

MATTERS OF
the Heart

KELLY IRVIN

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Matters of the Heart

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*To Tim—thanks for making it possible
for me to go on. Love always.*

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Featured Families

Lee's Gulch, Virginia

Aaron and Katherine King

Bethel Enos Claire Robbie Judah Liam Melinda

Silas and Joanna Miller (grandparents)

Charlie and Elizabeth Miller (parents)

Toby Jason Elijah Declan Layla Emmett Josie Sherri Sadie

Jason (brother) and Caitlin Miller

Zachary Zander Mary Retta

Karl and Cara Lapp (grandparents)

Adam and Leah Lapp (parents)

Rachelle John Dillon Mark Steven Kimmie Emma Mandy DeeDee
Jonah Sean Sam Michael Darcy

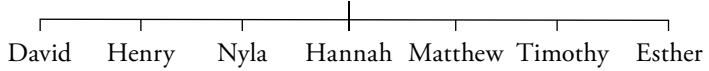
Atlee and Hilda Schrock (nursery owners)

Ben Harriet Hannah Nan Amos Kendell Lulu

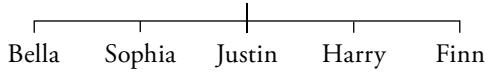
Luke and Deana Beachy

Andrew Christine Ryan Corrine

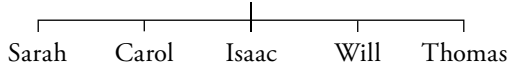
Bartholomew “Bart” (bishop) and Miriam Plank



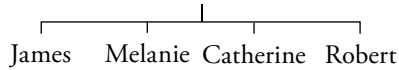
Martin (deacon) and Cindy Hershberger (grocery store owners)



Jedediah “Jed” (minister) and Martha Knepp



Noah and Mary Eash (parents’ committee member)



Micah and Layla (Miller sister) Troyer

Glossary of Pennsylvania Deutsch*

aamen: amen

ach: oh

aenti: aunt

bewillkumm: welcome

bopli, boplin: baby, babies

bruder, brieder: brother, brothers

bu, buwe: boy, boys

bussi: cat

daadi: grandpa

daed: father

danki: thank you

“Das Loblied”: Amish hymn of praise sung at all church services

dat: dad

dochder: daughter

dumkopf: blockhead

eck: corner table where newly married couple sits during wedding reception

eldre: parents

Englischer: English or non-Amish

eppies: cookies

es dutt mer: I am sorry

faeriwell: good-bye

Glossary

fraa: wife

Froh gebortsdaag: Happy birthday

fuhl: fool

gaul: horse

Gelassenheit: a German word, yielding fully to God's will and forsaking all selfishness

gern gschehme: you're welcome

Gmay: church district

Gott: God

gut nacht: good night

gut: good

hallo: hello

hanswascht: clown, silly fellow

hochmut: pride

hund: dog

jah: yes

kaffi: coffee

kapp: prayer cap or head covering worn by Amish women

kind, kinner: child, children

kinnskind, kinnskinner: grandchild, grandchildren

kossin, kossins: cousin(s)

kuss, koss: (noun) kiss, kisses

maedel, maed: girl, girls

mamm: mom

mammi: grandma

mann: husband

mudder: mother

narrisch: foolish, silly

nee: no

niess: niece

onkel: uncle

Ordnung: written and unwritten rules in an Amish district
rumspringa: period of “running around” for Amish youth before they decide whether they want to be baptized into the Amish faith and seek a mate
schweschder, schweschdre: sister, sisters
sei so gut: please (be so kind)
sub: son
tietschern: teacher
wunderbarr: wonderful

*The German dialect commonly referred to as Pennsylvania Dutch is not a written language and varies depending on the location and origin of the Amish settlement. These spellings are approximations. Most Amish children learn English after they start school. They also learn high German, which is used in their Sunday services.

A Note from the Author

I say all this to respectfully ask readers to honor the Amish view as loving, kind, and so much more Christlike than the worldly view of some would-be “English” parents who hold the belief that bringing a child into the world with disabilities is a choice that can be rejected. I have no doubt that Amish parents agonize, worry, and even shed tears over their “special children.” But they choose an attitude of gratitude. I hope you will read and enjoy *Matters of the Heart* in the spirit in which the Amish Calling series is offered—to edify, provoke thought, and shed Christ’s light in the world. God bless.

Chapter 1

Not even a blustery March wind propelling a heavy mist across the Knowles County, Virginia, fairgrounds to the auction platform could stop Declan Miller. Not when he had a microphone in one hand and a beautiful surrey-style buggy parked in front of an enormous crowd hanging on his every word.

“Here we go, folks, only a few items left, so get those bid cards ready for another workout.” Declan pointed at the buggy. “Take a good gander, folks. This will make a fine surrey for a family. It’s practically new.” He switched to Pennsylvania Dutch. “Let’s give the Hershbergers a great send-off to Pinecraft. You know what a buggy like this should go for.”

And then back to English. “This excellent piece of workmanship has headlights, taillights, warning lights, and running lights. In addition to the bench seat in front, it has two smaller flat seats in the back and plenty of storage. Nice green carpet in the interior, a dashboard made of inlaid pine with a roomy glove compartment, and two cupholders. I’d be tempted to bid on it myself, if I had a wife and kids. Maybe this buggy would be just the thing to get a woman to finally say yes to me.”

“You have to ask her out first, *hanswascht!*”

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Silly fellow. Grandpa's deep bass, once his best auctioneering tool, carried from his spot in a lawn chair on the front row. Since his retirement a year ago as the founder of Miller Family Auctioneering, Grandpa liked to attend the local auctions to watch his grandsons in action so he could critique them afterward.

Silly fellow indeed. That was Declan. The clown, the class cutup. With three older brothers and one younger one all working in the family auctioneering business, clowning around was his way of standing out. "Someday I'll catch up to the right one, *Daadi*, I will. Even if all that running after her wears me out."

A big grin split Grandpa's face. Laughter ran through the crowd. The folks around Lee's Gulch's three Plain districts had known Declan since he was a kid. At twenty-four he was a little on the old side to still be a bachelor, but no one was stewing about it yet—except his mother. Mom wanted all of her older children happily married as soon as possible—if not sooner.

"Declan."

Despite the noisy crowd, the sound of his father's voice—that same deep bass as Grandpa's—filtered through to Declan from where the older man stood checking off auction items as they were moved to the front of the line. He wagged his index finger toward the sky. The clouds had turned black. They were poised to lower the boom. *Stop messing around. Get a move on.* Dad could say so much in two syllables.

Right.

"We could get some rain any minute, so we'd better get busy. Here we go. I'll start the bidding at \$2,500. Who'll give me \$2,500?" The buggy was worth far more and the Plain men and women knew it. Bidding would be fast and furious. Declan let his gaze rove the crowd. His brother Elijah pointed out a Plain man from Nathalie. Declan nodded. "Fine, 2,500. Who'll give me 3,000? 3,000, 3,000 . . . got it. Who'll give me 3,500?"

The bids soared rapidly to \$5,000, becoming a three-way fight among the Plain stranger from Nathalie, newlywed Mark Schrock, and an Englisher named Kyle Jenkins. Kyle had a business hauling around English tourists who had a hankering to see Plain farms outside Lee's Gulch and visit their stores.

"\$5,500. Who'll give me 5,500? Bid 6,000. Now 6,000—"

"\$6,000." A man wearing a purple windbreaker and a Norfolk Tides cap stuck his bid card in the air for the first time. "I'll give you \$6,000."

"Whoa! We've got some serious competition going on here. That's what I like to see." Chuckling, Declan swung around and pointed at the Nathalie bidder. "What do you say? Are you still in the game?"

Nathalie shook his head. Same with Mark. Kyle's grin was grim, but he nodded. Declan cleared his throat again. His voice was getting scratchier. "All righty then. Who'll give me 6,500? Bid 6,500. 6,500. Now 6,500."

Kyle lifted his bid card. "\$6,200."

"I can work with that. 6,200. Bid 6,200. Now 6,200. Bid 6,200 . . ."

The newcomer's bid card popped up. "6,500."

"6,500. Bid 6,500. Come on, folks, you know this buggy is worth more. Now 6,500. Bid 6,500 . . ."

"Too rich for me." Kyle tucked his card under his arm and shot darts with his eyes at the newcomer.

A few more scans of the crowd. His bid spotters, Elijah and Emmett, both shook their heads. Declan lifted his flat-brimmed straw hat toward the newcomer. "Going once, going twice, sold to the gentleman in the purple jacket. What's your number, sir?"

Leaving Elijah to get the man's particulars, Declan grabbed his water bottle and emptied it in a few swallows.

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“Hey, *Bruder*, why don’t I finish up?”

Declan turned. His oldest brother, Toby, strode across the platform. It was like catching himself in a mirror—not that he ever did that. Toby had the Miller look—tall, broad shoulders, blond hair, slate-blue eyes, dimples. Declan was slightly shorter, but otherwise a carbon copy. “Did you finish your auction already?”

“*Jah*, all the livestock is done.” He picked up the mic Declan had laid on the podium. “*Dat* says you sound terrible. All hoarse and scratchy. Are you catching a cold?”

Declan’s throat had been sore when he hopped out of bed this morning. Nothing a cup of hot tea and some of Mom’s homemade horehound syrup wouldn’t fix. “*Nee*. It’s likely allergies. All the trees are budding like crazy.” He nodded at the crowd. “They’re getting antsy. There’s only a few items left. I can handle it.”

“*Dat* wants you to give it a rest.”

Dad and Toby shared supervision of Miller Family Auctioneering since Grandpa’s retirement. Declan glanced over Toby’s shoulder at their dad. He was in front of the platform. He jerked his head toward the two trailers that sat to the right of the auction site. His intention was clear. *Get off the stage.*

No way. Nothing was more enjoyable than auctioneering. As a boy Declan had lived for the day when he could take over the platform. He’d worked his way up from checking inventory, unpacking and packing equipment, and bid spotting to auctioneer school and then the best job in the world—one he’d been doing for three years now. Dad and his brothers would have to pry the microphone out of his cold, dead fingers. Declan shook his head and mouthed, *I’ve got this.*

Dad scowled. *Nee. You don’t.*

“It’s about to pour.” Declan tugged the mic from Toby. “We don’t have time for this. I’ll wrap it up quick.”

“I don’t know who’s more stubborn, you or Dat.” Pulling his black rain slicker’s hood over his straw hat, Toby glanced at the sky. “I’ll let you two thrash it out.”

There would be no thrashing. “Tell Emmett to get that pony cart moved up front.”

“Will do.”

Declan took the microphone and swung around to face the crowd. “Come on, folks, let’s finish up quick so you can get home, dry off, and eat a hot supper.”

Many of the English attendees had already scattered for the makeshift parking lot on the Hershbergers’ east pasture. Rains earlier in the month had softened the ground covered with only sparse weeds. It would quickly turn to mud, as would the dirt road that led to the highway. Visions of their pickup trucks stuck in the mud surely danced in their heads.

“I reckon you’ve already taken a peek at this sturdy pony cart, great for *kinner* to drive to school or church. I’m starting the bidding at \$500. Who’ll give me 500, 500, bid 500—”

A jagged bolt of lightning crackled across the sky. Thunder bellowed. The mist turned into a deluge of rain driven by a suddenly fierce, icy north wind.

“Sorry, folks, we’re done here.” Declan pulled his windbreaker’s hood up over his straw hat before the wind could send it sailing. “Get to your buggies. Be safe. Drive safe.”

Everyone swarmed at once.

Declan didn’t take time to tug on his raincoat. The speakers were already covered. He stuck the mic in its hard-shell plastic case and went to work moving equipment. In seconds rain soaked his jacket and his thin cotton shirt. His black denim pants hung heavy on his legs. Shivering, he pushed a dolly loaded with speakers toward the trailers parked a few hundred yards from the platform.

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As expected, the ground had already turned to the consistency of corn mush. The dolly's wheels clung to it, resisting forward movement. Declan's steel-toed leather boots sank into the mud. He mustered all his strength to pull them out. The mud made a sucking sound with each determined step. Rain sloshed from the exposed brim of his hat, making it hard to see.

"Watch where you're going, *sei so gut*."

The entreaty delivered in a soft, concerned tone brought Declan to a halt. He released the dolly handle long enough to shove his hat back and wipe at his face with the back of his hand. Bethel King stood in his path, both hands on her brother Robbie's wheelchair handles. Her younger sister Claire pushed brother Judah's chair. The younger kids' clothes were bedraggled and their faces unhappy.

Bethel's clothes and bonnet were soaked. Her lilac cotton dress clung to her pleasing form. Yes, the dress's hem was black with mud, but her cheeks were red with exertion and her eyes, the color of hot cocoa, were dark and serious. She was still as pretty as she had been during their days in school together. Declan put both hands in the air. "Sorry, I didn't see you there. After you."

Nerves zinged from the tip of his nose to his toes. As usual. Whenever he saw Bethel he turned into a blathering buffoon.

"It's okay. I just didn't want you to run into my *brieder*." Bethel strove to move Robbie's chair forward. The wheels sank deeper into the mud. She lifted the handles and heaved. The chair lurched forward. "We'll get out of your way."

Despite doing her best to deliver on that promise, she wasn't able to move the wheelchair more than a few inches. She had plenty of practice pushing her brothers' wheelchairs. Robbie, eleven, and Judah, ten, lived with a rare form of muscular dystrophy seen mostly

in Plain families. They'd been stricken almost simultaneously as four- and five-year-olds.

"I can't, *Schweschder*." Claire, a skinnier, shorter version of Bethel, struggled valiantly, but Judah's chair remained mired. She glanced at Declan. "*Es dutt mer*. Could you give me a push?"

"Don't be sorry. I'm happy to help—"

"I'll do it." Bethel let go of her charge's chair and hustled back to Claire's. "Declan has expensive equipment that shouldn't get wet."

Everyone in the district knew the Millers' sound system had been stolen the previous year. They'd only recently raised enough money through fundraisers and generous donations from their Plain community to replace them.

"The speakers are covered. They're in no danger." Here was his chance to do something nice for a girl—now a woman—who was known for her kindness but never seemed to warm up to Declan. Ignoring the *shmuck-shmuck* sucking of his boots, Declan waded over to Judah's chair. He bent low, so as not to tower over the boy. "I reckon I needed a bath. How about you?"

"Just in time for church tomorrow. I wish I'd brought soap." Judah pushed back his slicker's hood and grinned. "*Mamm* says it doesn't count unless I use soap."

"Es dutt mer, I can't help you there." Declan straightened and reached for the handles. His hand collided with Bethel's smaller one. She startled as if a bogeyman had popped out from behind the closest tree. Why was she so jumpy around him? He summoned a reassuring smile. "I don't bite, and I don't have cooties—contrary to what my *schweschdre* say."

"I don't want to put you out. We're fine."

"You can't push both of them. You push Robbie. I'll get Judah. We'll be a team."

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Could she read between the lines? Did she even consider in the farthest corner of her mind what it would be like to be a two-person team with Declan?

It was so unlikely. Bethel had been the smartest girl in the class—in the school—but she never let her head swell. When the other kids played baseball at recess, she sat on the sidelines reading a book, pausing to cheer them on at exactly the right time.

He became a base-hitting machine just to earn her cheers. And she had been generous with them. Sometimes she even jumped up and clapped as he ran the bases. Hearing her yell, “Way to go, Declan!” had spurred him on to more than one headfirst slide into home plate.

She worried her lower lip with her teeth for a few seconds. “What about your equipment?”

“It’s in its covering and then double-wrapped with heavy plastic. Plus, folks around here are far more likely to push it to the trailer than take it.”

Her forehead wrinkled. She nodded as if coming to an important decision. “*Danki*. We really appreciate your help.”

A chance to be helpful. Bethel always seemed so competent, so self-contained. She didn’t need anyone’s help, let alone Declan’s. Head bent against the wind and pelting rain, he followed her lead toward the line of buggies, his hands tight on the chair handles. “Knock, knock.”

Judah yelled over the wind, “Who’s there?”

“Oink, oink.”

“Oink, oink who?”

“Make up your mind. Are you a pig or an owl?”

Judah and Robbie chortled. Bethel, her shoulders hunched over the wheelchair, didn’t seem to hear.

Declan kept up a steady stream of jokes as they slogged through the field, across the muddy road, and into the pasture where the

buggies were parked in the sprigs of grass foolish enough to sprout so early in the spring season. Wasn't entertaining the boys another way of helping? Plus laughter was excellent free medicine.

Fortunately, the King buggy was close to the road. Her voice high and breathless, rain dripping from her bonnet and nose, Bethel waved at Declan. "I'm sure Claire can get it from here. Danki."

"I've come this far—"

"Really, we're fine."

"Was it the jokes?"

"Nee, of course not. They were . . . funny," she sputtered. "The boys love silly jokes."

Declan swiveled. Claire lagged behind by several yards. She had a strange waddle-like walk. "What do you think, Claire?"

"I can get it from here." She didn't sound convinced, but she marched forward. "Danki."

A gust of wind knocked Declan back a step. A fit of coughing overcame him. He hunched over. Between the wind and the cough, he couldn't breathe.

"Go, go, you need to get out of this wind." Bethel took the wheelchair handles. "Go home and have a cup of hot tea with plenty of honey and lemon. Sit by the fire."

"I'll be fine." Bethel had enough on her plate without worrying about Declan. He sought a more serious tone—she seemed to prefer serious. "I promise. You get yourself and these *buwe* home and do the same."

"Go!"

"Going." Declan turned. Having his back to the wind would help. He needed to skedaddle before Dad found the abandoned speakers. He picked up speed. His boots encountered a wet, slick clump of grass. They slid out from under him.

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Whomp. He landed flat on his back, cold rain running into his nostrils and open mouth. Not great. Not great at all. Gasping for air like a stunned fish, he stared up at the clouds. Two of them looked like old men with long gray beards grinning down at him.

“*Ach*, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Bethel’s concerned face appeared over him, along with Claire’s. The rain dripping from their bonnets joined the deluge threatening to drown Declan.

His back and behind hurt.

But not as much as his pride. Or was it his dignity? So much for impressing Bethel with his strength and dexterity or whatever else it took to get her brothers squared away.

“Knock, knock.”

Frowning, Bethel swiped rain from her face. “I’m serious. Are you hurt?”

Too late to backtrack now. “Knock, knock.”

She shook her head. Rain sluiced down her face. Claire had no such compunction. She jumped in. “Who’s there?”

“Pecan.”

“Pecan who?”

“Pecan someone your own size.”

Chapter 2

It wasn't funny. Okay, maybe a little. The joke. Not the fall. Laughing would be unkind. What if Declan had been hurt? Bethel allowed herself a small smile as she peered down at him. A fallen giant. Not really a giant, but he *was* tall compared to her five-foot-four-inch frame. Here he was doing them the huge favor of helping with the wheelchairs in the middle of a deluge and he'd fallen. And still he'd managed to keep his sense of humor. That should count for a lot—it took strength of character, really. She held out her hand. “Let me help you up.”

Instead, Declan rolled over on his knees, pushed off the ground, and hopped up. He whirled around and bowed with an elaborate flourish. “I meant to do that.”

“You did not.” Maybe he had. He was such a cutup. That's what she remembered from their school days. Quick with a joke, a harmless prank, and a smile. He had a nice smile. A really nice smile. Then and now. He also didn't have a serious bone in his body then. Or now. “Are you sure you aren't hurt? You didn't hit your head, did you?”

“I know how to fall. There's an art to it.” Mud coated his shirt and pants. Smudges decorated his clean-shaven cheeks and

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forehead. He'd lost his hat. The rain flattened his thick blond hair. He was a mess, and yet he seemed pleased with himself. His grin widened. His dimples deepened. "Go ahead, laugh. It was funnier than the joke."

They were standing in the middle of an open field in the pouring rain. A flash of sizzling lightning lit up the sky. Thunder boomed only seconds later. "Danki, but nee. There's a time and place for fun, but this isn't it. It's lightning out. The kinner are soaked and chilled to the bone."

"Jah. Of course. You're right. Going." Declan scooped up his hat. He slapped it on his head. Raindrops rolled down his face. "Be careful getting home. The roads will be full of water."

"You too. Very careful."

Coughing, he took off across the field.

He really was kind. Over the years his signs of interest had been obvious. Yet he'd never actually asked her to take a buggy ride. Why remained a mystery. He always spoke to her at the singings. He never failed to say hello at frolics and at church. A few times he appeared on the verge of saying something serious, but a joke sallied forth instead. He was nice, funny, and kind. And pleasing to the eye. But somehow Bethel couldn't imagine Declan stepping into the trials her family faced. A woman in her situation needed a serious man to stand with her. No matter how his sunny smile and sweet attitude tugged at her heart, Declan didn't seem like that man.

She went to work getting Robbie into the buggy. He didn't weigh much. The wheelchair folded up neatly. "Claire, can you get Judah in?"

A wail met Bethel's inquiry. She turned. Claire had her arms under Judah's armpits. She struggled to lift her brother from his chair. Frustration shone on her freckled face. "I don't know what's wrong with me today. I can't get him out."

A shiver that had nothing to do with the icy wind ran through Bethel. She clomped through the mud to Judah's chair. "Did you eat your oatmeal for breakfast?"

"Nee, I didn't have time. I dropped my bowl, and I had to clean up the mess."

"That must be it, then." Bethel patted her shoulder. "You're just low on fuel, that's all."

Sei so gut, Gott, sei so gut.

Together they lifted Judah into the buggy. Bethel stowed his chair in the back. She wiped her hands on her muddy apron, for all the good it did. "Let's get home. We could all use a hot cup of tea and one of Mamm's cinnamon rolls."

Ninety minutes later the boys, dressed in dry clothes, were ensconced in thick quilts in front of the fireplace holding mugs of chamomile tea spiked with lemon and honey. Little sister Melinda had talked them into playing Connect 4 with her. Mom had lit a fire in the wood-burning stove in the laundry room and heated water so Claire could take a bath after her cup of hot tea and a handful of gingersnaps.

"This weather. The sun was shining when we left the house this morning. It's supposed to be spring, but winter just doesn't want to let go." Following the tantalizing aromas of onion, chili powder, and sweet cornbread baking, Bethel went to the huge cast-iron pot of chili bubbling on the propane stove. She picked up the ladle and stirred. The heat warmed her cold hands and feet. "I wouldn't have taken the boys if I'd known it was going to storm."

"You should've brought them home as soon as it started to sprinkle." Mom pulled a huge pan of jalapeño cornbread from the oven. The billowing heat turned her cheeks red. Her tone held no condemnation, only concern. "You know how easily they catch colds."

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“Colds are caused by viruses, not rain.” Bethel softened her tone. Mom meant well. She and Dad had spent more than their share of time at the Center for Special Children in Lancaster County, where Robbie was first diagnosed with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy, and then Judah. The realization that intermarrying among the Plain people resulted in this rare genetic disease had been hard on both her parents. They never complained, but occasionally the weight of the yoke of guilt showed itself in their slumped shoulders. “But the cold wind probably carries a lot of germs with so many people gathered in one place. And then all the pollen in the air might cause them to be congested. We’ll keep a close eye on them.”

“When did you get your medical degree?” Mom didn’t have a mean cell in her body. She set the cornbread on a trivet and closed the oven. The oven mitts landed next to the pan. She sighed. “I know the boys can’t stay home all the time. They deserve some fun. I keep reminding myself of that.”

“The doctor said fresh air is good medicine.”

“Fresh air, not gale-force winds, and sunshine, not a cold rain.” Mom came over to the stove. She took the ladle from Bethel. “Did you try the chili? Is it spicy enough for your dat?”

Bethel accepted the bite her mother offered. The tangy concoction woke up her taste buds. Garlic, chili powder, canned tomatoes from their garden, chopped onion, green and red bell pepper, and tender chunks of beef stew meat. Mom’s chili was legendary at church picnics and school fundraisers. “That’s yummy, Mamm, as usual.”

She handed the ladle back. Mom took a bite herself. “It just needs to simmer. Your dat, Enos, and Liam won’t be back from delivering the bed set to Farmville for at least another hour. That’ll give the spices time to meld.”

The lyrics of an old Plain hymn floated through the open door that led to the laundry room. Claire loved to sing. She had a high,

clear voice that hit every note with a sweetness that made Bethel's heart squeeze. "Mamm, have you noticed anything odd about Claire lately?"

Mamm dropped the ladle. She scooped it up and laid it on the counter. She turned her back on Bethel and stepped over to the shelves where the dishes were kept. "Nee. What do you mean?"

Her words said one thing, her tone another.

"She couldn't push Robbie's chair through the field today. Fortunately, Declan Miller came by and helped us out or I would've had to push them both. She had trouble lifting Robbie from his chair." Bethel went to her mother. She took the stack of bowls from her. "She dropped her bowl of oatmeal this morning."

"Gott provides." Her expression was stoic, but Mom's voice quivered. "I'd hoped Claire was getting too old to be affected, but Gott's will be done."

Even with her fourteenth birthday coming up next week, Claire wasn't too old. This form of LGMD was as unpredictable as it was vicious. Bethel could cite all the symptoms. They all could. They'd watched them consume Judah and Robbie. They still watched and waited to see if Enos, Liam, and Melinda would be spared. The age of onset could be anywhere from three years old to early adulthood, but the average was thirteen and a half. Usually it involved the legs first, causing difficulty walking and climbing stairs and causing falls. In three to five years, the muscles wasted. The earlier the onset, the more rapid the progression. That might be the silver lining, if Claire was indeed affected.

People with the disease could still live to a ripe old age. Women could still have children, but being in a family way made the weakness worse, making it even harder to care for the baby. Plain women were expected to cook, bake, clean, garden, and care for as many children as God gave them. Almost impossible with

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LGMD. And then there was the probability of passing the disease on to her children.

Bethel could only aspire to have a faith as stoic and as strong as her parents' faith. She set the plates on the table and went to her mother. She hugged her quick and hard. "Whatever happens, we'll deal with it. I'm always here for you."

"Nee. You must marry, have a *mann*, have kinner. That's your place in this world." Her mother drew back. Her expression lightened. A sly smile stole over her face. "Declan Miller, eh? He's a hard worker, that one. A bit of a clown, but a sense of humor is a good thing. It can help a family get through tough times. It's certainly better than being married to a sourpuss."

So true. "I've always thought he was nice, but to *never* be serious?"

Serious problems required serious people who knew how to solve them.

In the days when she never missed a singing, Bethel had taken a few buggy rides, but none of the men—still boys, really—interested her because she had too much responsibility at home to fritter away her time on courting. Declan had spent most of his time horsing around with his buddies, pulling pranks, and singing at the top of his lungs—often off-key—trying to impress the girls. Occasionally Bethel would catch him staring at her, a curiously somber look on his face, but then his glance would dart away, followed by more hilarity.

He'd taken Jana Yoder for buggy rides for at least a year, but next thing everyone knew Jana was married to a man from Bird-in-Hand and moved away.

The gossipers didn't know why, and Bethel didn't want to know. It wasn't her business.

"There's nothing wrong with making people laugh. If you ask me, and even if you don't, you're far too serious. Your laugh muscles could use a workout."

“I laugh plenty, but when it comes to spending the rest of my life with a man, I need to be sure he can be serious when the need arises.”

“Some boys take longer to mature than others.” *Mudder* had plenty of brothers and cousins to use as examples, plus Bethel’s brother Enos, but he was one of the most serious people Bethel knew. “My experience has been they’re worth the wait. Declan’s not bad to look at either.”

“Mamm!” The kitchen suddenly seemed too warm. Bethel waved a dish towel at her mom. Who could help noticing a man built like he came from a long line of laborers used to swinging an ax and pushing a plow? Add that to the perpetual smile, dimples, and blue eyes, and a woman might be a bit tongue-tied in his presence. “Was Dat the class clown?”

“More of a smooth talker, I guess.” Mom smiled at the memory. “But I wasn’t one to fall for smooth talk. I made him work for it—two long years.”

And now they’d been married twenty-seven. What did that kind of love feel like? To weather the hard times as well as the good ones? Which brought Bethel right back to the topic at hand—babies born with a terrible disease inside them waiting to unveil a litany of dreadful symptoms like painful falls and wasting muscles.

“You are blessed.” The words cut Bethel’s tongue like a finely honed knife. Blessed by a curiously heavy yoke. Babies were gifts from God—all babies. “I just want to help with the buwe however I can.”

“Your *daed* and I will care for the buwe until we can’t. Then you and those who can will take care of those who can’t.”

It was the way of the Plain people. Bethel’s throat ached. Her stomach roiled. Her dreams of having lots of babies had begun in childhood when she’d been blissfully ignorant about genes and

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hereditary diseases like limb-girdle muscular dystrophy. Chances were far too great that her children would inherit this disease as well. She had a deep well of strength, but she'd used so much of it caring for her brothers. One day her parents would no longer be able to do it. Then it would be up to her again. Enos and her. Maybe Claire. Maybe Liam. Or maybe not. And what about little Melinda, who just turned four?

Should a man be asked to marry into such a quagmire? What hidden genes as a Plain man from her community would her as-yet-unknown groom bring to the marriage? It was like opening Pandora's box as a wedding present.

"What's wrong? You both look like the sky is falling." Claire stood in the doorway. Her freshly scrubbed face glowed a healthy pink. "Don't be mad, Mamm. The buwe will be fine."

"I'm not mad, you silly goose." Mamm rushed to the stove. "Get the pitcher of water from the refrigerator and fill the glasses. Your dat and brieder will be here any minute."

Still humming the hymn, Claire did as she was told.

Bethel went to work setting the table.

Glass shattered. Claire shrieked. Bethel whirled. Her sister had dropped the pitcher. It shattered on the vinyl floor. Water puddled at her feet. She dropped to her knees. "Ach! Es dutt mer, Mamm. Es dutt mer."

"It's okay. It was an accident." Bethel strode to her side. She knelt and brushed Claire's hands away. "Let me. You'll cut yourself."

She glanced up at their mother. Her expression wooden, Mom shook her head. She twisted the dishrag in her hands. "Jah, just an accident."