

The
DECISION

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PRAIRIE STATE FRIENDS BOOK I

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SHILOH RUN  **PRESS**
An Imprint of Barbour Publishing, Inc.

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ISBN 978-1-61626-088-0

eBook Editions:

Adobe Digital Edition (.epub) 978-1-63409-249-4

Kindle and MobiPocket Edition (.prc) 978-1-63409-250-0

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Cover design: Faceout Studio, www.faceoutstudio.com

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Published by Shiloh Run Press, an imprint of Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683, www.shilohrunpress.com.

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Printed in Canada.

DEDICATION

To caregivers everywhere, who selflessly give to others.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

MATTHEW 5:7



PROLOGUE

Arthur, Illinois

Edna Schrock shivered and pulled her woolen shawl tightly around her shoulders as she stepped out of the house Saturday evening. The air was cold and windy, like it had been most of the winter, yet it was two weeks into spring. They ought to be having warmer weather by now, but winter didn't seem to want to give in just yet. Last week, the temperatures rose into the upper seventies, and everyone caught spring fever. Neighbors and friends began preparing their gardens, and fields had already been plowed and were ready to be planted. Green shoots from flowers were coming up, and buds on the maples had turned red. Unfortunately, this time of year it wasn't unusual for the weather to tease people into thinking winter was finally gone. The calendar might say it was April, but Mother Nature said otherwise.

Heading toward the barn, where her grandfather had gone to check on the horses, Elaine hurried her footsteps. The wind howled noisily. She glanced toward the darkening sky and shivered. It almost felt like it could snow.

Elaine entered the barn and headed for the horses' stalls. "Grandpa," she called, seeing no sign of him in the first stall where Grandma's horse, Misty, had bedded down for the night.

She stopped to listen, but there was no response.

Moving on to the stall where her own horse, Daisy, was kept, Elaine still saw no sign of Grandpa. When she reached across the gate to stroke the mare's head, she heard a low moan coming from the next stall.

Hurrying over, Elaine gasped. Grandpa lay in the straw a few feet from his horse, Dusty. "Grandpa, what happened? Did you slip and fall?"

she asked, opening the gate and quickly entering the stall.

Grandpa's eyelids fluttered, and he clutched his chest. "Lainie," he murmured, using the nickname he'd given her when she was a girl.

"I'm here, Grandpa," she said, dropping to her knees beside him. "Please, tell me what's wrong."

"I—I am *katzodemich*," he mumbled.

"You're short of breath?" Elaine's heart pounded when he gave a feeble nod. Although she tried to remain calm, she couldn't help noticing Grandpa's pale skin and the bluish tint to his fingers and lips.

"Lie still, Grandpa," she murmured. "I'll run out to the phone shanty and call for help."

"No, wait," he said, clasping her hand. "There's something I need to ask you."

"What is it?" Elaine leaned closer to him, barely able to make out his words.

"If I don't make it—will you promise me something?" Grandpa's voice seemed to be growing weaker.

"Of course, Grandpa. What is it?"

"Look after your grandma for me. She—she'll need someone to care for her now. C—can you promise me that?"

Tears welled in Elaine's eyes as she held his cold hand. "I promise that I'll always be there for Grandma, no matter what." She gave his fingers a reassuring squeeze. "Help will be here soon, Grandpa. Don't worry, you're going to be fine."

Elaine rose to her feet and dashed out of the barn. It had begun to rain hard, and the bleakness of her mood matched that of the foreboding sky. Tension mounted in her chest as she raced on shaky legs toward the phone shanty. The cold, wet drops made it hard to hurry as she slipped along, trying not to lose her footing. "Dear Lord," she prayed out loud, "please let my grandpa be okay. Grandma needs him, and so do I."



CHAPTER 1



Tears coursed down Elaine's cheeks and dripped onto the front of her black mourning dress. The mourners had arrived at the cemetery a few minutes ago, ready to put Grandpa Schrock's body to rest in the ground. He'd died of an apparent heart attack just moments after the paramedics arrived Saturday evening. This morning, because Grandma wanted it that way, Grandpa's funeral service had been held in a large tent outside their home, rather than in the Otto Center, where some local Amish funerals took place.

During the service, one of the ministers quoted Matthew 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy." Grandpa had always been merciful to others, and so had Grandma. When Elaine was five years old and her parents had been killed in a buggy accident, her father's parents had taken her in. They'd been wonderful substitute parents, teaching, loving, and nurturing Elaine, yet asking so little in return. She only hoped she could live a life that would be pleasing not only to Grandma, but also to God.

If I'd only found Grandpa sooner, could he have been saved? Elaine wondered. *Oh, Grandpa, I already miss you so much.*

Elaine glanced over at her grandmother, standing to her left with hands folded, as though praying. Her eyes brimmed with tears. Grandma Schrock was a strong woman, but the grief she felt over losing her husband of forty-five years was evident on her face. And why wouldn't it be? Elaine's grandparents always had a deep, abiding love for each other, and it showed in everything they said and did as a couple. Elaine hoped to experience that kind of love when she got married someday.

Taking Grandma's hand, Elaine's throat constricted as Grandpa's

simply crafted wooden coffin was placed inside a rough pine box that had already been set in the opening of the grave. Death for the earthly body was final, yet she was confident that Grandpa's soul lived on and that he now resided in a much better place. Grandpa had lived the Christian life in every sense of the word, and he'd told Elaine many times that he loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, and mind. Yes, Elaine felt certain that Grandpa was in heaven with Jesus right now and perhaps even looking down on them with a smile. Did Grandma feel it, too? Quite possibly she did, for she gave Elaine's fingers a gentle squeeze as she turned her face toward the blue sky. *Thank You, Lord, for giving us a sunny day to say our good-byes*, Elaine prayed.

A slight chill hung in the air, but at least it wasn't raining, and only a gentle breeze whispered among the many headstones surrounding them. A bird chirped from a tree outside the fenced-in graveyard, as though offering comfort and a hope for the future.

A group of men from their church district began to sing while the grave was filled in by the pallbearers. Elaine winced. Although she had been quite young when her parents died, she still remembered standing in the cemetery during the burial, holding her grandparents' hands. Elaine's maternal grandparents, who had since died, had been living in Oklahoma back then. They had decided not to uproot Elaine from the only home she'd known, and she was grateful that Grandma and Grandpa Schrock had been more than willing to take her in. As the last shovelful of dirt was placed over the coffin, Elaine remembered her final words with Grandpa and her promise to take care of Grandma. *And I will*, Elaine reminded herself. *For as long as Grandma needs me, I will be there for her.*

Bishop Levi Kauffman asked the congregation to pray the Lord's Prayer silently, which concluded the graveside service. It was time to start back to the house for the funeral meal their friends and neighbors had prepared, but Elaine had no appetite. She'd be going through the motions and doing what was expected of her. Grandma would no doubt do the same.

Scanning the faces of close friends and church members, Elaine saw that the heartache she and Grandma felt today was shared by all.

Although nothing had been said during the funeral service earlier this morning about Grandpa's attributes, everyone knew that Lloyd Schrock was a kind, caring man. Having farmed in this community from the time he'd married Grandma until his recent retirement, Grandpa had proved his strong work ethic and commitment to the community. How many times had Elaine witnessed him getting up at the crack of dawn to head out to the fields without a word of complaint? Grandma always got up with him and made sure he ate a hearty breakfast before beginning another busy day. She'd done the same for Elaine throughout her school days.

Elaine would miss their shared meals, as well as Grandpa's smile and the stories he often told. On cold winter evenings, they would sit by the fire, enjoying apple cider and some of Grandma's delicious pumpkin or apple pie. All the wonderful times the three of them had together would be cherished memories.

As folks turned from the grave site and began walking back to their buggies, Elaine's friends Priscilla Herschberger and Leah Mast approached Elaine and her grandmother and hugged them warmly. No words were necessary. These two young women had been Elaine's best friends since they were children, and even though at twenty-two Elaine was the youngest of the three, they'd always gotten along well.

"Are you coming over to our house for the meal?" Elaine asked.

Priscilla and Leah both nodded.

"We'll do whatever we can to help out today so you and your grandma can relax and visit with those who attend." Leah, whose hair was golden brown like a chestnut, gave Elaine's arm a tender squeeze.

"You can count on us, not just for today, but in the days ahead as you and your grandma strive to adjust." Priscilla's dark eyes, matching the color of her hair, revealed the depth of her love.

"*Danki*, I appreciate you both so much." Given a choice, Elaine would prefer to keep busy, but she'd be expected to visit with the guests, so she wouldn't think of turning down her friends' offer of help.

"I am grateful for you, too," Grandma said, her voice trembling a bit. "I value all of our friends in this community."

As Elaine and Grandma moved slowly toward their buggy, Elaine caught sight of Jonah Miller heading her way. For nearly a year, she and Jonah had been courting, and Elaine was fairly certain it was just a matter of time before he proposed marriage. A week ago, she would have eagerly agreed to marry Jonah if he'd asked. But with Grandpa dying, she needed to be there for Grandma. Perhaps later, once Grandma had recovered sufficiently, Elaine would be ready for marriage. But she would continue to look after Grandma, making sure that all of her needs were met.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Jonah said, his coffee-colored eyes showing the depth of his concern as he looked first at Grandma and then Elaine. "If there's anything I can do for either of you, please let me know," he added, pulling his fingers through the back of his thick, curly black hair, sticking out from under the brim of his black dress hat.

"We will," Grandma murmured. "Danki."

All Elaine could manage was a brief nod. If she spoke to Jonah, her tears would flow, and she might not be able to stop them. There would be time for her and Jonah to talk—perhaps later this afternoon or evening if he stayed around after the meal that long. Jonah had a business to run, and he might need to get back to work this afternoon.

As though reading her thoughts, Jonah touched Elaine's arm and said, "I'll see you back at your house." Nodding in Grandma's direction, he sprinted for his horse and buggy.



As Jonah stepped into his buggy and picked up the reins, he thought about Elaine and her grandmother and wondered what they would do now that Lloyd was gone. Would they continue to offer sit-down dinners in their home for curious tourists, or would Elaine find some other employment in order to help out financially? Although Lloyd had retired from farming, he'd continued to earn money by selling a good deal of the produce they raised to a local store where many Amish, as well as some English, shopped. He wondered if Elaine would end up taking over that responsibility.

I could ask Elaine to marry me now. That would solve any financial

worries she and her grandma might have. Jonah smiled. *It would also make me a happy man.*

Jonah had been unlucky in love—at least when he'd lived in Pennsylvania. He had fallen in love with Meredith, a beautiful young woman whom he'd met several years before while visiting Florida. Meredith had believed that her husband was killed in a tragic bus accident, and after a suitable time of courting, Jonah and Meredith made plans to be married. But on the eve of their wedding, Meredith's husband, Luke, showed up. It turned out that he hadn't been on that bus after all, but had suffered from amnesia because of a beating he'd received at the Philadelphia bus station. For over a year, Meredith had grieved for Luke, until she'd finally given her heart to Jonah. When Luke showed up, claiming his wife and child, Jonah's whole world had turned upside down. Knowing he needed to get away from Lancaster County and begin again, a year and a half ago Jonah had moved to Arthur, Illinois, where his twin sister, Jean, lived with her family. Jean had also suffered a great loss when her first husband, Silas, was killed in a tragic accident. But since then, she had remarried. Jean had two children, Rebecca and Stephen by her first husband, and now she and Nathan had a baby boy named Ezekiel.

Jonah's bishop from childhood used to say, "Everything happens for a reason. God can take the tragedies in our lives and use them for something good." That was true in his sister's life, for she seemed happy and content. Jonah had also found happiness and love again when he'd met Elaine. He looked forward to the future and hoped to make the pretty blond his wife someday. But while she and her grandma were recovering from this great loss, he wouldn't bring up the subject of marriage. Instead, he'd be there for her, offering support in every way. When the time was right, he'd propose.

Thinking about the others who had been at the cemetery, Jonah reflected on how Sara Stutzman had looked as though she might break down at any moment. Sara's husband, Harley, had been killed by a falling tree ten months ago. Attending Lloyd's funeral and going to the graveside service must have been difficult for her, especially given that Harley's

grave wasn't more than ten feet from where Lloyd was buried.

It was hard for Jonah, too, because he and Harley had been good friends. Since Jonah was courting Elaine, he had to be careful not to offer Sara too much support. But he, as well as several other men from their community, had gone over to Sara's several times to help out with chores. Jonah still dropped by occasionally to check on Sara and her two-year-old son, Mark. Usually Jonah's sister, Jean, was with him, as she and Sara were good friends. He wondered if Sara would get married again, since it would be better for Mark if he had a father.

But that's really none of my business, Jonah told himself. If it's meant for Sara to marry again, she'll choose the right man when the time comes.



Back at the house, Elaine visited a bit and then headed for her bedroom to retrieve a gift she'd purchased the week before for Leah. As she walked down the hall, each step was a struggle. Walking into her room on the main floor, Elaine quietly closed the door. The voices from those who had gathered in the yard, as well as from inside the house, became muffled.

She stood by the bedroom window, her head leaning against the cool glass. Gazing outside at the people who were visiting in the yard, she was overwhelmed by how many friends Grandpa had made over the years. Elaine watched with blurry vision as Priscilla and Leah and a few other women dashed around, making sure food and drinks were readily available for everyone. It was nice to see Grandma receiving so much support on such a difficult day. For Elaine, it was like losing her father all over again, only worse because she'd been with Grandpa a lot longer. Grandma's heart was aching, too. It would take some time to work through all of this, and they would need to rely on God.

Away from well-meaning people, the tears Elaine had held in for most of the morning pushed quickly to the surface. Quietly, she let them fall, covering her mouth to stifle the cries. Grandpa was gone, yet it seemed as though he were still here. His presence would be felt in this house for a long time. Grandpa's voice seemed to whisper in Elaine's ear: *"Make each day count, Lainie, no matter what. Things happen for a reason, and although we may not understand it, in time, you'll find the answers you seek."*

Grandma used to remind Elaine of similar things, often saying, “*The Lord knows what is best for each of His children.*”

God, is all of this really what’s best for me? Elaine’s jaw clenched. *First, You took my parents, and now You’ve taken Grandpa, whom we need so much. I feel like I’m in a dark tunnel without any light to guide me out.*

She could stand in her bedroom and sob all day, but she had to get ahold of herself. It was time for her to support Grandma, just as she and Grandpa had always been there for her.

Elaine wiped away the tears with her apron and went to her closet to get Leah’s gift, a bag of daffodil bulbs from the market. Leah’s favorite color was yellow, and Elaine thought her friend would enjoy planting them and seeing them bloom every spring. She had enough bulbs to give half to Priscilla. She hadn’t planned it this way, but it would be her way of saying thank you for all they were doing to make things easier on her and Grandma. She would ask them to plant the flowers in memory of Grandpa.

Elaine hesitated, wishing she could stay in her room a little longer. She took a deep breath, squeezing her eyes tightly shut. Grandma must want to be alone in her grief, too, and yet throughout the funeral, graveside service, and now here for the meal, she had put on a brave face in the presence of others.

How can one go on after losing their soul mate and partner for life? Elaine wondered. *How does a wife begin each new day, knowing her husband is gone and won’t be coming back?* First Grandma had lost her only son, and now her husband was gone. *Oh, Lord, Elaine prayed, help me to be there for her in every way, offering all of the comfort and care she will need in order to get through each day.*

Elaine thought of Jonah and wondered what it would be like if she’d never met him. She cared deeply for Jonah and hoped to have a future with him, but how fair would it be for him to have to help her care for Grandma? The most difficult part of today was behind her, but now the real work would begin. It was time to pick up the pieces of their lives and try to move on.



CHAPTER 2



That evening after all the food was cleared away and everyone had gone home, Elaine went out to the barn to feed the horses. The sound of her steady stride had apparently alerted the animals of feeding time and sent the buggy horses into whinnying and kicking at their stalls. Patches and two of their other barn cats seemed excited to see Elaine, as they skittered across the lawn and pawed at the hem of her dress. “Not now, you three. I’m too busy to play right now.”

When Elaine stepped inside, she was greeted by familiar smells—grain, hay, dust, and the strong odor of horseflesh and urine from the horses’ stalls. They really needed to be cleaned, but that could wait for another day. She was too tired to lift a pitchfork, and it would be all she could manage just to feed the horses this evening.

As Elaine approached the stall where Grandpa’s horse was kept, she bit back a huge sob. This was the last place she’d seen her grandfather alive, when he’d asked her to look out for Grandma. Grandpa had obviously known he was dying.

“I will be here to help Grandma through her grief,” Elaine murmured. “And she’ll be here for me.”

A rustling noise behind Elaine caused her to jump. “*Ach*, Jonah! I thought you had gone home,” she said as he moved toward her.

“I left to make sure my sister got home safely,” Jonah explained. “Her horse was acting up, and since Nathan had to work and couldn’t be with her today, I decided to follow Jean and her *kinner* home. Then I came back to check on you and your grandma and see if you needed my help with anything.” He walked over to an open bale of hay and removed a few chunks to give Elaine’s horse.

“Danki, Jonah.” She stepped closer to him, feeling comforted and choked up by his consideration.

A look of concern showed clearly on Jonah’s face, and it brought Elaine to tears. “Oh, Jonah,” she sobbed, “I came out here to feed the horses, and all I could think about was how just a few days ago, I found Grandpa dying in his horse’s stall.”

Jonah drew Elaine into his arms and gently patted her back. “Losing a loved one is never easy, but God will give you the strength to endure it, for He understands your grief.”

She nodded, pulling slowly back and gazing up at his tender expression. “As much as I hurt right now, I know that Grandma is hurting even more.”

“*Jah*,” Jonah agreed, “and she will need to deal with the pain of losing Lloyd in her own way, in a time frame we can’t control.”

“Are you saying there’s nothing I can do to help her get through this terrible loss?” Elaine could hardly believe Jonah would hint at such a thing.

“I’m not saying that at all,” he said with a shake of his head. “I just meant that Edna will have to deal with Lloyd’s passing in her own way.”

“I know, but I made a promise to Grandpa that I would be here for Grandma, and I plan to keep that commitment.”

Jonah nodded as though he understood and reached for her hand. “Why don’t you go back to the house and let me take care of the horses? You’ve had a long day, and I’m sure you’re exhausted.”

“You’re right about that,” she agreed with a weary sigh. “And if you’re sure you don’t mind, I think I will go inside and make sure that Grandma’s okay. I’ll fix some chamomile tea, which will hopefully help us both get to sleep.”

Jonah bent and kissed Elaine on the cheek. “I’ll be back sometime tomorrow to see how you’re both doing.”

“Danki, that means a lot.” As Elaine left the barn, she thanked God for bringing Jonah into her life. He was such a kind, compassionate man. She hoped that he wouldn’t ask her to marry him anytime soon, for if he did, her answer would have to be no. For however long it took, Elaine’s

first obligation was to Grandma, which meant her own needs and wants must be put on hold.



Sara Stutzman stood in front of her bedroom window, staring at the inky blackness of the night sky. Attending Lloyd Schrock's funeral today had been hard on her, as it brought back memories of when she'd had to watch her own husband's body being buried. She and Harley had been married a little over two years when his life was snuffed out by a falling tree, leaving Sara to raise their son, Mark, by herself. Life could be hard, and disasters could occur when least expected. But life continued, and Sara had a reason to live lying right there in his crib across the hall.

Her precious dark-haired little boy would never know his father, but she would make sure to tell him what a wonderful, loving man his dad had been. At moments like this, Sara wished she had a picture of Harley so she could share it with Mark when he got older. But posing for a photo was frowned upon in her church district, so she would do her best to describe to her son what his father looked like.

Biting her lip to keep tears from flowing, Sara wondered if it was right to continue living in Illinois or if it would be better to return to Goshen, Indiana, where her parents and siblings lived.

Sara had met Harley when he'd gone to Goshen to work for his uncle Abner one summer. They'd quickly fallen in love, and when Harley went back to Illinois, they kept in touch through letters and phone calls. He came back to Goshen to visit several times, and a year later, Harley had asked Sara to marry him. They'd lived in Indiana for six months before moving to his hometown, where he'd started a new business making windows. Sara liked Illinois, and she'd made many friends in the area, including Jean Mast, whom she considered to be her closest friend. If Sara went back to Indiana, where she'd been born and raised, it would be hard to say good-bye to those she'd become close to here. Still, was it fair to Mark to live so far from his mother's parents, whom he would never know as well as his father's parents?

So many decisions to make, Sara thought. But I don't want to make any permanent changes just yet. Like Harley's mother had said a few weeks

after his death, *"It's best not to make any quick decisions about the future until you have had sufficient time to grieve."*

Betty was right. She still grieved the loss of her eldest son, just as Harley's father and younger siblings did. It had not been an easy time for any of them, but Sara was thankful they had each other's support, for without Harley's family, she wouldn't have made it this far. And having Mark close by helped Betty, because her grandson was the only part of Harley she had left.

Even though it was dark, in her mind's eye Sara could see every inch of the property. This home, this land was where she and Harley had planned to live, raise a family, and grow old together. Sara's heart was in this place as much as her husband's had been, and in the time they'd lived here, so many good memories had been made. But then this very land they'd loved so much had taken her husband's life. Would she be able to continue forcing herself to look at the trees lining their property without letting that horrible day override the sweet memories they'd made in such a short period of time?

Sara was thankful she'd been able to lease out part of their land to a neighboring Amish man who farmed for a living. The income from that, as well as money they had saved in the bank, was helping her get by. In addition, both Sara's parents and Harley's had given some money to help out.

My year of mourning is almost up, and I'll need to make my decision soon about whether I should stay here or move back to Indiana, Sara told herself after she'd pulled the covers aside and crawled into bed. In the meantime, I need to find an additional way to support myself and Mark, because my savings won't last forever, and I can't rely on my in-laws' or parents' help indefinitely. I need to ask God for His guidance and strength each day.



Grandma and Elaine had retired to their rooms a few hours ago, but Elaine was still standing at her window, looking toward the heavens and asking God for answers about what the future might hold. The stars seemed to be twinkling more brightly, perhaps just for her. *Lord, help me to be strong for Grandma. Help me not to lose hope and to understand why, when things*

seemed to be going so well, everything suddenly fell apart. Elaine's body was tired, yet her mind whirled with a multitude of questions.

Finally, Elaine willed herself toward the bed, knowing she needed to get off her aching feet. Pulling back the covers, she slipped into the linens that still smelled like fresh air. Grandma always hung the sheets outside after washing them, and they held their fragrance for several days. Elaine loved to bury her nose into the pillowcase and breathe deeply of its freshness. It was almost like falling asleep outdoors.

She tucked the quilt, lovingly made by her grandmother, under her chin, while wiggling her toes to get the cramps out. What she wouldn't do right now for her friend Leah to give her a good foot massage. Leah practiced reflexology and was quite good at it. Reflexology dealt with a lot more than massaging feet, but right now, Elaine would have settled for just that.

She reflected on how Leah and Priscilla had been happy with the daffodil bulbs she'd given them. Even before Elaine had suggested it, both friends had said the flowers would be planted in memory of Grandpa Schrock, an affectionate name they had called him by all these years.

Elaine closed her eyes, and even with both doors tightly shut, she heard Grandma's muffled crying from the room across the hall. As Elaine drifted fitfully to sleep, her last words of prayer were for Grandma to find the strength to go on.



Elaine sat straight up in bed and glanced at the clock on her dresser. It was nearly midnight, and she'd only been asleep a few hours. A noise seemed to be coming from the kitchen. She tipped her head and listened, trying to make out what it was.

Then Elaine caught a whiff of something cooking. But that was impossible; Grandma had gone to bed hours ago.

Pushing her covers aside, Elaine crawled out of bed and put her robe and slippers on. Opening her bedroom door, she padded down the hall toward the kitchen.

When she stepped into the room, she was surprised to see Grandma standing in front of the stove, flipping pancakes with an oversized spatula.

“Grandma, what are you doing out of bed, and why are you making pancakes at this time of night?” Elaine asked, joining her at the stove.

Grandma turned to look at Elaine. “I’m sorry, dear. Did I wake you?”

“Well, I. . .”

Grandma placed one hand on her stomach and gave it a pat. “I’m *hungerich*, and I had a craving for *pannekuche*. Would you like some, too?”

Elaine shook her head. “I’m not hungry, and after the long day we’ve had, you should be tired, too.”

“I couldn’t sleep, and I was thirsty.” Grandma’s mouth twisted grimly. “My bed seems empty without my dear husband to share it.”

Elaine wanted to say that she understood, but having never been married, she couldn’t fully comprehend the scope of what Grandma must be feeling right now. “Would it help if you slept in one of the guest rooms upstairs?” she suggested.

Grandma shook her head vigorously. “I am not leaving the bedroom your grandpa and I shared for so many years.” She sighed and turned off the propane-operated stove. “It’ll take me awhile to get used to sleeping alone, but I’ll manage somehow.”

Grandma placed the pancakes on a plate, grabbed the syrup bottle from the cupboard, and sat at the table. “Even in my loss, I can give thanks for all that the Lord provides.” She bowed her head and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, Elaine took a seat beside her.

“Are you sure you’re not *hungerich*?” Grandma asked, taking a drink of water from the glass she’d placed on the table. “I’d be happy to share some of these *pannekuche* with you.”

“No. I’ll just sit here and watch you eat,” Elaine replied. She guessed it was good that Grandma was eating now, as she hadn’t had much to eat at the meal after Grandpa’s graveside service, and neither had Elaine.

“As you like.” Grandma poured syrup over the pancakes and took her first bite. “Your grandpa loved pure maple syrup. He liked buttermilk pancakes the best, but I think he would have eaten any kind that was set before him.” Grandma chuckled. “As much as that man liked to eat, it was amazing that he didn’t have a problem with his weight.”

“I guess it was because he always worked so hard,” Elaine commented.

“Jah, and before he retired from farming, he labored in the fields, so it was no wonder he had such a hearty appetite.”

Grandma went on to talk about how she and Grandpa had met at a young people’s singing many years ago—a story Elaine had heard several times. But she listened patiently, knowing it did Grandma good to reminisce like this, and it would no doubt help the healing process. Truthfully, Elaine never tired of hearing it. She was comforted by hearing about how things had been when Grandpa and Grandma were young.

When the grandfather clock in the living room struck one, Elaine suggested that they both head back to bed.

Grandma yawned. “I guess you’re right; I am awfully tired. Danki for sitting here so patiently while I rambled on and on about the past.”

Elaine placed her hand over Grandma’s. “It’s all right. You needed to talk, and I hope you’ll share things about Grandpa with me whenever you want, because I enjoy hearing them.”

Tears welled in Grandma’s eyes. “We who grieve will never forget the ones we’ve lost, but we can be thankful for the years we had with your *grossdaadi*, for he filled our lives with love and laughter and gave me a sense of joy beyond compare.” She squeezed Elaine’s fingers. “And if I’m not mistaken, someday soon you’ll find that same kind of love, laughter, and joy with Jonah Miller.”

“I hope so,” Elaine said in a near whisper. Truth was, she wasn’t sure Jonah would be willing to wait until she felt ready for marriage. And if he wasn’t, she wouldn’t blame him for that.



CHAPTER 3



When Elaine entered the kitchen the following morning, she found a stack of Grandma's good dishes sitting on the table, and Grandma was at the sink, washing glasses.

"*Guder mariye*, Grandma."

"Good morning."

"Why do you have the good dishes out?" Elaine questioned.

"Have you forgotten that we have a group of tourists coming here on Friday?"

"Well, no, but. . ."

"Thought I would get a jump on the dishes while I have some time to clean them. That way, they'll be ready for our guests. Then I'll take them out to the dining-room table." Grandma turned and offered Elaine a weak smile. Dark circles rimmed her pale blue eyes, and Elaine was sure she hadn't slept well, if at all, last night.

"Oh, Grandma, I think it's too soon for that. I had planned on calling the tour group director this morning and canceling our Friday-night dinner."

Grandma shook her head determinedly. "We made a commitment, Elaine, and we need to stick to it. Besides, we could sure use the money."

Elaine couldn't argue with that, but she wasn't up to cooking a big meal for fifty people, and she didn't think Grandma was, either. "Maybe we can reschedule it for another time," Elaine suggested, moving closer to the sink.

"No, we can't." Grandma reached for another glass to wash, carefully immersing it in the soapy water. "The people who'll be coming are from out of town, not to mention that they've paid for their meal in advance."