

THE AMISH QUILTER

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ONE

Driving home from work, I had to pull the buggy onto the shoulder of the road just so I could marvel at the beauty all around me. To my right was an old stone wall lined with purple crocus blossoms. Off to the left, white dots of sheep grazed in a field bordered by clusters of vivid yellow forsythia. Ahead, the afternoon sun streamed through the clouds, illuminating the knoll where my parents' century-old house nestled amid our family farm. Even in mid-April, when some of the trees were still bare, Lancaster County had to be one of the most beautiful places in the world. I'd heard other people, mostly visitors who came into the shop where I worked, say the same thing. I'd never been anywhere else, but I believed them, especially on days like this when the sun had chased away the rain and the long-dormant earth showed so many promises of new life.

I inhaled deeply, wishing I could turn the scene in front of me into a quilt, wondering how I would recreate the light, patterns, and textures with fabric. Because I worked at an *Englisch*-owned fabric and art store, I made fancy quilts to sell to *Englisch* customers, creations that were much more artistic than the ones I made for myself or for my Amish family.

As I urged my gelding, Blue, forward, I thought about the impact

setting had always had on me—and on my quilting. I'd grown up here and lived in the same house my entire life, the one where my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had all grown up as well. In fact, our ancestors had worked this land since arriving here from Europe in the early 1700s.

Maybe that's why I felt such a sense of place and why I often wanted to evoke settings in fabric. When I was done, even though it wasn't an exact representation, gazing at that finished quilt always gave me the same feeling of harmony I'd had when I looked at the original scene it was designed to represent.

Yá, that was how I felt, though I'd never try to explain as much to my *mamm* or my sisters. Not being particularly creative themselves, none of them would understand—well, except maybe Izzy, my second-oldest sister, who was an accomplished seamstress and the only other family member with artistic tendencies. But she lived in Indiana now.

There were ten children in our family, five boys and five girls. But it was my sisters who influenced me the most: Sadie, Becky, Izzy, and Tabitha. It wasn't that they didn't have talents of their own. They were strong, gifted women. All of them were smart, witty, and outgoing. Sadie was a great cook and a wonderful mother. Becky was a no-nonsense, take-charge kind of person. Besides being an accomplished seamstress, Izzy was perceptive and wise. Tabitha was socially gifted and the life of every event she attended. *Yá*, I was the youngest girl and felt practically invisible compared to them. They'd dubbed me "Little Sister," and though I knew the term started as an endearment, over time it just became a reminder that I was slight and limited. Diminutive and negligible. Invisible. Other than my quilting, there was nothing special about me at all. I grew to hate the nickname, which always reminded me of the fact that I didn't measure up to Sadie, Becky, Izzy, or Tabitha—and I never would.

I started quilting with my *mamm* when I was eight. I'd learned to do other handiwork too—sewing, knitting, and crocheting—but I was the most interested in making quilts and took to it immediately. From the beginning, I enjoyed working with other women in our district when we'd gather for quilting bees, a long tradition in the Amish community. We would pin the top, the batting, and the back to a frame and then stitch it all into a single piece. The saying "many hands make light work" was

especially true when it came to quilting, which we literally did by hand. Now, though, *Mamm* and I often worked together in the evenings at home instead of waiting until we could gather a group of women. And because I produced so many, I did most of the piecing on my own.

I continued on, planning my evening at home as I drove. After helping *Mamm* get supper on the table and then cleaning up, I decided I would spend the rest of my time cutting out squares for a new quilt. A Plain one. I was making it for my sister Tabitha, who had recently been dumped by her childhood sweetheart and needed some tangible form of comfort. She liked yellows, greens, and browns, so those were the colors I was going to use.

I hoped my youngest brother, Thomas, wouldn't have homework tonight, because if he did I would end up being the one to help him. Tabitha, his teacher, refused to do so, and our *mamm* let us both know she'd been assisting with homework for nearly thirty years, ever since our oldest sister, Sadie, started school, and she was tired of the chore. Besides, *Mamm* said it was good practice for when I had children of my own.

The truth was, I doubted I'd ever marry. My parents felt that I was still young and simply hadn't met the right person yet, but my sisters disagreed. They said there were plenty of guys to choose from around here, and the problem was that I was too picky. They said I'd never find anyone good enough.

I understood why it might seem that way. I could be a perfectionist, *ya*, especially when it came to my quilting, but I didn't think my perfectionism extended to choosing a suitor. I had a feeling that sometimes what others took for pickiness was actually a sort of obliviousness on my part. When a young man was interested in me, I usually didn't even notice. And in those rare times when I was interested in a young man, I had no idea how to communicate that to him, especially in the nonverbal ways my sisters had. I'd get stiff and quiet and self-conscious, all of which probably made me come across as disinterested. Hence my sisters' conclusion. Maybe I should ignore their opinions on the matter and stick with what my parents said.

I reminded myself that Tabitha wasn't married yet either, and she was a year and half older than I was. When she was younger, she'd hoped to

wed her childhood sweetheart, Mark Wittmer. Then she'd hoped to wed a man who worked construction with *Daed*. Then a farmer who lived in the next county over. Then Mark again, who broke up with her last week and left for Maryland to work with a relative all in the same day.

Tabitha wanted to be married more than anything.

She was the most gregarious of all of us Mueller sisters. She was playful and fun and could tell a good story. She now taught at the one-room school we'd once attended as kids, and all of those traits made her an amazing teacher. She was a little on the wild side but had ended her *rum-springa* the year before and joined the church.

I was the exact opposite of Tabitha, and we'd pretty much had a love-hate relationship our entire lives because of how different we were. I was quiet and shy and couldn't tell a story to save my life. For the most part I'd skipped my *rum-springa* and joined the church when I was eighteen. I also lacked the talents my sister had—my only gift, other than quilting, was my way with a lemon sponge pudding.

As I turned down the lane, I scanned our property. We only had forty acres, and although *Daed*'s parents had been able to survive on such a small farm with only one child, my large family couldn't. *Daed* worked construction to make a living and then farmed on Saturdays and sometimes in the evenings, fitting in his woodworking when he could, while my two younger brothers did the majority of the chores. At the moment my fifteen-year-old brother, Stephen, who was next in line after me, should have been out in the field, but there was no sight of him.

Mamm wasn't in the garden either, even though she was almost guaranteed to be there on sunny spring days like this one. I pulled around to the side of the barn and saw that her buggy was gone. How odd.

I parked mine, unhitched Blue, and led him into the barn. After I brushed, watered, and fed him, I retrieved my bag of fabric—*ya*, even with a good employee discount, too much of my earnings from working at the store went back into the cash register—and hurried into the house. Tabitha would be home from school soon with Thomas, who, at ten, was the youngest in our family. Perhaps I would have a moment of silence to put away my fabric before they arrived.

I'd inherited Izzy's sewing room when she got married four years ago. It

was just an old enclosed sunporch in back, but I loved the space as much as she had and always kept it perfectly neat and organized. My quilting supplies were shelved according to color, so I knew exactly where this new fabric would go. Except I didn't make it that far.

I opened the back door to the scent of cinnamon and saw a rack of cookies cooling in the middle of the kitchen table. At the end, by *Mamm's* place, was a note. I grabbed one of the freshly baked snickerdoodles and began to read.

Linda,

I'm at Sadie's. Stephen is with me. Robert took a turn for the worse. Come as soon as you can to get the children. All three have bad colds.

Mamm

Sadie's twin girls were seven, and the baby boy was thirteen months. Sadie's husband, Robert, had been diagnosed with colon cancer the year before, went through treatments, and had beaten it—until last month, when tests showed the cancer had returned, this time in his liver. He'd started treatments again last week.

My stomach lurched at the thought of him taking a "turn for the worse." I hoped it wasn't as bad as it sounded. He'd seemed optimistic about the chemotherapy working again, though Sadie had been awfully quiet when they came to tell *Mamm* and *Daed* three weeks ago.

I left the bag of fabric on the table and went back outside. I was just about to re-harness Blue when Tabitha turned up the highway. I waved, and as the buggy approached, I hurried over to her and told her what was going on and that we needed to head to Sadie's right away. Thomas was slumped on the passenger side, looking exhausted after a long day at school.

"Do we have to?" he asked wearily.

"Yes, we have to. Get in the back!" Tabitha barked and then blew from her face a strand of light hair that had escaped from her bun. It fell across her cheek, and she poked it under her *kapp*. Clearly Thomas was getting on her nerves again.

As I stepped over to the buggy's passenger side, he climbed into the backseat, covered himself with a blanket from the pile on the floor, and closed his eyes. By the time we reached Sadie's house, just a mile away, he was fast asleep.

"It's warm enough for now that he'll be all right in the buggy." Tabitha jumped down and tied the lead rope to the hitching post near the barn.

Leaning into the back, I quickly tucked the blanket more tightly around our little brother. Then I followed my sister, just as I had my entire life. She was nearly a head taller than me and quite slender, and she walked with an air of authority I'd never had—and never would. Her hair was a lighter brown than mine, and in the summer it turned nearly blond. I'd always believed she was the most beautiful of all of us girls, not that such a thought was encouraged in our family. Character was what mattered. The thing was, Tabitha was strong in that regard too. Sure, she could be a little flirty, but she was also kind and compassionate. Except when it came to Thomas, who tried her patience daily.

As we neared the house, a man emerged from the barn, shaded his eyes, and looked toward us. For a moment I thought it was Robert, which was silly considering how ill he was. But this man was so similar in height and build that I had a feeling he must be a relative. Some of Robert's family lived near Pittsburgh, several hours away by car, and even though he and my oldest sister had been married for nine years, I hadn't met all of them—and definitely not this man. As we drew closer, I noticed that he was clean shaven, which meant he wasn't married, despite being in his mid or even late twenties.

Tabitha didn't seem to notice him, which wasn't like her at all. Instead, she charged toward the house, reached the front door, and stepped inside, calling out for Sadie in a loud voice.

I gave the guy an apologetic glance as I hurried after my sister. "*Shh!* Not so loud! Robert might be sleeping."

Tabitha shot me an annoyed look, one I was certainly used to. I doubted anyone in the world loved me as much as Tabitha or could be as irritated with me either.

We traipsed through the house Robert had built before he and Sadie married. It was really nice, not to mention roomy, with a big hutch,

bookcases, closets, large cupboards, and a pantry. The floors were an easy-to-clean parquet, and all of the doors and windows were top quality. The place was simple and Plain, like any Amish home, but well made and easy to maintain. Somehow, it was hard to reconcile the strong and capable fellow who had constructed it with the gaunt and sickly person the cancer had turned him into.

When we reached the hallway, *Mamm* appeared holding the baby on her hip. At the sight of us, Bobby began to wail.

“There, there.” *Mamm* patted his back and spoke above the roar. “The girls are all packed. I’ll spend the night here and help Sadie with Robert.”

“What about the morning?” I felt bad for asking, but I didn’t want to miss work if I didn’t have to. “I’m supposed to be at the shop by ten.”

Mamm sighed. “I can’t think that far ahead. We’ll figure it out later.”

Tabitha took Bobby, which seemed to calm him somewhat, turning his wails to sniffles as he settled onto her hip.

“Where’s Stephen?” I asked.

“Helping Isaac with the milking.”

Tabitha looked up. “Isaac?”

“Robert’s nephew. Ruth Mast’s grandson. He’s living with her.”

“Since when?”

Mamm dangled her arms and shook them out, clearly relieved to have a break from the baby. “I’m not sure, Tabitha. A few weeks, maybe?”

“A few weeks? There hasn’t been anyone new at church.”

“I imagine he’s probably spent his past few church Sundays back at home. He’s been making the move gradually. Sadie said he came to Lancaster County to open up a house painting business—mostly interior work, I think.”

So the man in the driveway was my brother-in-law’s nephew, which meant he’d probably been at Robert and Sadie’s wedding. I didn’t remember him, but I’d only been ten years old at the time. And that had been a very busy day. As the “artistic ones,” Izzy and I had been charged with arranging the sweet plates for Izzy’s reception, and when we weren’t tied up with that and our other chores, I was mostly focusing on my friends.

True to form, Tabitha started asking *Mamm* all sorts of questions about Isaac—was he handsome and how old was he and was he courting

anyone? So much for being heartbroken over Mark Wittmer. Straining hard not to roll my eyes, I continued down the hall to the bedroom of my two nieces. Knocking lightly, I opened the door to find Hattie and Hazel sitting on the floor between their beds, playing with paper dolls. They wore matching green dresses, black aprons, and white *kappa*, and as I stepped into the room, the two girls looked up at me with big brown eyes, their lips unsmiling, their noses red from their colds. Identical twins, they would've been nearly impossible to tell apart if not for a small scar on Hattie's face from when she was younger and had tripped on the hose and smacked her chin against the pavement.

"Hi, girls!" I spoke in my cheeriest voice.

"Hi, *Aenti* Linda," they replied softly in unison, without meeting my eyes.

"Time to go over to *Mammi* and *Daadi's* house. We'll have cookies and milk as soon as we get there, and then you can play with your dolls some more."

They shared a glance, looking as if they wanted to protest, but then held their tongues.

At seven, they were the oldest of the grandchildren, so I hadn't realized until the others came along just how odd these two were. They'd play quietly for hours. They seldom spoke. They really didn't interact much with anyone except each other. My twelve other nieces and nephews—even Bobby—adored me and loved coming to the farmhouse. Hattie and Hazel couldn't care less.

When the girls were four, Sadie and Robert had asked the doctor about their behavior. He looked into it and ultimately diagnosed them with ASD or autism spectrum disorder. Apparently they were on the higher-functioning end of that spectrum, with their primary issues being impaired social skills, the need for repetitive patterns, and limited interests and activities.

That diagnosis helped us understand why they seldom made eye contact, only played with each other, and could sit and concentrate on the same thing for days at a time. Thankfully, the doctor said, the Amish lifestyle provided lots of structure, which was helpful with ASD. Otherwise, there was no medication or cure for the condition.

Sadie and Robert both knew God had created Hattie and Hazel to be

exactly the way they were, so after the diagnosis they accepted the girls' behavior and didn't let themselves despair about it. The twins were God's gift, and that was that. We all simply loved them for who they were, as did the community. I don't think any of us saw them as disabled so much as just having some obvious differences in the way they socialized and interacted with others.

The truth was, their quiet, self-contained demeanors actually made watching them easy. It was getting to know them that had proven difficult. Now that they were in school, Tabitha was their teacher, and she said they did well as long as they could sit together and weren't forced to endure any extreme changes in routine. For several years I'd been contemplating a quilt of mirror images inspired by the girls. The colors would be cool—all blues and greens and grays—but I couldn't settle on a design. It was as if I was waiting for them to show me some new element of themselves first, something I could use as a focal point.

I stepped to the bedside table, picked up the manila envelope that was sitting there, and handed it to Hattie. With a sigh, she methodically put her paper dolls into it and then gave the envelope to Hazel.

As they did that, I found the bag *Mamm* had packed for them and double-checked it. Hairbrush. Toothbrushes. Nightgowns. A change of clothes. "Okay." I stood up straight. "Let's go get your shoes on." They obeyed, almost mechanically so.

Tabitha stood at the end of the hall, swaying back and forth with the baby.

"Where's *Mamm*?" I asked.

Tabitha nodded toward Sadie and Robert's room.

The girls continued on to the shoe rack by the front door, but I paused at Tabitha's side. "How bad is he?" I whispered.

Her eyes filled with tears. "*Mamm* said it doesn't look good, not at all."

My heart sank. "Should he be in the hospital?"

She shook her head. "The doctor saw him earlier, and he said it wouldn't make any difference at this point."

The bedroom door opened slowly. Our mother stepped out and pulled it shut behind her. As she turned toward us, I saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

My heart lurched. “*Mamm?*”

Her voice shook as she spoke. “He’s gone.”

I gasped. “Gone?”

She nodded.

“No.” How could it be? I glanced over at the twins, who were just out of earshot, now sitting on the floor by the rack and putting on their shoes. “What should we do?”

“Don’t say anything yet. The girls should return to their room and play for now. Linda, you tell Isaac the news and ask him to fetch Robert’s mother. Also, have him call the undertaker.” *Mamm* looked to Tabitha. “You stay with the children. I’ll go back in with Sadie.”

I stammered, “H-How is she?”

“In shock, I think.”

As *Mamm* returned to the bedroom and softly closed the door, I set the girls’ suitcase on the floor against the wall. Squaring her shoulders, Tabitha turned toward the twins and called out, “Change of plans, ladies. Back to your room for now. It’s not time to go yet.”

They barely reacted. They just nodded solemnly, removed their shoes, and did as they were told. Once they’d passed us, Tabitha reached for my hand and squeezed it. Robert had been like a brother to us—not that we needed another one, but we did need Robert. He was good and kind and compassionate. He’d been perfect for Sadie. I fought my tears, squeezed Tabitha’s hand in return, and then walked out the front door.

As I moved toward the barn, the world stopped for just a moment. Everything seemed so still yet so vibrant. A robin hopped over the grass, a worm in its mouth. Daffodils bloomed along the fence. A young cat, a black one I’d seen around here a few times before, slinked into the barn.

I swallowed my tears. Just like that, Robert was gone from this world. Thirty-two years old, and his life was over.

We were taught not to make assumptions about a person’s salvation. That was between our loved one and God. But I had no doubt where Robert was, and at that thought a feeling of joy surged through me despite the loss. He wasn’t suffering. He would never be in pain again. I was certain heaven held him. It was Sadie and the children I mourned for now.

I hurried on to the barn, stepped through the open door, and then paused for a moment as I looked up to the rafters, where the sunbeams filtered through the high window and across the open ceiling. The house may have been relatively new, but the barn was nearly two hundred years old, and it was one of my favorite places in all of Lancaster County. Again, I found myself cherishing that sense of setting. Someday I hoped to design a quilt inspired by this old barn.

It wasn't quite time for milking, but Stephen and Isaac had started anyway, probably so Stephen could get on home to his own chores.

I squinted in the dim light, relieved to see my brother leading a cow out to the pasture. I would tell Isaac first and then share the sad news with Stephen. I began walking down the row of cows and located Robert's nephew near the middle, beside a heifer, adjusting the hydraulic pump that worked to extract the milk with a rhythmic *whooshing* sound.

I stepped closer. "*Hallo.*"

He looked up at me. In the dim light I could make out brown eyes and dark hair under the brim of his straw hat.

"I'm Linda," I added. "Sadie's sister."

He stood, towering over me. "Oh, *ya*, sure. *Hallo* to you too."

I nodded. "I have a message from my *mamm*." My voice cracked as I spoke. "It's Robert..."

By the alarmed expression on his face, I could tell he guessed what that message was.

I managed to sputter. "He passed."

"*Nay*," he whispered, reaching for a beam to steady himself.

"*Mamm* wants you to please go get your grandmother. And call the undertaker."

"Of course."

"Stephen and I will finish up with the milking."

"*Danke*." He took a step toward the door. "I won't be long."

"Take our buggy," I told him, knowing that would be faster. Then I remembered Thomas was asleep in the back. "After I get my little brother out."

Isaac walked beside me, neither of us speaking. When we reached the buggy, I woke Thomas, who was cranky and out of sorts. "Listen." I spoke

in my most serious voice. "I need you to cooperate. We have to help with the milking."

"I don't want to," he whined.

Isaac stepped to my side. "It will only be for a short time. Sadie needs your help."

At the mention of Sadie, Thomas squared his shoulders. She was the sort who brought out the best in people, even Thomas, who'd been going through a "difficult" phase for a while now.

"*Danke*," I whispered to Isaac. Why hadn't I thought to appeal to my brother's goodness instead of trying to bully him into obeying?

Isaac nodded, untied the horse, and stepped up into the buggy. I watched as he turned on the highway, and then I took Thomas's hand.

"We need to find Stephen," I said. "I have something to tell both of you. Then we'll get to work."

He gave me a questioning look but didn't say any more. Perhaps he was finally sensing the gravity of the situation.

Stephen had just entered the barn with a cow. We met him inside. I looked at each of my little brothers, inhaled deeply, and spoke. "I have some bad news. It's Robert. He's passed."

"What do you mean?" Thomas scratched the side of his head, tipping his hat forward.

"She means he died." Stephen took a step back and bumped into the cow. He looked up at me. "What will Sadie do?"

"She'll manage. We'll all help. But right now we need to get the milking done. Do you understand?"

Stephen nodded solemnly, but Thomas shook his head, and his big, sad eyes filled with tears. My heart broke anew.

"I don't." He took in a raggedy breath. "Why did Robert die?"

I hesitated, blinking away tears of my own. That was a question best answered by someone older and wiser, so I told him he'd have to ask our parents about it later.

He seemed to accept that, and once he'd gotten control of his crying, I gave him the job of shoveling the grain into the trough for the cows. As he went for the shovel, the black barn cat stopped and stared at him before darting off toward a stack of hay bales.

With a sigh, I took a vinyl apron off the peg by the office door and put it on over my good dress, hoping for the best. I didn't particularly like milking, but I'd helped now and then since the first time Robert fell ill. I'd do whatever I could for Sadie.

She and Robert had been in the process of transitioning their property from a dairy farm to an apple orchard when his cancer returned in February. Once that happened, they put their plans on hold, but by then they'd already whittled down their sixty-head herd by more than half. Certainly that had made things easier during the past two months, but now that Robert was gone, Sadie was left in a strange limbo between not enough cows to justify a dairy and not enough apple trees to produce sufficient fruit. At least Robert's family was in a position to help if need be. I felt sure they would do whatever it would take to tide Sadie over until she could make some decisions about how to proceed from here.

In the meantime, I would be grateful that we had only twenty-five cows to milk rather than sixty.

The boys and I were still at it when Isaac returned. He told me I should go back in the house, but I assured him I could keep working.

He shook his head. "The boys and I can do it, plus neighbors will be arriving soon to help. Your *mamm* will need you in the kitchen."

He was right. As word spread, community members would show up and take over the chores. But in the meantime, there was a meal to prepare and people to soon feed—although Sadie, who was quite efficient, had probably planned out and partially prepared something already, with vegetables cut and meat waiting in the fridge.

Isaac's grandmother, Ruth, was a member of our district and a good friend of the family. I asked him how she was doing.

He shrugged. "She's as stoic as ever. Her first concern was Sadie, of course."

I knew Robert had been one of the youngest children in his large family of fifteen siblings. His mother was nearly eighty, and his father had died the year before. Ruth had to be heartbroken. I'd known her my entire life and had always been drawn to her, perhaps because I had no living grandparents of my own.

When I entered the house, Ruth was helping *Mamm* in the kitchen. I

gave the older woman a hug and told her how sorry I was for the loss of her son.

Her eyes filled with tears. “The Lord’s will be done.”

I nodded. God had allowed this to happen. We all knew, without a doubt, that He would provide for Sadie and the children. Still, it was a trying time.

I worked in the kitchen until the undertaker came, and then I stayed with the twins in their bedroom. Children in our community weren’t usually shielded from death, but it seemed telling her girls was more than Sadie could deal with at the moment. The undertaker would be returning the embalmed body the next day, however, so Sadie would have to break the news to them by then.

After he left, I shifted the girls into the living room and returned to my duties in the kitchen, absently gazing out the window at various friends and neighbors who were bustling around outside, handling the chores.

As the afternoon wore on, they relieved Isaac of any further barn duties, but rather than leaving, he joined us inside. He was the one who checked in with *Mamm*, asking about Sadie. He was the one who started the fire in the woodstove as the sun began to lower and the house grew chilly. He was the one who, at the supper table, cut a pork chop—*ya*, as I’d expected, Sadie had them ready to cook—into bites to split between Hattie and Hazel.

He was the one who rumbled Thomas’s hair and told him it was good to mourn, especially when we could not comprehend why someone as young as Robert had left us. Isaac was the one who, when all the helpers were gone and supper was done and Sadie came out of her room, stood close by as if protecting her.

She appeared frail. She and I were the smallest of the girls in our family, but she’d always had a fragility to her that I didn’t, as if her tiny bones could break like a bird’s.

As Hattie and Hazel lingered over their desserts of apple crisp with vanilla ice cream, and Isaac helped himself to seconds of the same, *Mamm* sent Stephen and Thomas home to do our chores and then directed Sadie, Tabitha, and me to the living room. Since Becky and Izzy had moved away, it had been us three girls and *Mamm*. After Robert fell ill, we worked

together to care for the children and run the household. There was no one else in the world whom I was as close to as my *mamm* and the two sisters in front of me.

Mamm sat beside Sadie while Tabitha held the baby. “What do you need us to do?” *Mamm* asked. “Take the children home or stay here?”

Sadie looked at me. “I’d like Linda to stay and help with the kids.” She turned toward *Mamm*. “And for you to come back in the morning.”

“All right.” *Mamm* patted Sadie’s shoulder. “I’ll be here first thing.”

It would make more sense for Tabitha to stay—she was better with the children than I was—but I couldn’t suggest that, not when Sadie had made her request. My family had this idea that I was good in a crisis, and that I intrinsically knew what to do when a person was hurting. “You’re empathetic,” Sadie told me once. “You feel things deeply.”

I didn’t necessarily agree, however. Most of the time I just didn’t know what to say, and I think people mistook my silence as an intentional sort of quiet comfort.

Footsteps fell on the porch, and then *Daed* appeared in the doorway. His construction crew was working a job on the other side of Harrisburg, and he seldom arrived home before seven. *Mamm* had left a message earlier with his boss for *Daed* to come as soon as he could, not wanting to relay the bad news via voice mail.

“How is he?” *Daed* asked, fear in his eyes.

Biting her lip, Sadie stood and simply shook her head.

“I’m so sorry.” He pulled her in for a hug.

I couldn’t stop the tears then. I glanced to the table, where Isaac sat with the girls and his grandmother. Both of the adults appeared moved too. Ruth brushed her hand across her wrinkled cheek as Isaac put his arm around her. It was a sweet moment between the two of them. The girls didn’t react at all, however, but instead just kept on picking at their food, watching their mother as they did. Someone needed to tell them what had happened.

“I’m going to call my manager,” I whispered to *Mamm*. I wanted to let Kristen know as soon as possible that I’d need the week off.

I grabbed my cape and slipped past *Daed* and Sadie onto the porch. The air had grown chilly, and I hurried toward the barn. When I stepped

inside, insulated by the warmth and quiet, I headed to Robert's office. Truth be told, I hated telephones and avoided talking on them as much as possible. Still, sometimes they couldn't be avoided. Like now. Taking a deep breath, I dialed and listened to the ring and was somewhat relieved when I got Kristen's voice mail rather than reaching her in person. I did my best to speak loudly and clearly as I left a message.

I returned to the doorway of the barn and paused there, looking around at the house and yard, the first chance I'd had to do so since all the helpers had come and gone. Diapers no longer hung on the line. The garden was fully weeded, the lawn neatly trimmed, the whole place practically sparkling in the last rays of the sunset.

Glancing toward the shed, I couldn't help but picture Robert there. He'd been up and puttering around just the day before. I shuddered at how quickly death had come for him.

The front door opened, and Tabitha stepped out with Bobby wrapped in a blanket. After her came Isaac. He spoke with Tabitha for a moment and then headed down the stairs. When he saw me, he nodded. As we met, he said, "I'm going to go get the buggy ready and then take my *mammi* home. I'll be back first thing in the morning."

"I'll see you then." We both knew there would be plenty of helpers here to handle the milking and other chores, but I guessed he felt the need to pitch in anyway, as did I.

When I reached the steps, Tabitha nodded toward the little one. "He's almost asleep. I'll put him down and then head home."

"Thanks." I was grateful I'd need to get just the girls ready for bed.

Tabitha nodded toward Isaac. "He's cute, *ya?*"

"I hadn't really noticed."

Tabitha leaned toward me. "Don't you remember him from the wedding? He was so gangly and *doplich* then. He's definitely grown up now." She smiled. "Looking good too."

"No, I don't remember him. But he seems very kind." I stepped to the porch and turned to see him nearing the barn. "And helpful."

Tabitha shook her head. "That's what caught your attention the most? Kind and helpful?" The baby stirred, and she lowered her voice. "Linda, open your eyes."

I pulled my cape tighter. We had more important things to think about right now than Robert's nephew. Even so, I continued to watch until Isaac rounded the corner of the old barn and disappeared from view.