

CHAPTER 1

It sure is good to have you home,” Katie’s father said as they headed down the road in his buggy toward Uncle Amos and Aunt Priscilla’s house. He glanced over at Katie and smiled. “Your *mamm* said Loraine was real pleased when she got your letter saying you’d be one of her attendants.”

Katie clutched the folds in her dress as she stared out the window. She didn’t know why she felt so edgy. She hadn’t felt like this when she was in Florida. She’d been depressed after Timothy died, but not quivery inside the way she’d been since she’d climbed into Dad’s buggy. She was grateful they didn’t have far to go.

Dad motioned to what was left of the barn they were passing. “Take a look at the devastation from the tornado that hit this past winter. That terrible storm affected nearly everyone around these parts in some way or another.”

“No one was killed, though, right?”

“No, but some were injured, and the damage was great. Many, like Wayne’s folks, lost their homes, barns, and shops. It’s a good thing the house Wayne started building before he lost his leg didn’t sustain any damage from the tornado,” Dad said. “Several of the men in our community finished it for him, and Wayne’s folks have been livin’ in it ever since.”

“Will they continue living there after Loraine and Wayne get married?” Katie asked.

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Dad nodded. "At least until their own house is done."

Katie knew from some of the things Loraine had said in her letters that she and Ada hadn't always gotten along so well. She wondered how things would be with them both living under the same roof.

"Look at the Chupps' place." Dad pointed to the left. "They lost their barn, his buggy shop, and the house. Only those who've actually seen the destruction of a tornado like we had here can even imagine such a sight."

Katie gripped the edge of the seat. "I don't understand why God allows such horrible things to happen."

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "It's not our place to question God. His ways are not our ways."

Katie clamped her teeth together in an effort to keep from saying what was on her mind. Dad wouldn't understand if she told him how angry she was with God for taking Timothy. He'd probably give her a lecture and say it was Timothy's time to die, as he'd said to her on the day of Timothy's funeral.

"Do you know how long you'll be helping at Loraine's?" Dad asked.

"Probably most of the day, since I'm sure there's a lot to be done before the wedding. You can come by sometime before supper and pick me up, or I can ask someone to give me a ride home."

"I don't mind coming back for you. I'll be here around four, okay?"

"That's fine, but if we get done sooner, I'll just ask for a ride home."

"Sounds good." Dad guided the horse up Uncle Amos's driveway and directed him toward the barn. When they stopped at the hitching rail, Dad turned to Katie and said, "Have a good day, and don't work too hard. You're lookin' kind of peaked today."

"I'll be fine, Dad." Katie climbed out of the buggy and headed to the house. She wasn't fine at all. It seemed strange being back here again. She'd only been gone from home a little over six months, but it seemed a lot longer.

She noticed several people in the yard pulling weeds and

planting flowers but didn't see any sign of Loraine or her folks. She figured they must be in the house.

When she stepped onto the back porch, she drew in a shaky breath. She wished Grammy or Mom would have come with her today instead of going shopping in Shippshewana. Katie figured since Mom and Grammy hadn't seen each other for several months, they probably wanted to spend some time alone.

Just as Katie lifted her hand to knock on the back door, it swung open. Loraine stepped onto the porch and gave Katie a hug. "It's so good to have you home! *Danki* for coming. It means a lot for me to have you and Ella as my attendants."

"*Danki* for asking me." Katie forced a smile. In some ways, it was good to be here, but she felt as out of place as a chicken in a duck pond.

"I just wish Jolene could be here, too."

"She's not coming?"

"Huh-uh. Her aunt's been dealing with carpal tunnel on both of her wrists, and she recently had surgery to correct the problem. Jolene thought it'd be best if she stayed in Pennsylvania to help out."

"That makes sense. But do you think Jolene will ever come back to Indiana?" Katie asked.

"I hope so." Loraine opened the door and motioned Katie inside. "Ella and her sister Charlene are in the kitchen. We decided to have a snack before we head out to the barn to help decorate the tables for the wedding meal."

When Katie entered the kitchen behind Loraine, she saw Ella and Charlene sitting at the table.

Ella jumped up, raced over to Katie, and gave her a hug that nearly took Katie's breath away. "It's so good to see you! We've all missed you so much!"

Katie smiled. "I've missed you, too."

"Would you like a glass of iced tea?" Loraine asked.

Katie nodded and took a seat at the table.

"How about a piece of my sister's *appeditlich* friendship bread?" Charlene motioned to the plate of bread on the table.

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"I'm sure the bread's delicious, but I'm not really hungry right now."

"As skinny as you are, you oughta eat the whole loaf." Charlene's eyebrows lifted high. "Are you sure you're not hungry?"

Katie shook her head.

Ella shot her sister a look of disapproval, but Charlene didn't seem to notice. She was busy cutting herself another hunk of bread.

"Didn't you have a birthday last month?" Charlene asked, her mouth full.

Katie nodded. "I turned twenty."

Charlene grabbed her glass and took a drink. "You'd sure never know it. Why, you don't look like you're more than sixteen." She pointed to herself. "I look older than you."

Katie groaned inwardly. She didn't need the reminder that she looked young for her age. She couldn't help it if she was short, petite, and had the face of a teenager. *At least I act more mature than my sixteen-year-old cousin*, she thought.

"I got a letter from Jolene last week," Ella said. "She won't be coming to Loraine's wedding because—"

"She already knows," Loraine interrupted. "I told her about Jolene's aunt when we were out on the porch."

"I wonder if Jolene's using her aunt's surgery as an excuse not to come home. She might be afraid that she won't fit in with the rest of us now that she can't hear," Charlene put in.

Ella shot her sister another look. "I'm sure that's not the reason. Jolene would never make up an excuse not to come to the wedding."

Katie's shoulders tensed as she shifted her gaze to the window. What would her cousins think if they knew she hadn't wanted to come home for the wedding? Did they have any idea how hard it had been for her to make the trip? Even with Grammy along, Katie had felt anxious on the bus ride. Every horn honk and sudden stop had sent shivers up her spine. She knew she couldn't have made the trip home alone. Even though she wasn't looking forward to riding the bus again, she looked forward to going back to Florida where there were no painful reminders of the past.

Loraine stood. "Would anyone like to see my wedding dress?"

Charlene's hand shot up. "I would!"

"Me, too," Ella said.

Katie nodded as well.

"I'll be right back." Loraine scurried out of the room.

Charlene nudged Katie's arm. "What's it like in Pinecraft? That's where your *grossmudder* lives, isn't it?"

Katie nodded as she fiddled with the edge of the tablecloth. "As you know, Pinecraft is the section of Sarasota where many Plain People have homes or come to rent. It's a nice community."

"Is it true that there are no horses and buggies?" Charlene asked.

Katie nodded. "Unless they're going out of the area and need to hire a driver, everyone either walks or rides a bike."

"Do you go to the beach very often?" Ella questioned.

"*Jab*. Grandpa and I go there a lot. We enjoy looking for shells, and Grandpa likes to fish."

Charlene sighed. "I wish I could visit Florida sometime. I'm sure I'd enjoy being on the beach."

"Maybe you can visit me there sometime."

Ella's eyes widened. "You're going back?"

"Of course. My home's in Pinecraft now."

The room got deathly quiet. Ella and Charlene stared at each other as though in disbelief.

Katie figured it was time for a change of subject. "Who did Wayne choose to be his attendants?" she asked.

"Jolene's *bruder*, Andrew, and Freeman Bontrager," Ella replied. "Wayne and Freeman have become good friends since Freeman and his sister, Fern, moved back to Indiana a few months ago."

"Freeman opened a bicycle shop," Charlene added. "Mom and Dad bought me a new bike for my birthday in February."

"Oh, I see." Katie stifled a yawn. She'd had trouble falling asleep last night.

"Freeman won't be helping here today because he has lots of work at the shop." Charlene sipped her iced tea. "You should see all the bikes he has. I'll bet he'd do real well if he had a shop in Sarasota, since so many people ride bikes there."

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“Here it is,” Loraine said, sweeping into the room with a khaki green dress draped over her arm. “I’ll wear a full white apron over the front of the dress, of course.” She held it out to Katie. “What do you think?”

With trembling fingers and a wave of envy, Katie touched the smooth piece of fabric. “It—it’s very nice.”

“Are you okay?” Loraine asked with a look of concern. “Your hand’s shaking.”

Katie dropped both hands into her lap and clutched the folds in her dress. “I’m fine. Just a bit shaky because I didn’t have much breakfast.”

“Then you oughta have a piece of this.” Charlene pushed the plate of friendship bread toward Katie. “You’ll blow away in a strong wind if you don’t put some meat on your bones.”

Katie ground her teeth until her jaw began to ache. One of the first things Mom had said to her when she’d arrived home was that she needed to gain some weight. Of course, Dad had mentioned it, too.

“Charlene’s right.” Ella spoke up. “If you’re feeling shaky, then you should eat something.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Katie grabbed a piece of bread and took a bite. Then she washed it down with a sip of iced tea.

Bam! The screen door swung open, causing Katie to nearly jump out of her seat. Walking with a slow, stiff gait, Wayne entered the room. His face broke into a wide smile when he saw Katie. “*Wie geht’s?*”

“I’m fine.” The lie rolled off Katie’s tongue much too easily. She was getting used to telling people what she thought they wanted to hear.

Wayne moved across the room and stood beside Loraine’s chair. “We’re sure glad you could come for the wedding.”

Katie forced a smile and nodded.

“Would you like to see my new leg?” Before she could respond, Wayne pulled up his pant leg, exposing his prosthesis.

Katie bit back a gasp. “D—does it hurt?” She could hardly get the words out.

A Cousin's PRAYER

"It did at first, but I've pretty well adjusted to it now." Wayne took a seat beside Loraine. "It could have been worse, and I'm grateful to be alive."

Uneasiness tightened Katie's chest, and she blew out a slow, shaky breath. Seeing him like this was a reminder of what she'd caused—and what she'd lost.

Wayne reached around Ella and grabbed a piece of bread. "Looks like you've been baking again, huh, Ella?"

She nodded. "It keeps me busy when I'm not helping my *daed* in his business."

"Those wind chimes he makes are so nice," Loraine said. "I might buy one soon, to hang on our porch."

"You won't have to do that," Charlene said. "Dad and Mom are planning to give you one of his nicest sets of wind chimes for a wedding present."

Ella poked her sister's arm. "It was supposed to be a surprise."

Charlene covered her mouth. "Oops."

Loraine poured another glass of iced tea and handed it to Wayne. "How are things going outside?"

"Pretty good. By the end of the day, I think your folks' yard will look like a park." He grinned and lifted his glass to take a drink. "This sure hits the spot. It's getting mighty warm out there. Much warmer than normal for April, I think."

"That's fine with me," Loraine said. "A warm spring day is exactly what I wished we'd have on our wedding day. I hope the weather stays just like it is—at least until Thursday."

Katie stared out the kitchen window, blinking back tears of envy and frustration. *I'd give anything if it were me and Timothy getting married in two days. Oh Lord, please give me the strength to get through Loraine's wedding.*