

The Amish Blacksmith

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THE AMISH BLACKSMITH

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*In loving memory of
Robert Irwin Dickerson
1907–1977*

*Loving grandfather, amazing horseman,
wonderful man*



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PART ONE



ONE

The muscles under the horse's chocolate-brown flank rippled as I pressed my hand against his warm side.

"Easy, boy," I said, my tone that of father to frightened child.

At my work station in the blacksmith shop, I shifted so the horse could better see me and continued running my hand across his body. Halfway down his left rear leg, I came to a stop when my fingers reached a puffy knob that shouldn't have been there. Bending closer, I gently palpated the hock. I'd already scraped out the dirt and turf imbedded around his shoes minutes before, but this swelling told me to take a second, closer look at the hoof.

I flipped on my headlamp and gave the horse's fetlock a tug. In response, he nervously shifted his weight but allowed me to hoist up his leg. Crouching, I studied the hoof's surface in the glow of the beam, noting how it was worn on the inside edge. I turned to Trudy, the young teen who stood nearby, her arms crossed as she watched.

"I think Patch's knees are swollen," she told me solemnly. "The back ones, at least."

"Actually, they're called 'knees' in the front but 'hocks' in the back. See how the joints bend differently? A hock is more an elbow than a knee. But you're right. There's some swelling here for sure."

She nodded, cupping a hand around her own elbow. Ordinarily, I

wouldn't have corrected a customer, but Trudy was different. She wanted to know. She wanted to learn. Trudy's family lived in a neighboring Amish district in Gap, and they had been coming to this blacksmith shop—as had my family and I—for years.

"This looks worn and uneven," I continued. "I'd say he's been favoring the inside of his leg."

"He's been pulling to the right. Sometimes I think he's going to take us both straight into the ditch."

I lowered the horse's hoof to the concrete floor, and he tossed his head and nickered. I reached up a hand to remind him with a gentle touch that I was still there, that all was well. On the other side of the shop, my friend and coworker, Owen Kinsinger, was at the forge, pounding a flaming-red shoe against the rounded cone of an anvil. The horse rotated an ear toward the sound.

"Is there anything I can do for Patch?" Trudy asked. "He seems so sad."

I stifled a smile, thinking how much she reminded me of myself when I was her age. Like me, she had a fondness for horses and seemed to think of them as more than just a means of transportation. Also like me, she often lingered at the blacksmith shop, watching as the family horse was shod, rather than leaving the animal in the morning and returning for it later in the day the way most folks did.

The difference between us was that Trudy usually left once the work was done, while I'd always stuck around afterward for as long as I could, peppering Owen's dad, Amos Kinsinger, with a thousand questions about what he was doing and why. Growing up as a worker in my father's buggy shop, I had always gravitated toward the tasks that involved welding, learning so much over the years that eventually folks thought of me as the resident blacksmith. But there was one big element of the blacksmithing trade I'd never had the chance to learn: the task of being a farrier, or an official shoer of horses. Ironically, that was the only part of smithing that I really cared to do.

That's why Amos had always held such fascination for me. Though he, too, could weld with skill almost any item that came his way, what most impressed me were his skills as a farrier. Watching him, I'd always longed for that to be my job as well.

Now, at twenty-four, I'd finally achieved that goal, though it hadn't been easy—especially the part where I'd had to break the news to my *daed* about leaving the buggy trade. Once I managed to do that, I set about making it

happen, first by spending four months at a farrier school out in Missouri and then returning home to step into this apprenticeship at Kinsinger Blacksmith and Welding. I had already been working here, mostly under Owen's guidance, for a year. That left one more year to go, at which point I should be experienced enough to take on pretty much anything that might come my way as a blacksmith or a farrier.

I shifted to the horse's other side. Funny how a person could put off doing something that really interested him, I thought as I ran my hand across Patch's flank, like how I delayed the switch from the job of building buggies to that of shoeing horses. But when you grow up in a family of buggy-makers, it's tough to be the first one to decide to do something different.

Once I did, though, I couldn't believe I'd waited so long. Sure, the work of shoeing was hard—and now and then my back ached something terrible at the end of the day—but I really enjoyed spending my hours working with horses. It also helped that my *daed's* buggy business continued along fine without me, sparing me from feeling as if my departure had created a hardship for him or the family.

When I reached the horse's hip, I again ran my hand down his leg, only to find that this hock was swollen as well. A look at the hoof revealed that it was even worse than the other, and I pointed out the damaged, uneven area along the hoof's quarter to Trudy. No wonder the animal was having trouble. I couldn't imagine how long it had been since this horse was shod, surely a lot more time than the recommended eight weeks for a driving horse.

"Where did you say you got him?" I released the leg and stood up straight.

"He belonged to my uncle's neighbor, but then Patch started rearing up and not following commands, so the neighbor stopped driving him. He just put him out in the pasture and forgot all about him."

"When was that?"

"I don't know. Uncle Vernon didn't like how the man and his family were handling Patch, so he offered to buy him. He didn't ask a lot of questions."

"And how did the horse come to be yours?"

"He's calmer with me than he is with my uncle, so I asked if I could have him," she said. "I knew Patch might give me some trouble, but I had to do *something*. Like I told you before, he just seems so sad."

I gave the young teen a smile. "I think if I had hooves in as bad a shape as these are, I'd be sad too."

"So what happens next?"

“Well, now that his hooves are all cleaned out, we’ll hot shoe him. That will give him a good fit and fix the problem of the uneven wear and tear.”

“What about his not wanting to follow commands?” Trudy persisted. “What are we supposed to do? *Daed* knows you’re good at helping horses with behavior problems. He told me to ask you about that.”

I appreciated hearing those words of affirmation, especially considering I was still relatively new to the horseshoeing business. That I was known to have a way with horses—even before I went to farrier school—was what I hoped would allow me to establish my own shop someday. I liked the idea that people thought of me as somewhat of an expert on how to calm and coax an agitated or spooked horse. I wasn’t sure why God had chosen to bless me with this particular kind of insight; I just knew that I had a lot of respect for horses and enjoyed helping them perform at the best of their ability.

“What kinds of behaviors are you seeing?”

“Well, for one thing, I’m amazed he’s letting you stand there at his side. He usually hates that.”

“Yeah, a horse will protect his flank when he thinks he’s in danger. If he has a flaw or ache or whatever, he will hide it if he can. Horses don’t want others to see their weaknesses.” I turned to Trudy. “There are really just two kinds of animals, you know, prey and predator. Flight animals and fight animals.”

Trudy’s eyes narrowed. “Sure, maybe in the Wild West, but this is Lancaster County.”

I smiled. “Horses understand which one they are, even in the domesticated world. They don’t stop thinking like horses just because they start pulling buggies. Every horse knows he’s prey, not predator, and that his flank is his most exposed vulnerability.”

“You’re saying Patch is scared he’s in danger, and that’s what makes him act the way he does?” Trudy looked from the horse to me, trying to understand.

I stroked the animal, caressing his long neck, hoping to draw out some of his anxiety through the gentlest of touches. “In the wild, a horse can never let on to the herd or a predator that he’s easy to pick off or even wounded in some way. He has to hide all of that to survive.”

Trudy moved forward to put her hand on the horse’s neck near mine. Patch swung his head around and nodded, as if to say, “The man’s right.”

“How can I convince him I mean him no harm?” she asked.

This was always the part that intrigued me the most, figuring out how to get a horse to drop its defenses and learn to trust again. It usually took some

time—and a little sleuthing. Some horses didn't like certain noises, some feared tall things or shiny things or painted stripes on the road or puddles or stop signs. Once I understood what the issue was, it all came down to trust. If I could get a horse to trust me, it was a lot easier to get it to trust its owner. And only when a horse trusted its owner would it obey despite its fear.

Back when I was still working at my father's buggy shop, friends and sometimes friends of friends would bring over their problem horses so I could work with them. It was no big deal, really, just an extra something we offered as part of the buggy trade. Usually, for a skittish driving horse, I would spend an hour or so with it a couple times a week, trying to figure out what it was afraid of and then helping it understand that the thing it feared was not going to cause it harm.

I would be happy to work with Patch as well, though not today. Amos and Roseanna—my boss and his wife—had instructed Owen and me to leave our afternoon clear. They had already left in a hired car for the Lancaster train station to pick up their niece, Priscilla, who was moving back here after having been away for six years. They wanted everyone to be available to welcome her home.

And it was to be a big welcome indeed. Much of the Kinsinger extended family was coming to greet Priscilla and share in a big celebratory meal. In fact, judging by the rattle of buggies out in the drive, it sounded as though some of them had already begun to arrive.

I'd been invited to eat with them, which ordinarily would have been a good thing. I bunked in a small structure here on the Kinsinger farm that had once served as a guest cottage, and though that cottage had a kitchen, there weren't many things I could make. I ate lunch with the Kinsingers almost every day, and I was always glad when they invited me to supper as well. Roseanna was a wonderful cook, not to mention that I would enjoy seeing Priscilla again after all these years.

The problem was that this was a Saturday, and I'd been planning to spend the whole evening with Amanda Shetler, the lovely young woman from the Kinsingers' district whom I'd been courting of late. For a while now, ever since my future as a blacksmith had begun to look more secure, I'd been thinking about marriage. After all, my nephew and best friend, Tyler, had gotten married last fall, and he seemed happier than ever. Wanting to settle down myself, a few months ago I'd started courting Amanda, who was as cute and easygoing and uncomplicated as they come. While I would have

preferred spending the evening with her, I had felt obligated to accept the Kinsingers' invitation to help welcome their long-lost relative back into the fold. But that meant a lot less time with Amanda this evening—and no time to work with Patch this afternoon. Amos and Roseanna were due back with their niece within the hour, so I needed to wrap things up for now.

Turning to Trudy, I told her I was busy for the rest of the day, but that I should be able to follow up with her horse over the next few days. "If you can spare him, you should just leave him here," I added. "I'll work with him during my free time and see if I can't figure out what's bugging him."

Trudy crooked an eyebrow. "I don't. . . I don't have much saved up for this."

"That's okay. I have plenty of room in the barn for a guest, no extra charge, though I wouldn't mind your giving Amos a bale of hay or a small sack of grain once I'm done, if you want, since it's his barn and he covers the feed. Otherwise, we can just make it a part of the shoeing."

Trudy smiled. "Ya?"

"Ya. I'm happy to do it. I want to help him just like you do."

"Thank you, Jake," she gushed.

"No problem. Of course, now we have to figure out how to get you home. Want me to see if one of Owen's sisters can give you a ride?"

Trudy shook her head. "That's okay. I have a few stops to make along the way, so I'll just walk. It's only a mile or so."

She told Patch goodbye and as an afterthought asked me if she could leave her horse cart here too.

"No, sorry. You'll need to strap it on and lug it home with you."

She looked startled for a moment, but then her face broke into a grin when she realized I was kidding.

Together, Trudy and I moved the cart under the eaves of the machine shed. She set out on foot as I returned to the blacksmith shop. Owen had already started to hot shoe Patch, and the air inside was smoky and acrid. Hot shoeing smells terrible, but it makes for a nice indentation on the hoof for the shoe to occupy, not to mention there's less slipping, better fit, and a happier horse. Though some blacksmiths might try to get away with a cold shoeing now and then, we always hot shod here. That was one reason Kinsinger's was known for quality.

Owen and I worked in tandem to finish Patch, with Owen shoeing and me tamping down the nails. We were both conscious of the time, but we wanted to finish this last job before calling it a day.

“We smell like something that crawled out of the burn pile,” Owen said when we were done, four hooves and four hot shoes later.

“Nice way to welcome family, eh? Reeking of charred horse hoof.”

Owen laughed. “Trevva told me to make sure I came back to the house and got cleaned up before Priscilla’s arrival, but that’s clearly not going to happen. I hope my cousin remembers this is just the way it is. At least the stench should be familiar to her.”

I had a feeling he was right about that. Priscilla was the daughter of Daniel Kinsinger, Owen’s uncle, and she’d grown up on this farm. A frequent presence in the blacksmith shop her whole life, Priscilla had been an odd girl, rather distant and moody, almost seeming to prefer the company of farm animals to that of people. That said, she’d always liked me well enough, probably because I was the one person she knew who was as crazy about horses as she was.

Not that we spent all that much time together. She was four years younger than I, and since I lived a good eight miles away from here, I wasn’t around all that often anyway. But whenever I was here with Owen or Amos, I always got such a kick out of her, the cute little black-haired tomboy who would rather muck out stalls and slop pigs and sit in the stench of a blacksmith shop than set one foot in a kitchen or a washroom—much to her mother’s horror.

Priscilla’s *daed* passed away when she was ten, but she and her *mamm* stayed on here after he died, living in the smaller house that now served as home to Owen, his wife Trevva, and their new baby. The little guest cottage I lived in now had been a tourist rental back then, and from what I could recall, Priscilla’s mother, Sharon, had been in charge of operating it.

The year I turned sixteen and got my own buggy, I started coming over more often, both to hang out with Owen and to observe Amos as he worked. Priscilla was twelve by then, and though she was still a total tomboy, I could tell she had a little crush on me. It didn’t bother me. I felt sorry for her because I knew how smart and funny and likeable she was, but most people couldn’t see it. They just thought she was odd.

Then came the year that Priscilla was fourteen, when her mother died in a tragic accident. I was eighteen by then and working full time in my family’s buggy-making shop, so my trips to the Kinsinger farm had once again grown few and far between. But from what I’d been told, Priscilla had a terrible time coming to grips with her *mamm*’s death. Her aunts, uncles, and cousins did everything they could to help, surrounding her with love and

care, but she was so traumatized that eventually she'd gone to Indiana to live with relatives there.

I was never completely sure why she left. For that matter, I didn't know why she was returning now. In a way, I felt bad that I'd never bothered to follow up or even ask Owen how his young cousin was doing. That's why I felt the least I could do tonight was pitch in and help make her feel welcome. I wondered if she was still as horse crazy as ever, or if that was something she'd outgrown since the last time I saw her. I also wondered if she still went around in stained skirts and skinned knees, or if she'd been "domesticated" in the past four years. Somehow, I doubted it.

As Owen and I put our tools away, I asked him about the reason for Priscilla's return.

He shrugged. "I guess she's ready to come home. It's been six years. She's not a kid anymore."

His use of the word "home" surprised me a little. Sure, this had been where Priscilla first grew up, but with both parents passed away—and after being gone for so long herself—I had to wonder if she still thought of this as home.

"If you don't mind my asking, why did she go away to Indiana in the first place?"

He seemed to consider my question as he hung his tongs in order of descending size along a row of hooks on the wall.

"Do you remember how overcome with grief Priscilla was when her mother died?"

I told him no, embarrassed to admit I hadn't even gone to the funeral. "I mean, I heard through the grapevine about how inconsolable she was, but I never saw for myself. I wasn't around here a lot during that period, if you recall. We were eighteen then, right? My days were busy, putting in overtime at the buggy shop."

Owen flashed me a grin. "Yeah, right. You were busy working days so you could pay for all those nights. Dating half the girls in the county isn't cheap."

I flashed him a smirk, ignoring his comment as I tried to remember more about that time. All I could recall was that Priscilla's father died of natural causes, but her mother's death had been sudden and tragic, the result of a bad fall.

"Sharon's death was a big shock, wasn't it? That would throw anybody."

Owen glanced my way. “Yeah. But Priscilla’s behavior was over the top. It was...disturbing, to say the least.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. I wasn’t one for big emotions myself, but I’d seen the impact losing a parent could have on a child because of my nephew Tyler. He’d come to live with us after his mother—one of my older sisters—passed away when he was just six years old. He had grieved for her deeply, for a long time, and there had been nothing odd or disturbing about that. Death was always painful, even for those who held out the hope of heaven.

“But isn’t that kind of understandable?” I pressed. “We are talking about the girl’s mother, after all. And Priscilla was just a teenager at the time.”

“Yes, of course, but...” Owen shot me another meaningful glance. “It’s hard to explain, Jake. After Sharon died, Priscilla really fell apart, to the extreme. *Mamm* and *Daed* gave her room to work through things at first, but after a while they grew worried for her. She couldn’t seem to accept what had happened. So finally *Daed* contacted his sister, my Aunt Lorraine in Indiana, to see if Priscilla could live with them for a while. Everyone was hoping a change of scenery might help, but I don’t think anyone thought it would be permanent. To be honest, I’m surprised she stayed away from home as long as she did.”

Before I could reply, we heard the sound of a car crunching up the gravel driveway.

“They’re back,” he murmured, putting away the last of his tools and heading out.

I considered Owen’s words as I finished closing the shop. Then I took Patch’s reins from the hitching rail and led him out the rear door and along the gravel walkway to the entrance for the smaller of the two horse barns. I stabled him next to my own mare, Willow, and forked some hay into the feeding troughs for both of them. Listening to the sound of voices on the breeze, I knew that the Kinsinger family members must have been watching for Priscilla’s arrival from the house, because soon the volume and pitch of their chatter grew. By the time I finished with the horses and headed out to join the crowd, the driveway was filled with Kinsingers and the hired car was gone.

I stayed several yards back, letting the family welcome their niece and cousin home after six long years away. I couldn’t see Priscilla at first,

surrounded as she was by Owen's sisters and brothers and their children. But then the crowd parted somewhat, and I got my first glimpse.

Little Priscilla wasn't so little anymore. She had grown up in the years she'd been gone. Her hair was still nearly black under her *kapp*, but now she was tall and slender, bearing the womanly build of a twenty-year-old. I almost looked away for a moment, so surprised was I at how beautiful she had become. So much for stained skirts and skinned knees. This was no tom-boy standing before me.

When she finally glanced my way, I was startled by the color of her eyes, which I'd forgotten were the deepest shade of violet. They were the same color the sky gets just before a drenching thunderstorm—the kind you want for the sake of the crops, but the kind you fear a little too.

She looked down to grab the handle of one of her bags, but then she raised her head toward me again—quickly, as if she had just figured out who I was—and met my eyes with her own.

Her face was expressionless, giving away nothing. I gave her a nod and a slight smile. In return, she just stood there for a long moment, holding our gaze.

Then she was again enveloped in a sea of cousins and ushered into the house.



Two

I managed to shower and dress in plenty of time for dinner, though as I took my seat at the Kinsingers' table that evening, I couldn't help but glance over at the clock on the wall. Perhaps I could still go over to Amanda's later, maybe take her for a starlit buggy ride—assuming this welcome home meal for Priscilla didn't stretch on for too long.

As everyone got settled, I leaned over to Amos and told him there was an extra horse in Willow's stable tonight, that Trudy Fisher's new Morgan had some anxiety issues and she was hoping I could help. Amos said that that was fine with him, as long as I did so on my own time and not when I was supposed to be working.

Finally, everyone was assembled and we bowed our heads in silent prayer. I ended my prayer by asking God to not only bless this meal and the ones who had prepared it, but also to help keep it brief so I wouldn't miss too much time with Amanda.

Or not, I quickly added to my prayer, feeling the heat of guilt surge in my face as Amos gave a somber "Amen."

The crowd at the table included everyone who resided on the Kinsinger farm: Amos and Roseanna, who lived here in the main house, their older son, Mahlon, and his family, who lived in a second house that was connected to this one via a breezeway, and their younger son, Owen, and his family, who

lived in the smaller house that sat closest to the road. I lived here as well, in the run-down guest cottage that also sat out front, on the far side of the big garden. Rounding out the group tonight were Amos and Roseanna's three grown daughters—Lucinda, Grace, and Ruth, who all lived elsewhere—and their spouses and children.

It was a big, noisy bunch, though conversation seemed to flow along easily enough, and the food was amazing as usual. Feeling somewhat like an interloper, I mostly just listened and ate and tried to keep my discreet glances at the clock to a minimum.

Though Priscilla was definitely still the quiet type, I was able to pick up on a few things about her life these days just from what others said and asked. It seemed that her most recent employment out in Indiana had been as a companion to an elderly neighbor. Jobs were hard to come by in her area, and once the neighbor passed away, Priscilla had had trouble finding something else. Finally, she'd decided to come here instead—or, as she put it, she'd felt God's leading to return, and so she'd "had no choice but to obey." That wasn't exactly a rousing endorsement of life in Lancaster County, but no one seemed offended.

"You should be able to find something around here," said Treva, Owen's wife. "I could put the word out to see if any caregiver positions are available."

"Thanks, but no," Priscilla replied quickly. "I've had enough of that."

The conversation lagged for a moment, and I realized everyone else was probably thinking the same thing I was, that what she really meant was that she'd had enough of death.

"What kind of work will you be looking for?" Roseanna asked, pretending that the moment hadn't grown awkward.

Priscilla speared a pea with her fork. "I'm not sure," she answered softly. "Something temporary, I imagine."

That seemed to stop the group entirely—not just from speaking but from eating as well. When Priscilla looked around and realized the reaction her words had caused, her face turned a vivid red. "What I mean is," she ventured, her eyes back on the plate in front of her, "I don't plan on sticking around all that long. Maybe just for the summer."

Still no one spoke, so I decided to try to break the tension by dragging it out in the open. "Well," I said with a smile, leaning forward, my gaze on Priscilla. "This should make you feel good."

Her delicate cheeks still pink, she looked up at me, her eyebrows raised in question.

“To see how disappointed everyone is,” I explained, gesturing around the table. “They were so excited to be getting you back that now they’re sorry to hear they might not get to keep you for long.”

I was afraid that was laying it on a little thick, but to my relief Mahlon’s wife jumped in.

“Jake’s right,” Beth said, nodding vigorously. “We’ve really missed having you around.”

That earned some “*yas*” from every side of the table, and though I wasn’t sure if it was exactly true, I did know they all cared about this young woman and her welfare. And why not? About the only thing sadder than a girl losing both parents by the age of fourteen was a girl unable to recover from that loss and eventually having to be sent away to live with distant relatives. The Kinsingers were good people, and I had no doubt they had done everything they could to help Priscilla with her grief back then. I also knew the relief they had felt in realizing she had recovered enough from all of that to finally return.

“How about retail?” Roseanna asked, trying to steer the conversation back to the topic of employment. “I could see if there’s anything available at the quilt shop.”

I stifled a smile by shoving a big bite of chicken into my mouth. Shy Priscilla working with customers? I couldn’t imagine a more uncomfortable position for her than that.

“Do you have any office skills?” Lucinda asked before Priscilla could reply. “I heard they might be looking for another secretary up at the hat factory.”

Owen and Treva’s baby, Josef, let out a sudden cry. As Treva placated him with a spoonful of mashed carrots, she added, “Or maybe you could find work as a mother’s helper.”

“Good idea,” Owen echoed.

Lucinda seemed about to offer another suggestion when Amos held out a hand.

“Enough,” he declared, his voice sounding stern, though there was a twinkle in his eye. “The girl has been here all of an hour, and already you folks are trying to send her off to a job. Leave her alone. For now, I would be happy just to see her pitching in around the house. Roseanna could use another pair of hands, especially on the days she works at the quilt shop.” He turned to

his wife and added, "In fact, instead of marching your niece down there for a job, you could ask for more hours for yourself. She could handle things here on the home front while you earn a little more pocket money."

Considering that Roseanna's paycheck helped put food on the table, I feared she might bristle at the term "pocket money." But she just smiled and nodded and said that was a *gut* idea. Priscilla seemed relieved as well, and soon the conversation had moved on to a completely different topic, something about new jars and canning fruit and the need to clean out the pantry before the peaches were ripe.

The meal continued, and the only other time the focus turned back to the guest of honor was at the very end, when one of Ruth's teenage sons asked Priscilla if she'd stayed in touch with any of her old friends here in Lancaster County. He'd been too young back then to realize that the girl hadn't had many—if any—friends when she'd lived here. To most folks, she'd always seemed the odd one out, the girl with the violet eyes who liked to talk to animals.

"I've been gone a little too long for that," she replied stiffly, and things grew silent around the table once more.

"I'm sure the horses will remember you," I offered, once again trying to ease an awkward moment. "I mean, the ones that were here back then."

In response, Priscilla gave me a look I could only describe as curious. "Think so?"

For a moment, it almost felt like the old Priscilla and the old Jake, just talking about horses as usual, as if not a day had passed.

"Of course. You spent enough time with them."

"*Ya*," she replied, her expression growing unreadable. "So did you."

I was trying to think of a response when Amos laughed and told her, "He still does. Jake's our newest blacksmith. He finally has a reason to be darkening my doorstep."

Priscilla again looked over at me, her eyes appraising but her lips silent.

"*Ya*," I said with a grin. "Owen and I give a very nice pedicure."

"*Very* nice," Owen added with a silly expression, and everyone laughed.

Finally, the meal was over and I could make my escape without seeming rude. With thanks to Roseanna for the delicious food and a last nod to Priscilla, I rose and excused myself for the night. Baby Josef smiled at me and gurgled a farewell, and I gave him a soft pat on the head as I walked past.

Stepping outside into the early summer evening, I decided that Priscilla

Kinsinger might be older and prettier now, but she still obviously struggled in social situations. I couldn't imagine why God had led her to come back to Lancaster County, as she'd said, unless it was to have her confront the last vestiges of grief over the loss of her mother. It would be perfectly normal for Priscilla to miss her late parents, but I hoped the past six years had allowed her to find at least some semblance of peace.

After a quick stop at the shed to roll out my courting buggy, I headed for the smaller barn to retrieve Willow. I'd just gotten her all hooked up when Amos appeared, startling me.

"Going out?"

"Nah. I just like to hitch and unhitch my horse to the buggy for fun."

I expected him to chuckle—he always seemed to enjoy my particular brand of humor—but instead he ignored my response and asked in a serious tone if I had a few minutes to talk. I gave him a nod, my heart sinking as I realized I must have done something he was unhappy about. Was I in for a lecture of some kind? I quickly went through a mental checklist of my evening chores, certain I had completed everything regarding the horses and the shop.

"Now that you've had a little time to catch up with Priscilla," he said in a soft voice, "I need to ask you a favor."

"Oh. Okay," I replied, relief flooding my veins. This wasn't work related after all.

"With her back here," he continued, removing his hat and running a finger along its brim, "Roseanna and I agree that the most important thing we need to do is to help her reconnect with other people her age. It's... it's urgent, actually."

"Urgent?" I understood how hard it must be for Priscilla to make friends with people who barely remembered her, but why on earth would something like that be urgent? When he didn't explain, I added, "You know as well as I do that establishing relationships takes time, Amos. Why the hurry?"

He looked down, and even in the gathering darkness I could see he was embarrassed to be talking about this.

"It's rather complicated, and I won't bother you with the details, but according to my sister Lorraine..." His voice trailed off as he reached up to pat my horse. "Priscilla has been seeing someone... out in Indiana... and he is, uh, eager for her return. Lorraine doesn't know the full situation, but she's afraid he's asked Priscilla to marry him."

"Why is that a problem?"

Amos sighed. “Well, Lorraine is glad that someone finally showed an interest, of course, and she said he’s a good man. But she feels that this particular match might not be in our niece’s best interest.”

“Is he not Amish?” I asked, surprised at the thought of Priscilla dating outside of the faith.

“Oh, no, he’s Amish,” Amos said. But then he went on to explain that the man was much older and was a widower with eight children, several of whom were nearly as old as Priscilla herself. “I’m sure there are plenty of women who would recognize such an instant family for the blessing that it is,” he added.

“But Priscilla probably isn’t one of them,” I finished.

“Priscilla probably isn’t one of them,” he echoed, shaking his head.

We shared a smile, both of us imagining the disaster that such a match would bring. Distracted, self-absorbed Priscilla didn’t seem suited to the kind of selfless devotion and attention eight motherless kids would need—and deserved.

“In any event, my sister believes Priscilla has come back here in order to explore other options before she gives the fellow an answer. No one else in the family knows about any of this, but when Priscilla spoke at dinner tonight about only staying for the summer, I imagine that’s about the longest her fellow was willing to wait for her to give him a yes or no.”

“I see.”

Willow, eager to be away, tossed her mane and nickered. I felt like doing the same. Though my sympathies were with Amos and his predicament, I couldn’t imagine what any of this had to do with me. All I knew was that the clock was ticking, Amanda was waiting, and I was eager to be finished with this conversation and out of here.

“Regardless of how long Priscilla sticks around,” Amos went on, “Lorraine, Roseanna, and I have high hopes that she’ll meet someone closer to her own age here in Lancaster County, someone more suitable for marriage, a man she can have her own children with. We think she needs to create a new life for herself here.”

“Makes sense,” I told him, wishing he would get to the point. Again, what did any of this have to do with me? Surely Amos wasn’t going to ask *me* to court his odd niece.

He cleared his throat. “Rumor has it that you’ve been seeing a certain young woman.”

“Amanda Shetler,” I replied with a nod. There was no reason not to confirm

what Amos had already been told. In his day, most Amish courted with great discretion, even if word often spread along the grapevine about who was seeing whom. These days, however, couples were far more open about all of that, at least in the less conservative districts.

“Good,” he replied, looking embarrassed for having had to ask. “In that case, what I’d like is for you and Amanda to take Priscilla under your wing.”

I’d heard him, but I still couldn’t help but respond as if I hadn’t. “What was that?”

“Priscilla needs to get back into the circle of young people in our district. She won’t do it on her own. She needs you and Amanda to help her remake those friendships. She won’t meet anybody if she hides in the barn for the rest of her days, here or in Indiana. The best thing that can happen is that someone in our district or one of the neighboring districts will take an interest in her, court her, and marry her.”

“But I don’t know that I’m—”

“Just take her along with you to the singings and the games and get-togethers, Jake. Introduce her to people, and then watch out for her to make sure she doesn’t just stand in a corner. You’re welcome to use my spring wagon whenever you do since there’ll be three of you.”

I had no desire to do what Amos was asking of me. I wasn’t in my *rum-springa* anymore. Mentally, I had moved beyond the youth group a few years ago when I took my vows of membership. These days, the only reason I attended events at all was for Amanda’s sake, because she was still young enough to want to be a part of things. Now I was to bring Priscilla along with us as well? No thank you.

I wanted to tell Amos that he was asking too much of me, but the man had given me a job in his blacksmith shop and a place to live, and I ate with his family at their dinner table almost every day. He had been incredibly good to me. I couldn’t say no.

But neither could I see Amanda and me insisting Priscilla come with us to these gatherings if she didn’t want to come. And I was fairly certain she wouldn’t. Actually, I realized, that might be my out.

“Is Priscilla open to this?”

Amos looked at me as if I were nuts. “Well, I’m not going to ask her if she’d like to tag along with you and Amanda. You must invite her. And be adamant about it. In a nice way, of course.”

Great.

“Oh,” I said.

“Talk to Amanda and have her help you with that. Roseanna and I would do it ourselves if we could, but we can’t. The invitation has to come from people Priscilla’s own age. I’m sure you can see that.”

“Um...yeah.”

Willow nosed me as if to say we’d been detained long enough, but I was still trying to figure out the ramifications of what was being asked of me—such as how Amanda was going to react and how long we would have to do this—when Amos clapped me on the back.

“We’re all set, then. Thanks, Jake. We need to do what we can for Priscilla so that she can have a life of her own. One that’s a better fit for...for someone like her.”

“I’ll do my best,” I managed to reply.

Then I watched Amos amble back toward the house as if he hadn’t just asked for the impossible.