

The FARMERS' MARKET
MISHAP

A SEQUEL TO *The Lopsided Christmas Cake*

The FARMERS' MARKET
MISHAP

WANDA &
BRUNSTETTER
& JEAN BRUNSTETTER

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DEDICATION

To Miriam Brunstetter, and in loving memory of her husband, Charles Brunstetter—both have always been a beacon of light to our family. And to our Amish friends, the Wagler family. Thanks for your warm hospitality.

*And let us not be weary in well doing:
for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.*

GALATIANS 6:9

CHAPTER 1

Topeka, Indiana

A bone-chilling wind lashed at the trees, scattering bits of debris across the yard. Elma Hochstetler drew her shawl tighter, shivering against the cold. All day long the weather had been like this. One would never know it was the first week of May. She quickened her footsteps, pausing to step around a puddle left from last night's rain. If this unpredictable, windy and gray-skied weather kept up, she'd never get the rest of her garden planted. Hurriedly, she made her way to the chicken coop, not wanting to spend any more time out here than necessary. With nightfall approaching, Elma felt the temperature dropping.

As she passed the barn, Elma heard her trusty horse, Pearl, whinny and kick the door from inside her stall. Cupping her hands around her mouth, Elma hollered, "You're okay, girl; it's just the wind." She grabbed at the scarf covering her head, hoping it wouldn't be blown away, and blinked several times when her eyes began to run because of the stinging air.

When the kicking stopped, Elma breathed a sigh of relief and hurried on. The last thing she needed was one more repair to take care of. The wind followed as she opened the door to the chicken coop, barely making it inside before it slammed shut. Loose feathers stirred up and floated slowly down as the air calmed inside. Sounds of watery clucking, claws scratching the floor, and the fluttery ruffle as a chicken preened itself greeted her. She sneezed when the odor of straw and dusty feed reached her nostrils. Elma blew a feather away from her face that until now, had been stuck in her head scarf.

Collecting eggs wasn't Elma's favorite pastime, nor did she enjoy feeding and watering the unpredictable chickens. She glanced around quickly, hoping Hector wasn't lying in wait for her this evening. The feisty multicolored rooster could be so erratic—sometimes creeping up on her in a sneak attack, other times boldly pursuing her as soon as she stepped into the coop.

Elma looked down at her leg, now sporting an itchy bandage. For no apparent reason, other than just plain orneriness, Hector had pecked her ankle and broken the skin earlier this morning when she'd entered the coop. This evening she'd brought an old broom in with her and made sure it was within reach in case she needed to defend herself. "You won't get me twice today," Elma muttered. "I'm ready for you this time, Hector."

Elma lifted her wicker basket and started down the line. "All right, ladies, what do you have for me?" She'd fed and watered the chickens this morning but hadn't taken time to collect the eggs, as she'd been in a hurry to open the store. The fabric sale going on this week was bringing more customers than they'd expected.

When Elma's twin sister lived here, taking care of the chickens had been her job. But since Thelma married Joseph and they'd moved into the house across the street, she had faced other responsibilities, not to mention the task of caring for her own chickens. And now Thelma was expecting a baby and tired easily. Even though she still helped in the store, for the last month she'd only been working part-time. This put more stress on Elma, as she couldn't manage everything on her own. Two weeks ago, she'd hired Anna Herschberger to help out during the times Thelma couldn't be there. So far, the arrangement had been working well.

"Okay, Gert, you'd better move aside." Elma gave the hen a gentle push, reached into the nesting box, and plucked out a nicely rounded tan-colored egg. "*Danki*, Gert."

Smiling, Elma moved on to the next nesting box, always wary of Hector. No sign of him yet, so she figured he hadn't come inside with the rest of the chickens when the sun began to set.

When Elma finishing gathering eggs, she hurried out the door

and headed for the warmth of the house. She'd no more than stepped onto the porch when Tiger showed up. Purring in a deep, throaty rumble, the orange-and-white cat rubbed against her leg. As Elma switched the basket into her other hand, Tiger walked a figure-eight motion in and around her feet.

"Okay, okay, don't be in such a rush. At least allow me to open the door." She turned the knob, and as the door swung open, Tiger released several rapid-fire *meows* and darted in with a swish of his tail, causing Elma to trip. She regained her balance just in time to avoid dropping the eggs. "Tiger, why can't you be more patient? I could have spilled all the eggs and had a big mess to clean up."

Tiger offered a piercing *meow* and paraded off.

Elma rolled her eyes. She'd never cared much for cats, but with the mouse problem she'd had since living in her grandparents' old house, it was either allow the cat in or set traps in most of the rooms. Since Elma began letting Tiger in every evening, the mouse population had decreased, so at least something good had come from it. Elma's twin was the one who loved cats. If Thelma had her way, she'd adopt every stray cat from Topeka to Shipshewana.

Elma entered the kitchen and set the basket of eggs on the counter. She grimaced, noticing the wet tea bag she'd left on a spoon this morning before leaving to open the store. It wasn't like her to be so careless. "Guess I have too much on my mind these days," she murmured, removing her shawl and folding it neatly over the back of a chair.

Tiger, who'd joined her in the kitchen, swished his tail across the hem of Elma's long dress. *Meow. Meow.* It was a definite "I want to be fed now" meow.

"Hang on. I'll get you something to eat shortly." Elma picked up the wilted tea bag and threw it in the garbage. Then she opened a cupboard door to get the cat food. Before she could get the bowl filled, Tiger began gobbling it up.

"You greedy *katz.*" Elma chuckled. "You ate breakfast this morning, so you can't be that hungry." She gave him some fresh water then took care of the eggs. Once they were put in the refrigerator, Elma took

out a container of leftover vegetable-beef soup, poured it into a kettle, and placed it on her new propane-operated stove. Even unheated, the meaty scent made her stomach growl. Thank goodness the old woodstove was gone, although the kitchen wasn't as warm and toasty now. That sooty old beast had given her and Thelma so much trouble when they'd first moved here after their grandparents died. A good many desserts had flopped or ended up overly brown when they'd baked in the antiquated oven.

Elma snickered, thinking about the lopsided cake her twin sister had made and they'd taken to Shipshewana to be auctioned off. Patting her cheek, it was hard not to get flustered again. Even so, with all the time that had passed, her face grew increasingly warmer with the thought of what had transpired onstage. She could have died of embarrassment when the bidding began. Then, she stood, too stunned to speak, when someone bid one hundred dollars for their pathetic-looking cake. Turned out that Joseph Beechy had convinced his friend Delbert Gingerich to bid on the cake so he could meet Thelma. The plan worked, too, because it didn't take long for Joseph and Thelma to begin courting.

As Elma stirred the soup, her thoughts drifted yet again. Slowly but surely, this old house was being transformed into a more comfortable place to live. At least Elma saw it that way. Grandma and Grandpa had been content to live here a good many years, getting by with what they had and making only a few updates. Even with the new stove, some updated kitchen cabinets, and a new water heater, Elma had a list of things she still wanted to have done. One in particular was getting someone to fix the leaky toilet in the bathroom upstairs. She also hoped to buy a new kitchen table and replace the faded kitchen linoleum, which had worn nearly through in several places—especially in front of the stove. Another project involved carpentry, so she'd need to call on Joseph's friend Delbert for that.

At one time, Delbert and Elma had been a courting couple, but things didn't work out between them. He was too set in his ways, and most likely, he thought she was, too. Then Delbert's cousin Myron Bontrager came on the scene and courted Elma for a few months.

Myron lived in southern Indiana, and it didn't take Elma long to realize a long-distance relationship wasn't going to work out. Besides, she and Myron didn't have much in common, so she wasn't too upset when they went their separate ways.

While waiting for the soup to heat, Elma set the table and poured a glass of water. When the soup was ready, she poured the steaming medley into a bowl, inhaling its beefy aroma. There was only enough for one helping, but it was plenty for her and certainly hearty. After adding a box of crackers and a leftover cheese ball to the setting, she took a seat and bowed her head for silent prayer. *Heavenly Father, I thank You for this food and ask You to bless it to the nourishment of my body. Be with my sister and her husband, and with our family in Sullivan, Illinois. Continue to give me the strength to keep Grandma and Grandpa's store going, and if it be Your will, bring the right man into my life. Amen.*

When Elma opened her eyes, her gaze came to rest on the vacant chair where Thelma used to sit. The chair wasn't the only thing deserted, however. The entire house seemed empty without her presence.

When Elma gave her blessing for Thelma to marry Joseph, she had no idea how lonely it would be to live in this rambling old house all alone. There was no one to converse with except the cat, and cooking for one was certainly no fun. Sometimes during a long, solitary night, Elma would cry herself to sleep. She never let on, though. No point upsetting her sister or throwing cold water on Thelma's happiness.

I need to quit feeling sorry for myself. Elma grabbed the saltshaker and sprinkled a bit on her soup. *My twin deserves to be happy with Joseph. I only wish I could find a man with whom I'd be content—someone who shares my interests and looks at life the way I do.*

Thirty-four and still unmarried, Elma had accepted her plight. Unless God brought the special man to her, she'd be an old maid for the rest of her life.



Thelma sat in the rocking chair, knitting a pair of green booties. The baby wouldn't be here for five more months, but she wanted to be prepared. She glanced at her husband, sitting across from her reading

the recent edition of *The Connection* magazine, and smiled.

Returning her smile, Joseph set his magazine aside. "Is the gas lamp giving you enough light?"

"*Jah*, it's plenty."

"I was looking at you a bit ago and noticed you were squinting." He gestured to the coffee table. "You oughta be using those readers right there on the table, don't you think?"

Thelma nodded. "You're right. I'm trying to use what little sight I have without them." She wrinkled her nose. "Anyway, those glasses make me feel like I'm getting old." She began rocking in rhythm to the clicking of her knitting needles.

"You're *schee*. In fact, I think you've gotten even cuter since I married you." Joseph winked at her. "And you're even more beautiful now that you are carrying our baby. You have a glow about you."

She placed the needles in her lap and flapped her hand at him. "Go on now—you're such a tease."

Joseph left his chair and came over to give her a kiss. "I'm not teasing. I'm a lucky man to have found a woman as pretty as you. You're *schmaert*, too."

Thelma bobbed her head. "Now that's one thing I'll have to agree on. I was smart enough to marry you."

He gave her another wink. "Think I'll pour myself a glass of grape juice. Can I get you anything?"

"Juice sounds good. *Danki*, Joe."

"No problem." Joseph gave Thelma another quick kiss and headed for the kitchen.

While Thelma waited for his return, she thought about some of the things she needed to get done before the week was out. Tomorrow was Thursday, and she'd be helping Elma in the store, so not much at home would get done. Friday would have to be laundry day, and Saturday she hoped to do some baking and cleaning.

Thelma felt thankful her utility room was on the main floor. She didn't miss those days of going down to the basement to wash a load of clothes. *Poor Elma. She never has liked going to the basement to do the laundry. It's too bad there isn't a place for her washing machine upstairs.*

Maybe Joe or Delbert could figure something out.

Thelma glanced around the living room. She couldn't help comparing her and Joe's home to Grandpa and Grandma's old house. The fireplace mantel in this home was nicely stained, and the flooring was in tip-top shape. The prior owners had obviously kept the place up.

When Thelma and Joseph first moved in, Elma donated a few pieces of furniture, such as the rocker Thelma sat in now. Of course, Joseph brought the furniture he had in his previous home, so they didn't really need much.

She glanced at the empty cradle sitting across the room. Even though carpentry was not his specialty, Joseph had made the cradle, finishing it last week. Of course, his good friend Delbert, being a carpenter by trade, had given Joe several tips. *What a shame things didn't work out for Dell and Elma.* Thelma got the chair moving faster. *I'd always hoped when I fell in love, my twin sister would find her soul mate and fall in love, too. It would be nice if Elma was also married and expecting a boppli. Well, at least she'll have the privilege of being an auntie soon.*

Despite Thelma's love for Joseph, it had been difficult for her to get married and move out of Grandpa and Grandma's old house, leaving Elma alone to fend for herself. Although Thelma and Joseph only lived across the street, it sometimes felt like miles between them. *I wonder what Elma is doing tonight?* Thelma paused from rocking to glance out the front window. During the day, from where she sat now, she could see across the street to the house she'd become so familiar with. Now she could only see a faint light glowing in one of the windows. *It must be lonely for her over there by herself. Well, at least she lives close and we get to see each other nearly every day.*

Thelma and Elma had always been close, and when they'd moved to Topeka two years ago, to take over Grandma and Grandpa's store and live in their house, it had drawn them even closer. She was ever so happy being married to Joseph, but oh, how Thelma wished her twin could find such a wonderful man.

"Oh, my." Thelma's eyes flew open when her neck snapped back before almost nodding off to sleep.

“You look tired, my love.” Joseph set a glass of juice on the coffee table near Thelma. “Should we drink our juice and then get ready for bed?”

Thelma yawned, rubbing her neck. “I suppose it would be a good idea. The sale will continue at the store tomorrow so I need to be there early to help Elma.”

Joseph’s thick eyebrows rose high on his forehead. “I thought Elma hired Anna Herschberger to help out.”

“She did, but one of Anna’s friends is getting married tomorrow, so Anna asked for the day off.” Thelma drank the juice; then, grasping the armrests, she rose from her chair.

Joseph pulled Thelma into his arms and kissed her tenderly. “I love you so much, and now that you’re expecting a boppli, I want to be sure you take good care of yourself.”

She tipped her head back, reaching up to stroke his soft beard. “Now don’t look so worried. I’ll be fine, Joe, and so will our baby.”

CHAPTER 2

You look *mied* this morning. Are you sure you feel up to working today?" Elma placed both hands on her sister's shoulders.

"I am a bit tired, but with the sale going on still, and Anna not working, you need my help." Thelma smiled, although it didn't quite reach her usual sparkling blue eyes. "Besides, I enjoy being here in the store with you and having the opportunity to visit with customers."

Elma knew all about her twin's eagerness to visit. Even when they were children, Thelma had been the outgoing one. While Elma was talkative with people she knew, her sister easily carried on conversations with complete strangers. She remembered how once, when they were ten years old, their mother had taken them shopping. As they were getting ready to leave the store, Thelma walked right up to a young English girl and asked where she'd gotten her red balloon. The next thing Elma knew, her sister and the English girl were exchanging addresses so they could write to each other. Elma had never understood why she and Thelma were different on many levels. Yet they were as close as any identical twins could possibly be.

"I have a suggestion." Elma moved to one side of the stool where her sister sat. "Why don't you sit on this stool here by the counter and wait on people? I'll take care of cutting material and restocking shelves as needed."

"Are you sure? I can help stock shelves if you need me to."

Elma shook her head determinedly. "Absolutely not! In your delicate condition, you should not be doing anything strenuous. At least

here by the counter, you can stay off your feet.”

“You and Joseph worry about me too much.” Thelma folded her arms across her stomach. “I’m not an invalid, you know.”

“Of course not, but you’re thirty-four years old and expecting your first boppli. You need to be careful and not overwork.” Elma glanced down at her sister’s ankles then quickly looked away. She wasn’t about to mention the slight swelling she’d noticed. Thelma would think she was fussing too much. But if it got any worse, she wouldn’t hesitate to speak up.

Thelma sighed. “All right, I’ll do as you say.”

“Good to hear.” Elma put the OPEN sign in the large front window and had barely gotten the door unlocked when a horse and buggy pulled up. Four Amish ladies got out, and, as soon as the horse was secured, they hurried into the store. One of them, whom Elma had not met before, held a baby in her arms. For a split second Elma felt a pang of jealousy, but she quickly got it under control.

“*Guder mariye.*” Elma greeted them with a smile.

“Good morning. How are you today, Thelma?” Clara Lehman gave Elma a hug.

Elma shook her head. “Oh, no, I’m not Thelma. I’m Elma.”

Clara’s cheeks reddened. “Sorry about that. You two look so much alike. Even after two years of knowing you both, it’s hard to tell you apart.” She looked over at Doris Miller, who stood beside her. “Don’t you agree?”

“Jah, but then Thelma is the one expecting a boppli, so we should be able to tell them apart.” Doris motioned to Elma’s stomach and snickered. “Does she look like she’s in a family way?”

“Of course not.” Clara’s face colored further, and Elma’s cheeks heated as well. She pushed up the left sleeve of her dress, revealing a small scar on her elbow. “One way you can always tell us apart is by this scar. I got it when I was a child and fell off my bike.”

“And don’t forget the small mole I have behind my right ear,” Thelma called from her place behind the counter. “It’s one sure way to know who is who.”

Clara chuckled as she moved toward the counter. “Now, now,

Thelma, most people would not be likely to look behind your ear.”

“Or see the scar on Elma’s arm,” Doris interjected.

This discussion was getting nowhere, and Elma was about to ask if either of the ladies needed help with anything, when the door opened again and two more women entered the store. From the looks of things, today would be busy. That was good; Elma liked being busy. She moved across the room to introduce herself to the young woman with the baby, while Doris, Clara, and the other women stood at the counter talking with Thelma.



By noon, Thelma felt more than ready to take a break. She’d been waiting on customers all morning, and her back was beginning to hurt from sitting so long. She noticed her ankles appeared to be a bit swollen today. It was hard to believe, but twenty customers had come into the store in the last hour, all looking for material and sewing notions. Thelma wondered if every woman in their community had gone shopping today.

She stepped off the stool, and was about to seek Elma out to say she wanted to go to the back room to eat lunch, when Lizzie Yoder entered the store. Ambling over to the counter, the older woman asked breathlessly, “Does the sale you’re having include everything in the store?” Her blue eyes seemed to grow larger. “I hope so, because I need a few things and don’t have much money to spend.”

“I’m sorry,” Thelma responded, “but only the bolts of material are on sale today.”

Lizzie’s double chin tilted downward as she heaved a sigh. “I figured as much but had to ask. Guess I’ll head on down the notions aisle.”

Thelma watched Lizzie walk away. For a sixty-two-year-old who was a bit on the pudgy side, Lizzie moved pretty fast. *I hope I’m that full of energy when I’m her age.*

Once again, Thelma was on the verge of calling her sister to mind the counter when Mary Lambright entered the store. “It’s good to see you. How are your boys doing these days?” Thelma asked.

Mary’s eyes brightened. “Philip and Richard are doing well. They

both enjoy being in school.”

“I’ll bet they do. Seems like just yesterday when they were sitting here in the store listening to me read them a story.”

Mary bobbed her head. “My *kinner* have grown so quickly.” She motioned to Thelma. “Bet you’re looking forward to becoming a *mudder*.”

“Oh, jah. Joseph and I are both excited about becoming parents.” Thelma looked down at her growing stomach and patted it gently.

Mary smiled. “Guess I’d better get what I came in here for. If you’re still at the counter when I’m ready to pay for my purchases, we can chat a bit longer.”

When Mary hurried off, Thelma stepped down from the stool. She was getting ready to head to the back of the store when Lizzie showed up again. “I’m ready to check out now.”

Thelma glanced around, hoping Elma was nearby and would come to her rescue, but no such luck. She must be at the back of the store.

“Umm. . .sure, I can check you out, Lizzie.” Thelma stepped behind the counter again, and Lizzie placed her purchases down—a notebook, two spools of black thread, four skeins of green yarn, and a bag of jelly beans. Seeing the candy caused Thelma to think of Joseph’s friend Delbert. He seemed to always have candy in his pocket. Delbert had a sweet tooth, for sure. But then from what Thelma had seen, so did Lizzie. *Good thing Elma’s not waiting on her. She’d probably give Lizzie a lecture on the danger of eating too much sugar.*

“What’s new with you, Lizzie?” Thelma questioned as she put the woman’s purchase in a plastic bag.

Lizzie squinted over the top of her glasses. “Nothing good, that’s for sure.”

“What do you mean?”

“My brother, Abe, will be moving to Kentucky soon, and he’s taking his whole family with him.” Lizzie touched her chest. “Everyone but me.”

“I didn’t realize they were leaving the area. Why don’t you go with them?”

"I was invited to move, but I said no, I'm staying put." Lizzie shook her head so hard her head-covering ties swished across her face. "Topeka's my home, and there's nothing in Kentucky for me."

Thelma pursed her lips. "So you'll stay here all alone?" Lizzie had never married, and it didn't seem right that she wouldn't live near her family anymore.

Lizzie shrugged her shoulders. "My friend Peggy will be moving in with me soon, and we'll share expenses. We clean houses together, so things should work out okay for both of us." She grabbed the package of jelly beans, ripped it open, and took out a few of the black ones. "These licorice jelly beans are my favorite." She offered Thelma a sheepish grin and popped a handful into her mouth.

Thelma resisted the urge to say something about eating so much candy. She'd be acting like her sister. "Will there be anything else?"

"Nope, that's all for now. I'll see you again soon, though, I expect." Lizzie leaned against the counter and lowered her voice. "So how are you feeling these days? Still having morning sickness?"

"Not anymore, but I do get awful tired at times." Thelma almost snickered. *Funny how some people feel compelled to drop their voice when talking about certain topics.*

"I can't speak from experience, mind you, but I've seen plenty of women who were in a family way. Some have the morning sickness and some don't. Everyone is different." Lizzie ate several more jelly beans of various flavors. "Well, I'd better get going." She paid for her items, picked up the sack, and headed for the door. "Have a nice day, Thelma."

As Lizzie was putting the bag of candy into her satchel, a few jelly beans fell out of the opening. "Don't worry, I'll get them." Lizzie scurried to pick them up. "It's okay. I think I got them all. You take care now."

"You, too." Thelma chuckled. Lizzie Yoder was quite the character. Too bad Lizzie's family would be moving to Kentucky. Thelma couldn't imagine what it would be like if Elma moved away. Of course, that wasn't likely to happen since Elma wasn't married. Even

if she was, no way would Thelma's twin sister leave her—especially when she would become an aunt in five months.



When they had a small break between customers, Elma joined Thelma at the counter. “You’ve been up here a long while, Sister. You’d best take a break while I keep an eye on things.”

“Danki. I’m more than ready for it.” Thelma rose from the stool and headed for the back of the store.

Elma followed her into the back room and grabbed her lunch basket to take up front. “I’ll eat this while I’m at the counter, in case any customers come in.” She gave her sister’s arm a gentle pat. “You relax, put your feet up, and take it easy. If I need you, I’ll give a holler.”

Thelma’s appreciation was evident as she took a seat and smiled at Elma. “I was beginning to wonder if things would ever slow down.”

Elma chuckled. “You know how it goes. We’re either bored and looking for something to do, or the store is literally crawling with customers.”

“Jah.” Thelma pointed to the door. “You’d better get busy and eat before more people show up.”

“Okay, see you soon.” Elma hurried to the counter and placed her bologna and cheddar cheese sandwich, along with some carrot and celery sticks, on a napkin. As soon as she removed the thermos lid, the tangy smell of apple juice wafted up to her nose, making her mouth water.

Elma managed to eat most of her lunch before Hazel Zimmerman, one of the Mennonite women who lived close by, stopped by.

“Good day, Elma.” Hazel offered a genuine smile. At least she hadn’t gotten Elma mixed up with Thelma.

“How are things with you today?” Elma put her lunch basket behind the counter.

“My back has been acting up, but other than that, everything is going pretty well.” Hazel reached around and rubbed her lower back.

“Sorry to hear it. I hope your back gets better soon.” Elma picked up the spray cleaner and a napkin to tidy the area, while Hazel headed to the fabric section.

A short time later, Hazel returned with a bolt of pale blue, lightly printed material. "Do you happen to have more of this color in the back?"

"I'll go take a look; just give me a second." Elma stepped out from behind the counter and headed for the back room. When she entered, she spotted Thelma dozing in her chair.

Elma smiled. *I'll let her rest awhile longer. My twin needs to take care of herself and not overdo.* She found the material she'd come for and stepped quietly out of the room.

Once outside the door, Elma scurried to find the scissors to cut through the packaging tape. "This isn't going as smoothly as I had hoped," she mumbled quietly. After she had the box opened and began pulling the material out, she could see it wasn't the right material. Elma looked over at the next box sitting nearby and grabbed the scissors again. This time she had the right color, but now she'd created a mess in the back of the store.

Sighing, she heard the door out front open and close, then more voices. She hurried up front where she found Hazel leaning against the fabric table. "I believe this is what you wanted."

Hazel grinned. "Thanks, it's perfect."

Elma pushed her glasses back in place and looked toward the door, where two English women stood. "Hello, ladies."

"Hello," they said in unison.

"We saw your ad in the paper," the older of the two women said, "and we're here to check out your sale."

"Please feel free to look around." Elma gestured to the fabric section of the store.

As the women looked through the material, Elma cut Hazel's fabric and rang up the notions and thread she'd picked out.

"Are you working alone today?" Hazel picked up her bagged purchases.

"No, my sister is here, but she's taking a break." Elma glanced toward the back room, wondering if Thelma was still asleep.

"Well, tell her I said hello, and you have a good day."

"Thanks. You, too."

While the two English women shopped for fabric, Elma knelt to organize the work space behind the counter. Then she heard someone step up behind her.

“Sister, how long were you going to let me sleep?” Thelma tilted her head. “Why are you looking at me so strangely?”

“Your head covering’s on crooked.” Elma reached out and put it back in place. “And the reason I didn’t wake you is because I figured you could use some rest.”

“Well, I got some. Have I missed much?” Yawning, Thelma smoothed the front of her dress.

“Hazel Zimmerman came in for material and notions, and a couple of English ladies are looking at material.” Elma glanced in their direction.

“I’ll pop back there and see if they have any questions.”

Elma shook her head. “You should stay off your feet. I’ll go see how they are doing.” Elma motioned to the wooden stool.

Thelma opened her mouth as if about to argue the point, but with a slight shrug, she took a seat.

As the day wore on, so did Elma’s exhaustion. She could see clearly from the distant look in her sister’s eyes, and the way she sagged on the stool, that she was still quite weary.

“It’s time to close up,” Elma said. “Why don’t you go on home now? I’ll take care of everything.”

Thelma didn’t argue. She gathered up her things, gave Elma a hug, and with hands hanging limply, headed out the door. “See you tomorrow, Sister.”

“You’re not working tomorrow,” Elma called to Thelma’s retreating form. “Anna will be here to help me.”

Thelma lifted a hand in a backward wave and shut the door behind her.

Elma slouched against the counter, supporting her head with a hand. Her muscles felt heavy, and her senses dulled. For the last hour she’d had difficulty focusing, and now all she wanted to do was go home, take a hot bath, and sit with her feet propped up. But of course, it was wishful thinking. Even though she’d collected eggs this

morning and had given the chickens food and water, other animals needed tending to this evening. Somehow she would push herself to feed the barn cats and check on the horses. After those chores were done, she would grab something from the refrigerator for a quick supper, and if she had enough energy left, she'd take a bath and then put her feet up.

Pulling from deep within, Elma proceeded to turn off the gas lamps and lock up the store for the night. She missed the days when she and Thelma closed the store together then went home and shared a meal, enjoying each other's companionship and the quietness of their house. So much had changed in the last two years. Sometimes it still didn't seem possible that she now lived alone.

Heading down to the house, Elma heard Pearl whinny in the barn. "I'll be back soon to feed you, girl," Elma called.

Like clockwork, Tiger was waiting on the porch to be let in for dinner. "I know you're hungry, Tiger. So am I." Elma reached into her sweater pocket for her key chain but came up empty. She held her hands behind her back, gripping her wrists. *Oh, no. Where did I put the keys? I must have dropped it on the way down to the house.*

She looked down at the cat, who was meowing and rubbing her legs. "Sorry, Tiger, but we aren't going in yet. I have to find my keys."

CHAPTER 3

Tiger's plaintive *Meow!* was almost Elma's undoing. She was hungry, too, and wanted to get in the house as much as he did. "My keys have to be somewhere between the store and home." Elma's teeth clamped together when she turned and the cat darted between her legs. "Tiger, you're gonna trip me again." She clapped her hands. "Now scat!"

Elma stepped off the porch and headed back to the store, searching the ground as she went. "*Ach*, my back is throbbing." She gripped the area above her hip as she stooped over, scanning more of the area. It was like looking for a sewing needle in a field of hay. Grass, weeds, gravel, and dirt covered the path leading back to the store, and although it may have helped, she wasn't about to crawl on her hands and knees to get a closer look. Besides, the sunlight was slowly fading, making it more difficult to see anything that might be lying on the ground. Maybe the keys were inside the store. If that was the case, she was out of luck. Her key to the store was on the same chain as the one for the house, and she'd flipped the lock on the store before shutting the door. Aside from breaking a window to get inside, it could be all for nothing if the keys weren't there. Elma didn't need to add purchasing a new window to her growing project list.

"So, great!" Elma looked up at the sky in exasperation. "Now both keys are missing."

While she continued her search, Tiger meowed and pawed at the hem of her skirt.

"I'm sorry, Tiger." She bent to pet him. "But I can't feed either of

us till I locate those keys. Wish you could help me find them.” Elma’s eyes teared up. This was a time when she missed having her twin sister at her side. Thelma would probably remain upbeat, saying something like, “Don’t worry, Sister, we’ll find them.”

Elma choked back a sob as she searched the ground, taking small steps toward the store.

After looking for what seemed like hours, she gave up. The only sensible thing was to go over to Thelma’s house and borrow her set of keys. “Don’t know why I didn’t think to do it sooner.” She tapped the side of her head, almost knocking her head covering off.

Elma hurried down the driveway, thankful it wasn’t windy this evening. She paused at the mailbox to retrieve the mail then, looking both ways, crossed the street. Joseph and Thelma’s front room window faced the road, along with most of the wraparound porch. So if her sister wanted to sit outside, she could watch the customers come and go.

As Elma started up the driveway, to go around back, she heard a familiar *meow!* Looking down, she groaned. Much to her chagrin, Tiger had followed her across the street.



Thelma was about to start supper when Joseph entered the kitchen. “Don’t bother fixing anything for us, ’cause I’m takin’ my beautiful *fraa* out for supper this evening.”

“Oh, Joseph, are you sure? I bet you had a busy day at the harness shop. Wouldn’t you prefer to stay home and rest?”

“Nope.” He stepped up to Thelma and gave her a hug. “I did have a busy day, but I’m guessin’ you did as well. Your stooped posture and red-brimmed eyes are a good indicator of exhaustion.”

Thelma nodded. “I used to be able to work five days a week and do all sorts of chores without feeling so mied.”

Joseph tipped her head back so she was looking directly into his eyes. She giggled when he affectionately tweaked her nose. “But you weren’t expecting a boppli back then. Which is why you need to take it easy and let me treat you to a meal out at Tiffany’s.”

Thelma’s mouth watered thinking about the good food on the