smile was so big, in fact, that at first I thought he was reacting to the sight of me in these stupid boots. But then I realized it wasn't that. Something was up, something much more exciting than just a friendly late afternoon hike between friends.

I looked at him questioningly, expecting him to explain, but instead he just gave me a wink and returned his focus to my mother. She was at the counter, helping my youngest brother, six-year-old Thomas, drop spoonfuls of biscuit dough onto a cookie sheet. Clearly, whatever Zed was beaming about, he wanted to wait to tell me in private.

Despite my curiosity, I knew it would be rude to rush out, so I forced myself to relax and tune into their conversation. *Mamm* was in the middle of giving Zed some advice—no surprise there. He would be leaving for college at the end of the week, and every time she'd seen him lately, she had taken it upon herself to relay some point of encouragement or word of warning. Not that she had ever been to college herself, of course. We were Amish, not Mennonite like him. But Peggy Mueller was a sharp, no-nonsense woman who had always seemed to have a clear picture of what the outside world offered, both the positive and the negative. At the moment she was going through a mental checklist, asking if he had remembered to pack this and that.

"Oh, and of course," she added, "don't forget to bring along a list of everyone's addresses and some stamps so you can stay in touch."

“Yes ma’am. I have the stamps already, and some stationery my mom gave me.”

“*Gut.*”

“No need for a list of addresses, though. Just about everybody is already in the contacts app on my cell phone.”

My mother seemed neither embarrassed at her lack of knowledge about the current technology nor impressed that Zed was in possession of it. “Imagine that.” Turning back to Thomas, she tilted the bowl as he spooned out the last bit of dough. I watched them both for a moment, thinking what a lovely, homey scene they made.

Thomas was as cute as a button as always, his round cheeks dusted white with flour as he worked. Beside him, *Mamm* was the very picture of patient, maternal efficiency.

She was a little shorter than I and nearly as slim, despite having given birth to children. She looked younger than her age, especially considering that her oldest child, my sister Sadie, was twenty-eight. *Mamm* had a way about her—an independence I didn’t see in many of the other mothers in our community. She was also, quite frankly, beautiful. Her large brown eyes were full of life, and her dark brown hair, without a streak of gray, contrasted with her clear, creamy skin. The funny thing was, she’d passed on her eyes, hair, and skin to me. I just didn’t wear them all as well as she, I felt sure.

“So where are you two off to this afternoon?” she asked, glancing our way.

“We’re going out near the old Conestoga Indian Town,” Zed replied. “I want to show Izzy a potential shooting location for my next film.” He was an aspiring filmmaker, something my family tolerated but didn’t understand in the least.

Mamm had just picked up the cookie sheet, but she paused, her eyes wide. “Your *next* film? But you just finished the last one. Can’t you take a break from all of that before you start again?”

“Oh, c’mon,” he teased, “that’s like saying...” His voice trailed off as he glanced around the room, his eyes finally landing on me. Then he looked back at my mother. “Well, you’ve pretty much finished raising Izzy here. Didn’t you want take a break from all that mothering before you moved

on to the others and started again?” With that, he stepped forward and mussed the hair on Thomas’s head.

I knew Zed was just kidding around, but I stiffened, holding my breath until my mother laughed in response.

“Point taken,” she replied, clucking her tongue at his audacity as she slid the biscuits into the oven and closed the door. Somehow Zed could always get away with saying things to her no one else ever could.

Certainly, with ten kids *Mamm* had done her share of mothering—and she wasn’t finished yet. At six, Thomas was the youngest, but there was also Stephen, who was eleven. I was nineteen and the oldest still living at home, but I wasn’t much help to her as my time was mostly spent sewing and caregiving. My younger sisters, Linda and Tabitha, were both home as well, and though Linda frequently pitched in around here, Tabitha was gone a lot, working for another family as a mother’s helper.

As for our older siblings, Matthew, Mark, Becky, and Sadie were all happily married and living in homes of their own. Only Melvin was single, but he lived across the county, where he worked as a farmhand.

Now I watched as *Mamm* wiped little Thomas’ cheeks clean with her apron and then directed him to wash the dough from his hands.

“Go out and check with your *daed*,” she added, “to see if he needs any help in the barn until supper’s ready.”

“Okay!” He climbed down from his perch atop the tall stool and went to the sink. When I was his age, I would have been expected to stick around and help clean up the mess we’d made from all that cooking first, but it was different for boys.

As Thomas washed his hands, I looked to Zed, ready to go, but his eyes were still on my mom. When it came to the topic of making movies, the man had a one-track mind. “You know, even if I did want a break from filming—which I don’t—I’m leaving for school in four days, so there’s no time to lose. I want to do as much location scouting as I can before I go because I won’t have another chance until I get back here at Thanksgiving.”

Thanksgiving. Three whole months away. I tried not to think of how empty my life would be between now and then as I absently watched my little brother rinse the soap from his fingers.

“Most people don’t realize how much prep work goes into making

a movie,” Zed continued as Thomas turned off the faucet and raced through the mudroom and out the back door, banging it loudly, without even stopping to dry his hands. The screen door fell shut behind him with a *thwack*, one tiny wet handprint glistening on the wooden frame.

“Oh?” my mother asked, but I could tell her focus had shifted to the mess their meal preparations had left behind.

“Filming won’t start till next summer, but I’ll need the time between now and then to plot out and write and storyboard the whole thing. The sooner I have an idea of my location options, the easier that process will be.”

My mother turned to him, one eyebrow raised. “Seems to me that your time in Indiana should be devoted to your studies, not to getting ready for some movie you won’t even start filming for months. Don’t forget, Zed, academically speaking, Goshen may be far more demanding than you’re used to here.”

She was right about that last part. Since graduating from high school two years ago, Zed had been attending a local community college in Lancaster, where he had cruised through almost every class with straight A’s across the board. But now he was off to Indiana, where he would be entering Goshen College as a junior and would spend the next two years finishing out his degree in communications. Fortunately, he was a super smart guy and totally up to the challenge, but I had a feeling this new school was going to require a far more balanced effort than was his norm. Not that he was lazy by any means. He just tended to focus on his film classes and little else.

On the other hand, Zed was being himself. When it came to creativity, he could be as obsessed as I was. Filming wasn’t my area, but sewing and embroidery and other handwork were. Far too often I would ignore more important tasks that needed doing in order to press on with some creation that consumed my every thought. This tendency drove my parents crazy, but sometimes I just couldn’t seem to help myself.

“Fortunately, this film preparation stuff *is* for a class,” he said to *Mamm*, interrupting my thoughts. “Two classes, actually. This semester I have scriptwriting, and in the spring I’ll take storyboarding. So I’ll be able to do both—course work and prep work for my new film—at the same time.”

He grinned, but she just shook her head in bewilderment. As world savvy as she was overall, my *mamm* had trouble understanding how someone could make an entire college career out of moviemaking. In fact, on her scale of useful occupations for a grown man to have, I felt sure that “film director” fell somewhere near the bottom, right between “hairdresser” and “videogame designer.” In her life, at least, there simply wasn’t any point.

“Speaking of location scouting,” I blurted out, “we need to get going while we still have some sunlight. Oh, and we may be a few hours, so don’t hold supper for me.” With a surge of guilt, I added, “Though I can do these dishes for you when I get back, if you want.”

“We’ll see,” she said, her hands on hips as she surveyed the pile. No doubt, every single item would be washed and dried and put away before Zed and I even reached our destination. “You two have fun.”

Smiling, I headed outside, grateful she and my *daed* both seemed to understand the depth of my friendship with Zed. Better than that, they accommodated it, even if he was Mennonite, not Amish, and a college student besides. As families went, I was usually the odd one out around here—a square peg to the round holes that were my parents and siblings—but at least they respected my judgment enough to give me this.

Of course, once the day came that my *rumpspringa* ended and I joined the Amish church, I wouldn’t be able to hop in a car and just run off with some guy for a few hours, even if he was a trusted family friend. But for now they took such things in stride, and I appreciated it more than they knew.

Zed and I headed toward his banged-up old red Saab, which was waiting in its usual spot in the driveway. As we climbed inside, I noticed that mysterious gleam had returned to his eye, but I didn’t ask what it was about. I knew he would tell me in his own good time.

Soon we were out on the road, zipping up and down hills, past farms and fields and houses, and he was telling me all about his plans for this next movie he would be making. He’d recently won a big contest for his last film, and that success made him eager to plunge into the creative process yet again.

I couldn’t blame him. I felt the same way. I had made most of the costumes for the reenactment portion of that film and would do so again

for this one. It had been such a thrill to work with Zed like that, even if I hadn't understood a lot about the specifics of moviemaking. Before agreeing to help, I had read his script, so I knew going in that the story would be respectful of the Amish, which I appreciated—and which no doubt went a long way in convincing the bishop to approve my association with the project.

But beyond that, I had never even *seen* a movie, much less helped out somebody who was making one. Of course, when Zed was in high school, I'd seen him working on the computer plenty of times, editing the little films he'd made with his cell phone. But in college it was different, starting with the big, fancy camera and lights and things he was allowed to check out from the media lab for his film project. I had found the process fascinating—and the final result incredibly satisfying.

In the end, the film he made was wonderful—so wonderful, in fact, that the professor of his community college film class had encouraged Zed to enter it into the Pennsylvania Film Festival's "New Voices" contest once the semester was over. That was where he had won not just one but two big prizes.

The movie had focused on one of Zed's ancestors, an artist and wood-carver named Abraham Sommers who had lived in Switzerland back in the 1700s. The story was all about the legacy of that man's Christian faith, symbolized by three beautiful carved wooden boxes made by his own hands, and how that faith had been passed down through the generations all the way to today, just as those boxes had been passed down.

Thinking of it now, I found myself overwhelmed with emotion. I turned away and gazed out at acres of cornstalks swaying in the breeze, a surge of sadness filling my throat. I knew this feeling wasn't so much about Zed's touching movie as it was the fact that he was leaving in just a few days. I took a deep breath and held it in for a long moment. As I let it out, I wished for the millionth time he wasn't leaving at all.

I understood why he wanted to go off to school—why he practically had to, given his field of interest—and I knew how blessed he was that a Mennonite college even offered film classes. Still, the selfish part of me yearned to hear him say that he'd changed his mind and decided to stick around Lancaster County forever.

Oh, how I would miss him!

“You okay, Iz?” he asked, sensing my distress.

Turning back, I gave him an encouraging smile. “I was just thinking how...different it’ll be not having you around anymore.”

“Different as in sad? Or different as in better?”

I smiled, forcing away any tears. “Different as in I sure hope Thanksgiving gets here soon, because I’m going to go nuts without my best friend around.”

To my surprise, he didn’t make a joke or say something sarcastic. He just swallowed hard and nodded.

“I’ll miss you too,” he replied softly. “More than you can imagine.”

We were quiet the rest of the way, but it was a comfortable silence, borne from four years of close friendship. I hoped that friendship would continue to endure despite the impending distance between us and the diverging trajectories of our lives.

Once we reached our destination, he parked along the side of the road near the head of a hiking trail, and a few moments later we were trooping down that path into the woods. Even though it hadn’t rained for several weeks and most of the walk was dry, it became quite muddy in places, just as he’d warned, probably thanks to a spring or two that bubbled up from the ground along the way. At the worst parts, my big boots made a moist sucking sound with almost every step.

Zed talked nonstop as we went, going on and on about the story for his new movie and the various scenes he wanted to film here, but I wasn’t really listening. My mind tended to wander in and out no matter the situation, but now I was starting to feel even less focused than usual. What was the matter with me today? Perhaps it wasn’t just my growing sadness about Zed’s departure but the realization of how different his world was going to be from mine from now on.

Here in Lancaster County, the ways he and I lived were fairly similar, despite the fact that I was Amish and he was Mennonite. Zed’s mother, Marta Bayer, was Mennonite and had been for years, but she’d been raised in an Amish home, so she’d always cooked lots of Amish foods, taught her kids the language of Pennsylvania Dutch, and in many ways emulated an existence more Amish than Mennonite.

Of course, as a Mennonite Zed had access to some things I didn’t, such

as electricity and a car and a computer. But in many other ways his lifestyle was still quite Plain. Most importantly, he and I held the same core beliefs about God and His Son, about how being Christlike meant living simply and humbly, in full submission and surrender.

Once Zed went off to college, however, the Amish influences around him would be far less pervasive. At least he would be at a Christian school, but Goshen wasn't the only college in the area. Who knew what sorts of temptations awaited off campus in town or at some of the secular schools nearby? My mind filled with images of sleazy bars, wild parties, and coeds in tight tops and short skirts. Even if Zed was living and studying in a Christian environment, could he remain the same, solid, faithful guy he'd always been once he had that much freedom—and no one from home to see what he may or may not be doing?

“Okay, Izzy, here we are,” he said now, oblivious to the scowl that had formed on my face. He bent down to pass beneath a low-hanging branch and then turned to hold it out of the way for me as I moved forward.

My scowl fading, I looked up and couldn't help but notice how tall he was getting these days. Tall and handsome and sweet. No doubt some beautiful college girl would try to nab him within weeks—if not days—of his arrival at Goshen.

We moved forward, side by side, to where the path opened up into a broad clearing, and then we came to a stop.

“What do you think?” he asked as he made a sweeping motion with his arm.

In the distance I could see what looked like the remains of a couple of old log cabins. One was missing a roof, the other an entire wall, but the parts still there looked utterly authentic.

“Don't you think this could serve as our little cluster of Amish homes?”

I hesitated, wishing I had paid more attention to what he'd been saying about the film itself. I knew it would focus on an historical topic, but beyond that I couldn't recall what that topic was or even the era it would be in.

“You do you understand what I was saying about selective framing, right?” he asked, taking my confused silence for reticence.

I cleared my throat, embarrassed to admit that no, I didn't understand

what he'd been saying, but only because I hadn't been listening. "Tell me again now that we're here."

With a nod he moved forward, clomping another ten feet or so toward the ramshackle structures and then coming to a stop. "It's simple, really." He held his arms out in front of him, making an *L* shape with the thumb and forefinger of each hand, and then moving the *L*s together to form a square. "Even though the cabins are in pretty rough condition, what I'm saying is that we can make them seem intact with some simple camerawork."

"We can?"

"Yeah. Pretend this is the camera lens," he said of the square, "and that the frame includes only what you can see through here."

I walked over to him and peered out toward the cabins through his fingers.

"Now, move me so that the top of the frame is aligned just above the door on that first cabin."

Placing a hand on his upper arm, I did as he said, surprised at the hardness of the muscle I could feel through the fabric of his sleeve as I pressed his arm downward. Zed was so lanky and tall—and his life so cerebral and sedentary compared to most of the men I knew—that I'd never thought of him as being muscular before. But now I realized he must have bulked up during his summers of physical labor at the Gundys' nursery business and over Christmas breaks on their tree farm. I felt bad I hadn't noticed that until now.

Once I got his hands into place, I again leaned in close, viewing the scene as he had instructed and trying not to think about the enticing scent of sandalwood that wafted from him. Was that aftershave? Cologne? Had he always smelled like that?

"See?" he whispered, tilting his head down toward mine so he could look through his hands with me. "If the lens never goes higher than this, the viewer won't even know that building doesn't have a roof."

Unable to speak, I simply nodded, aware not just of his scent and his build but of the heat that radiated from his chest and arms. Suddenly, I wanted to be in those arms. Wrapped in them. Pressed against him. Our hearts beating in tandem.

His attention was still on the cabins, but mine was on him. What was going on with me? I had known this guy for years, ever since we were little kids. We hadn't always been close, but the year we were both fifteen, I had been hired as a caretaker for his dying father, and we had come to know each other well. Almost immediately our friendship moved into a romance, one that was all-consuming. But then my parents sat me down and expressed their concerns—that we were too young, that he was Mennonite and not Amish—so out of respect for them, Zed and I had agreed to cool things down and keep our relationship purely platonic after that. It took some time, but eventually I really did grow to think of him as a brother. To my relief, when I later explained that to my parents, they took me at my word and had trusted us to keep it that way ever since.

Now here I was, no longer a child of fifteen, seeing this man in a way I hadn't in several years—as a love interest, not just a friend. We were so much alike, he and I, and so very compatible. As my mother liked to say, Zed was just so *easy*, so loveable. A truly good guy to the core. Our relationship had only grown stronger since, and I enjoyed and appreciated him more than just about any other person on earth. In every sense of the word, he was my best friend.

But was he just a friend? Or something more? At the moment I wasn't sure. For some reason, I found myself wanting to embrace him—but not like a hug between buddies. With shocking clarity, I realized that the embrace I yearned for was the *romantic* kind. I wanted to be held—tightly—by this tall and sweet and handsome man, to be taken into his loving arms. *Just* friends?

Not hardly.

Stunned, I stepped back and turned away, hoping that the range of emotions I was feeling hadn't shown on my face—or that if they had, he hadn't noticed.

“I'm going to take a closer look,” I mumbled, and then I began walking as quickly as I could toward the cabins. With each step, a new truth pounded in my head like a drum.

I didn't just love my best friend Zed.

I was *in love* with him too.