

The
Beginner's
Quilt

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WANDA &
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Dedication

In loving memory of my grandmother Matilda Thiel,
whose special quilt remains in my family.

*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above,
and cometh down from the Father of lights,
with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*

JAMES 1:17



Prologue

1967

Shipshewana, Indiana

DIANNA BONTRAGER PACED FROM ONE end of the living room to the other, stopping only to glance out the window at the rain shower that had just begun.

“Oh no—not again,” she muttered.

“What’s wrong?” her husband, Philip, asked from across the room, where he sat reading the latest issue of *The Budget Newspaper*.

“Would you believe it’s raining again? For goodness’ sake, we’ve had more than our share of rain this spring, and it makes me long for the hot weather of summer.”

Philip left the paper on the chair and came up behind her. “Is it really the rain bothering you, or is there something else on your mind that has you in a sour mood?”

Dianna folded her arms and groaned. “You know me too well, don’t you, Husband?”

He chuckled and slipped his arm around her waist. “*Jah*, but then what do you expect after being married to me these last thirty-six years?”

She shrugged without giving a response.

Moving directly behind Dianna, Philip rubbed her slumped shoulders. “Come on now. . . Tell me what’s really on your mind. It’ll make

you feel better to get it out, and you know you want to.”

Dianna gave a sharp intake of breath. “You’re right. Maybe I will feel better if I verbalize my thoughts.” She turned to face him. “It’s Emma. I’m worried about her.”

“How come?”

“Do you really not know?”

He shook his head. “Why don’t you enlighten me?”

“She’s almost twenty years old and lacks the skills that she’ll need for marriage.”

“Such as?” Philip questioned.

“Do I need to remind you that our daughter can’t cook or sew and that she doesn’t show any interest in learning to do so?” Dianna heaved a sigh. “Emma wants to be outdoors all the time, either doing chores in the barn or helping you with various things in your woodworking shop.” She glanced upward and shook her head. “I’ve tried so hard to pique our daughter’s interest in the kitchen and sewing room, but with little or no success. I feel like a complete failure.”

“You’re not a failure, Dianna.” He gave her a tender hug. “Apparently, Emma is simply not interested in those things. Sure wish I had an answer for you that might make things easier.”

“Don’t you understand, Philip? It’s not for me that I want Emma to learn domestic chores. It’s for her own sake.”

They stood quietly together, staring out the window, until a brilliant idea popped into Dianna’s head. “I think I know a solution to the problem.” She clapped her hands as a ray of hope rose in her chest.

“What do you have in mind?”

“We can send Emma to Arthur, Illinois, to live with my parents for the entire summer.”

“How’s that gonna help?” Philip reached up and scratched behind his right ear.

Dianna’s lips parted slightly as a smile formed. “As you know, my *mudder* is an excellent cook and can sew just about any item of clothing, and it all turns out well. She’s also a patient woman. If anyone can teach

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our youngest daughter how to cook and sew, it's my dear mother."

Philip quirked an eyebrow and smirked at Dianna. "But even if your *mamm* is successful at teaching her those domestic skills, can she find Emma a husband?"



Chapter 1

*Three weeks later
Arthur, Illinois*

EMMA BONTRAGER SAID GOODBYE TO her female driver and stepped out of the vehicle. A lump formed in her throat when she gazed at the familiar farmhouse and spotted her grandparents seated upon a wooden bench on their front porch. Over the years, Emma had enjoyed spending time with Grandma and Grandpa whenever her family had come here for visits. But this time things would be different. At her mother's insistence and her father's agreement, Emma had been sent here to hone her domestic skills. Not that she really had any. Truthfully, from the time Emma was a little girl, she'd done everything she could think of to avoid helping her mother in the kitchen. Mom hadn't pressured Emma back then, because Emma's older sister Rachel loved everything about learning how to cook, and she'd taken to the sewing needle really well too.

Now Emma was about to embark on a new adventure that would tie up her entire summer, doing things that had no appeal to her whatsoever.

Emma started up the path leading to her grandparents' home, hauling her suitcase with one hand and an oversized canvas tote bag with the other. She wasn't one bit surprised when Grandpa stepped off the porch, and Grandma followed. "*Willkomm*, Emma!" they said in unison.

Grandpa gave Emma a firm hug before taking the suitcase from

her. "I'll haul this inside for you."

Then it was Grandma's turn to wrap her arms around Emma's waist, giving her a tender squeeze. "Ever since your mamm wrote and said you were coming, we've been looking forward to your extended visit."

Emma wished she could say the same. It wasn't that she didn't like spending time with Grandma and Grandpa; she just didn't like the reason she'd been sent here for three whole months. Even so, Emma politely smiled and said, "You and Grandpa are looking well."

"We're both in pretty good health," Grandma responded. "And we're ever so thankful for that."

"For sure," Grandpa said as they all started into the house. "And I credit most of that to your *grossmammi's* healthy and hearty cooking." He glanced over his shoulder and winked at Emma. "In no time at all, you'll be cookin' up a storm and loving every minute of it."

Emma doubted that would ever happen, but she kept her opinion to herself. No point in upsetting the applecart, so to speak. If she was going to be here for the next three months, she planned to be as pleasant as possible and never say anything rude to either one of her grandparents.

"You're just in time to help me fix lunch," Grandma said when Grandpa disappeared up the stairs with Emma's suitcase and tote bag.

Emma cringed inwardly but kept a forced smile on her face. She was tired after the nearly five-hour drive from Shiphewana to Arthur, and the last thing she wanted to do was help her grandmother make anything in the kitchen, especially when she didn't feel the least bit hungry.

I hope it's nothing too difficult, she thought. I just want to go upstairs to one of the guest rooms and unpack. After that, it would be real nice if I could lie down and take a little nap. But I suppose that's out of the question.



"What kind of sandwich would you like?" Grandma asked when she and Emma entered her spacious kitchen.

Emma shrugged. "I don't know. I'll eat whatever you and Grandpa are having."

“Do you like liverwurst with mayonnaise, mustard, and lots of lettuce?”

Emma struggled not to wrinkle her nose as she replied, “Uh. . . not particularly. My mamm likes it though,” she quickly added.

“Jah, I am aware. It was one of her favorite sandwiches when she was a little girl,” Grandma commented. “How about your *daed*? Does he also enjoy liverwurst?”

Emma shook her head. “He’s never been fond of it, so guess I take after him—at least in that regard.”

Grandma moved to the end of the counter and removed a loaf of bread from the bread box. “It’s normal for most children to have likes and dislikes that either or both of their parents had. You could learn to acquire a taste for liverwurst, though. That’s how it’s been for me over the years when trying new foods that I had avoided eating in my younger years.”

Emma made no comment, because she’d glanced out the window and spotted the old tree house Grandpa had built back when she was a young girl. He’d said it was for all his grandchildren to enjoy whenever they came to visit. But Emma had always assumed he’d built the sturdy structure just for her because he knew how much joy it would bring her, and he had been right. Emma’s sister Rachel, who was four years older than her, had never shown much interest in the tree house. In fact, she’d often said that it was too dangerous to climb way up there just to sit on the wooden platform and stare down at the backyard. “*I’d rather be inside reading a book, or helping Grandma bake brownies, than be outside with all the bugs and dirt to mess up my dress,*” Rachel had often said. She did, however, help pull weeds in the garden and harvest the produce each year, but they weren’t her favorite things to do.

Emma loved being outdoors. She enjoyed the scent of freshly mowed grass and even liked smelling the smoke from Grandpa’s old firepit they sometimes used for roasting hot dogs on sticks.

Emma had never minded getting dirty, and she even enjoyed the prickly feeling of grass under her bare feet. The sound of grasshoppers and crickets was like music to her ears. Even listening to the chatter of squirrels and croaking frogs had brought a smile to her lips during

childhood, and it still did.

“Emma, dear, did you hear what I said?”

At the sound of Grandma’s voice, Emma’s head jerked as she turned away from the window. “Uh. . .no. . .I guess not. Would you mind repeating it, Grandma?”

“I asked if you would rather have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch instead of what your grandfather and I are having.”

“Oh jah, please. That sounds good to me.”

Grandma pushed the loaf of bread to the other end of the counter, closer to where Emma stood. “Here you go. You’ll find the peanut butter and some strawberry preserves in the pantry.” She pointed in that direction.

Emma remembered all the times that she’d come here as a child. Not once had Grandma asked Emma or any of her siblings to make their own sandwich. She’d always graciously done it for them and had looked quite content when they’d all taken seats at the kitchen table. What had changed? Well, at least Emma would be fixing something she liked that wasn’t the least bit difficult to make. It was a comfort. Of course, nothing would be as comforting or comfortable as lying on the guest bed and sleeping for a few hours. But that wasn’t to be.

Emma removed two slices of bread and placed them on a plate. *Or better yet, I wonder if Grandpa would mind if I went outside for a while and took a nap in his hammock.* She sucked in her bottom lip. *Guess I won’t know till I ask him, which I plan to do while we’re eating our noon meal.*



When Grandpa took his place at the head of the table and bowed his head, Emma and Grandma did the same. Other than thanking God for the peanut butter and jelly sandwich on her plate, Emma wasn’t sure what to pray about. She didn’t feel thankful that she’d been sent here to become domesticated like her sister, who could cook and sew quite well, or any of her brothers’ wives, who all seemed to enjoy their roles as homemakers. Benjamin’s wife, Anna, was very competent in the kitchen and baked some of the best-tasting pies. Phoebe, who was

married to Harvey, also loved to cook, and made a fine beef stew. Jacob's wife, Elizabeth, was noted for her country-style baked beans, which she often served at family gatherings.

And then there's me, Emma thought ruefully. Sandwiches I can make, but not much of anything else to brag about. Of course, she mentally added, bragging about one's abilities—cooking, sewing, or otherwise—would be considered hochmut, so even if I was good at something, I would never boast about it.

Emma's eyes snapped open when she heard Grandpa clear his throat. She noticed that both his and Grandma's eyes were open, and she wondered how long they'd sat waiting for her to finish praying.

Emma's face felt warmer than usual, and she quickly reached for her glass of lemonade. After taking a drink, she set the glass down and allowed her contemplations to resume as she stared across the room, where a ray of sunlight filtered in through the kitchen window above the sink. *I don't understand why my parents think I need to learn how to cook or sew. I've never had a boyfriend, and it's not likely that I'll ever get married, so what's the point in trying to teach me how to run a household? I will probably spend the rest of my life as an old maid, living alone and eating simple things like cold cereal and easy-to-make sandwiches.*

"Emma, didn't you hear what your grandmother said?"

Grandpa's deep voice pulled Emma's thoughts aside, and she blinked in rapid succession. "Uh, no." She turned to face her grandmother. "Sorry, Grandma. What did you say?"

Grandma reached over and placed her hand on Emma's arm. "I asked if you were going to write your parents a letter to let them know that you arrived safely."

"Oh, um, jah, I should do that as soon as we're done eating." Emma picked up the remainder of her sandwich and was about to take a bite, when another thought popped into her head. "It's probably not necessary, though. I'm sure when my driver, Helen, gets back to Shipshewana she'll let Mom and Dad know I made it here safely."

"Most likely you're right," Grandpa put in. "But it would still be nice if they heard the news directly from you. Don't you agree, Emma?"

She nodded. "Jah. I'll take care of that after I've helped Grandma do the lunch dishes."

"There are only a few," Grandma said, "so I can manage those by myself."

Emma smiled. "Okay, *danki*." She looked forward to going outdoors and walking to the mailbox, where the air was fresh and much cooler than here in Grandma's kitchen. Emma would write the letter while sitting outside too.



When the three of them had finished their lunch, Emma followed Grandma's instructions and got a notepad, envelope, and stamp from the old rolltop desk, and then she excused herself and scooted out the back door. Pausing on the porch and leaning her head back, she savored the fresh early-summer air. Emma remained in place for several minutes, breathing slowly in and out. It felt good to be out here. If only she could stay out of the suffocating air inside the house for the rest of the day.

Taking her time to absorb the fragrance of flowers growing in Grandma's yard, while listening to the chattering of birds swooping from tree to tree, Emma made her way around the side of the house. Upon entering the front yard, she spotted the extra-long wooden picnic table Grandpa had made several years ago. She remembered well the many times when her family had come to visit and gathered in the yard, sharing meals at this rustic table.

Emma took a seat on the same side she'd sat upon as a child. She'd always thought that food tasted better when eaten outdoors. *Maybe I'll suggest that we eat breakfast out here sometime*, Emma thought as she placed the notebook in front of her, in readiness to write her folks a letter. She really didn't have much to say. She clasped the pencil between her second and third finger and began to write a short message saying she'd arrived safely and that it was good to see her grandparents again.

A short time later, Emma had written enough to fill one page and figured that was enough. After placing the letter in the envelope, addressing it, and sealing it shut, Emma put a postage stamp on it

and rose from her seat.

When she got to the mailbox and pulled the door open, she nearly got hit in the face by a cobweb. *Or maybe it's not a simple schpinnenest, she thought. It could be a web spun by some lurking schpinn just waiting to get me.* Emma had an aversion to spiders, especially the big ones that ran fast when she tried to get them, and she didn't like the hopping kind of spider either. As far as she was concerned, God must have made a mistake when He'd created the creepy insects known as *spiders*. Emma wasn't sure why she had a fear of the crawling insects. She'd never been bitten by one, but there was always a first time.

Seeing no sign of a spider, Emma pushed the web aside, reached inside the mailbox, and was surprised that there was no mail inside. She remembered then that Grandpa had mentioned once that their mail was always delivered in the latter part of the day, but usually before suppertime. Emma placed the envelope inside, and after closing the door, she lifted the metal flag on the side of the box to let the letter carrier know there was mail to be picked up.

Emma was about to turn back toward the house when a well-groomed chestnut-colored horse pulling an open carriage approached. A young, beardless Amish man with reddish-brown hair was seated on the driver's side and lifted his hand to wave as he went by. Emma didn't recognize him and figured he must not live close by. Either that or he was new to the area since her last visit. She smiled and waved in response. It was the polite thing to do. Emma watched for a few seconds as the *clip-clop* sounds grew quieter and the horse and buggy continued down the road.

Emma turned and made her way up the driveway, hoping she could rest in the hammock for a little while. Even though she hadn't asked Grandpa's permission yet, she felt sure he wouldn't mind. She was almost to the hammock when she discovered a cluster of lovely daffodils in the flower bed bordering the front of the house. She decided to take a few minutes to admire their beauty, and for the first time in her adult life, Emma wished she had a camera and could snap a picture to capture the essence of the bright yellow blooms. After squatting down for a

closer look, Emma almost let out a yelp when Grandma came out the front door and called to her.

“It’s time for your first cooking lesson, Emma. Since it’s almost the right hour to start supper preparations, you may as well begin now.”

Emma sighed as she glanced up at the billowy white clouds floating overhead. *So much for taking a nap in Grandpa’s hammock today.* She’d forgotten to ask him about it during their early lunch, and now it was too late to ask, since Grandma had decided it was time to start supper. Oh, how Emma wished she’d only come here for a short visit, and not to spend the entire summer learning how to cook and sew. She didn’t want to leave all this wonderful fresh air and sunshine for the confines of the hot and stuffy kitchen.

“All right, Grandma, I’m coming,” Emma called in return to her grandmother’s request. What other choice did she have?



Grandma glanced at the battery-operated kitchen clock, and then she looked at Emma. “Are you ready to begin?”

“I—I guess so. What are we making?”

“Not we—you.” Grandma pointed at Emma. “I’ll give you the directions and show you how to do specific things if necessary, but you won’t learn if I do it for you.”

Emma’s shoulders slumped. “Okay then—what will I be making?”

“I think a simple meat loaf would be a nice beginning, and it will be a hearty main dish for supper.”

Emma grimaced. She’d never cared much for meat loaf—simple, fancy, or otherwise. Just the thought of having to learn how to make it, much less sit at the supper table and force herself to eat some of it, took away any appetite she may have had for eating the evening meal.

Why, oh why, did my parents have to send me here? Even if I were to learn the fine art of cooking, meat loaf would never be on my menu. Now it was Emma’s turn to look at the clock. She hoped this lesson wouldn’t take too long, because while the meat loaf was in the oven baking, she hoped to do something fun.

After Grandma instructed Emma about where she would find the necessary ingredients, Emma asked why she needed two pounds of ground beef instead of one.

“It’s simple, dear one,” Grandma responded. “If you make a big enough meat loaf, then we’ll have leftovers for *kalt* meat loaf sandwiches.”

“Oh, I see.” Emma didn’t voice her thoughts, but she didn’t care for cold meat loaf sandwiches any more than she did when the meat loaf was warm.

As she began gathering the ingredients listed on the recipe card her grandmother had given her, Grandma took their conversation in another direction by asking Emma what type of sewing she’d learned to do.

“Well, uh, I’ve sewed buttons on a few of my daed’s shirts.”

“Is that all?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, for goodness’ sake. Haven’t you made any dresses for yourself?”

Emma shook her head. “All my dresses, capes, and aprons have been made by Mom or Rachel.”

“How is your sister doing these days?” Grandma asked. “Is she still being courted by that Lambright fellow?”

Emma nodded. “Rachel and David have been seeing each other for nearly two years now, and my daed says if David doesn’t ask Rachel to marry him soon, Dad’s gonna tell her suitor that he either must propose or break things off with Rachel.”

Grandma’s mouth opened wider than normal. “Oh my. I can’t imagine how that would make poor Rachel feel. I’m sure your daed isn’t serious about his intentions.”

Emma shrugged. “I don’t know. He might be.”

“Now that would be most embarrassing for both Rachel and David. How about you, Emma? Do you have a steady beau back home?”

“No way! I don’t think I will ever get married.”

“Never say never. You might be surprised what the future holds.” Grandma wagged a finger in Emma’s direction. “Now, changing the subject. . . We’ll go to the fabric store in town tomorrow so you can

pick out the material you would like, and when we get home, we'll start working on a new dress for you."

Emma's fingers clenched around the small glass measuring cup she held to beat the eggs. Although cooking a meal wasn't on her wish list, sewing a dress was definitely not something she wanted to do.



"With the exception of the dinner rolls I made today, Emma cooked all the main dishes for our evening meal." Grandma gestured to the oddly shaped meat loaf, and then the bowl of lumpy mashed potatoes. Emma hoped the food would taste better than it looked.

"That's terrific." Grandpa grinned at Emma. "I can't wait to try the meat loaf. It's one of my favorite things to have for supper."

Emma held her breath as Grandpa reached for the meat platter and cut two hefty pieces. After placing them on his plate, he picked up the bowl of potatoes and took several spoonfuls. He didn't mention the lumps, so Emma thought that was a positive thing. *I should have tasted everything before putting them on the table*, she thought. *But since I don't like meat loaf, I wouldn't have known if it was good or bad. Guess I could have suggested that Grandma give it the taste test, though.*

She blew out her breath and breathed in another one as Grandpa took his first bite of meat loaf.

He chewed, swallowed, and quickly grabbed for his glass of milk. After drinking most of it down, Grandpa looked right at Emma and said, "What in the world did you do to the meat loaf? It doesn't taste anything like what I'm used to."

"I—I just followed the recipe Grandma gave me when she left the kitchen to go outside and check the towels hanging on the line."

"Here, Marlin, let me try it." Grandma reached for the platter, but before she could pick it up, Grandpa forked another hunk off his plate, leaned forward, and popped it right into her mouth.

Grandma's dark eyes widened as she grabbed a napkin and spit the piece of meat loaf into the paper. "Ach, Emma, didn't you add any ketchup?"

“Well. . .umm. . .I thought I had.”

“And why so many *brot grimmele*?” Grandpa questioned. “Using too many breadcrumbs makes for a dry, crumbly meat loaf.”

Tears sprang to Emma’s eyes and threatened to spill over. It was bad enough that she’d been expected to cook a dish she didn’t like, but to find out that she had botched the job added insult to injury. Without asking to be excused, Emma pushed back her chair and fled the room.