

LYDIA'S
CHARM

WANDA &
BRUNSTETTER

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DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To all my Amish friends who live in Ohio. To Mae Miller: thanks for having us for supper and for sharing with me your wonderful recipe for Frogmore Stew. A special thanks to Bill Westfall, who encouraged me to write this story set in Charm.

*Who can find a virtuous woman?
for her price is far above rubies.*

PROVERBS 31:10 KJV



PROLOGUE

A sob rose in Lydia King's throat as she stared at the calendar on her kitchen wall. A year ago today, she'd buried her husband after having been married only five short years. Oh, how she wished she could bring Jeremiah back.

She glanced at her four-year-old son, Josh, who sat at the table, coloring a picture of a yellow cat. The sweet-tempered boy had Lydia's tawny blond hair and his daddy's big brown eyes. He was endlessly curious and enjoyed all kinds of animals—two more of his father's traits.

Lydia blinked to keep her tears from spilling over. Josh needed his father as much as she needed her husband. It wasn't fair that Jeremiah had been killed in a logging accident, leaving her alone to earn a living and raise their son.

The muscles in the back of her neck tightened. It wasn't fair that two weeks ago she'd lost her job at the restaurant in Arthur, Illinois, because business was so slow that the restaurant may have to close. She'd looked everywhere for another job, but there were none to be had.

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The rent on their small home was coming due in a few days, and with her funds running low, Lydia didn't know what she should do. She needed to provide for Josh, and without a job, she'd soon be out of money and unable to pay any of her bills. Unlike her English friends who'd also been laid off, Lydia would not rely on unemployment checks because her Amish community believed they should rely on each other and God rather than on insurance.

Lydia had no family living nearby to offer her support. When she and Jeremiah had first moved to Illinois from their home in Wisconsin, they'd made quite a few friends in the local Amish community. Those friends had been quick to help Lydia financially after Jeremiah's death, but she couldn't expect them to provide for her and Josh forever. They had families of their own to support, and Lydia wanted to make it on her own.

Oh Lord, please tell me what to do, she prayed. *I need some direction.*

Her gaze came to rest on the stack of mail lying on the table, unopened. She thumbed through the envelopes, noting several bills that only fueled her frustration.

When she spotted an envelope from her mother, who'd moved to Charm, Ohio, a year ago, she quickly tore it open.

Dear Lydia,

I received your letter the other day and was sorry to hear that you'd lost your job. It's not good for you to be there with no family, and I think you and Josh should come here to live with your grandfather and me. Since Holmes County has the largest population of Amish in America, a lot of tourists visit here every year. I'm sure it would be easy for you to find a job in the area. I could watch Josh while you're working, and you'd have a place to stay where you wouldn't have to worry about

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paying rent. Please think about this and let me know your decision.

*As Always,
Mom*

Tears welled in Lydia's eyes. Things had been strained between her and Mom for a long time. It touched Lydia that Mom cared enough to suggest that she and Josh move to Charm.

Mom had found it hard to leave her home in Wisconsin to take care of Grandpa, who'd suffered a stroke a year after Lydia's father died. Since Mom was Grandpa's only daughter, and her two older brothers lived in Missouri, she'd felt obligated to care for him. Lydia had figured her mom would be happy living in Ohio, where she'd been born and raised, but after reading several of her letters, she'd realized that Mom was miserable. Maybe taking care of Grandpa was too much for her. She probably needed some help.

"I'm *hungerich*. What's for *mattsait*, Mama?" Josh asked, breaking into Lydia's thoughts.

Lydia had no appetite for food, but she couldn't let her boy go without his supper. She forced a smile and gave his shoulder a gentle pat. "We have some leftover chicken noodle soup in the refrigerator. Does that sound good to you?"

He nodded enthusiastically and grinned.

Lydia glanced at Mom's letter one more time. Lifting her shoulders and letting them droop with a sigh, she made a decision. She didn't want to leave their home in Arthur, but she had no other choice. It would be a new beginning for Josh and her, and she was sure that Mom would appreciate some help with Grandpa. Maybe her loss of a job was God's way of letting her know that it was time for a change.



CHAPTER I

The teakettle whistled. Lydia started to rise from her chair, but Mom beat her to it.

“I’m glad you decided to move here,” Mom said, removing the teakettle from the stove. “Your *grossdaadi* doesn’t talk much these days, and I get terribly lonely sometimes.” Lydia noticed the dark circles under Mom’s pale blue eyes as she poured hot water into their cups. Mom’s flaxen hair was streaked with gray, and the wrinkles in her forehead were more defined. She was only fifty, but she’d aged quite a bit since the last time Lydia had seen her.

“Unless someone comes to stay with Dad, I don’t get out much these days,” Mom explained as she dropped a tea bag into her cup. “Even then, I worry about how he’s doing, so I don’t stay away any longer than necessary.”

Lydia plopped a tea bag into her cup, bounced it up and down a few times, and placed it on her saucer. “Maybe now that I’m here, you can get out a little more.”

“Don’t you want your tea to steep awhile longer? It looks awfully pale in your cup,” Mom said.

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“My tea’s fine. I like it weak.” Lydia held her voice in check, determined not to give in to her frustrations. Some things never changed. Mom telling her what to do was one of them.

Maybe I’m being oversensitive, Lydia told herself. I’ve been used to being on my own for the past year and doing things pretty much the way I choose. Hopefully, things will get better after Josh and I have been here awhile. I just need to keep a positive attitude and ignore the things I find irritating.

She glanced around the small kitchen and noticed a pot of primroses sitting on the windowsill. That was something positive—a sign of spring.

Mom reached for the jar of honey sitting on the table and put a spoonful in her cup of tea. She pushed the jar toward Lydia, but Lydia shook her head. She’d always preferred her tea unsweetened and figured Mom should know that. But then, Mom had more important things on her mind these days, so maybe it had slipped her mind.

“If you don’t need me for anything this afternoon, I’d like to take Josh into town to look for a new pair of boots,” Lydia said. “His feet have grown, and his old boots are pinching his toes.”

“Do you have enough money?”

Lydia nodded. Truth was she barely had enough, and she hoped she could find something within her price range.

“That’s fine. I’ll hitch my horse to the buggy for you whenever you’re ready to go.”

Lydia frowned. “I know how to hitch a horse, Mom.”

“Yes, but Buttercup’s kind of temperamental. She might not cooperate with you the way she does for me.”

Lydia couldn’t imagine any horse with a name like Buttercup being temperamental. “I’m sure I can manage, but if I have any trouble, I’ll come in and get you.”

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The awkward angle of the gas lamp hanging overhead etched Mom's face in sharp shadows as she pursed her lips and nodded slowly. "You might try Charm Harness and Boot for Josh. If you can't find the right boots there, you should go to the Wal-Mart in Millersburg."

"It'll take too long to go to Millersburg," Lydia said. "Hopefully we'll find what we need at the local store. I might stop by Miller's Dry Goods, too. If there's anything you need, I'd be happy to pick it up."

"I can't think of anything right now," Mom said. "Since I spend most of my days taking care of your grossdaadi, I'm too busy to do any quilting, so I don't buy much from the dry goods store these days."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I know how much you like to quilt." Lydia took a sip of tea and let it roll around on her tongue. She loved the zesty taste of peppermint.

"With the exception of the new store Kiem Lumber built a few years ago, I think you'll find that things haven't changed much in Charm," Mom added.

"It's nice to know that some things haven't changed. So many things in our world have."

Mom nodded. "We do have a couple of new store owners in town."

"Which ones?"

"The woodshop on the outskirts of town is now owned by a man named Menno Troyer. He and his wife, Sadie, moved here from Pennsylvania about a year ago, but she died six months ago from cancer. That left Menno with four boys to raise on his own."

"That's too bad." As a widow, it was hard enough for Lydia to raise one child on her own; she couldn't imagine trying to bring up four boys without the help of her husband.

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“Oh, and then there’s the general store,” Mom continued. “It’s run by a family of—”

The back door slammed shut, and Mom jumped, nearly spilling her cup of tea.

“*Ich hab ken halt draa grict!*” Josh hollered as he raced into the kitchen.

“What couldn’t you catch hold of?” Lydia asked.

“*Derr katz!*” Josh jumped up and down, his dark eyes big as saucers.

Mom put her finger to her lips and frowned. “Be quiet, Josh. You might wake your *urgrossvadder*.”

A gray cat with four white paws zipped into the kitchen and hid under the table, curling its bushy tail around its fluffy body.

Josh dove under the table and grabbed the end of its tail. *Meow!* The cat let out a screech and raced across the room. Josh tore after it, but his feet tangled in the throw rug in front of the sink, and he dropped to the floor with a grunt. He sat a few seconds, then scrambled to his feet. Dashing across the room, he grabbed for the cat, but it sought refuge under the table again.

“*Ich hab ken halt draa grict!*” Josh hollered.

“I told you to be quiet!” Mom raised her voice as she pointed to the cat and then to the back door. “*Duh die katz naus!*”

Josh’s lower lip trembled, and his eyes filled with tears as he gathered up the cat and took it outside, as Mom had asked.

Irritation welled in Lydia’s soul. Josh wasn’t used to his new home or having to be quiet when his great-grandfather was sleeping. What harm could there be in letting him play with the cat in the house? Mom was being too harsh and critical of his behavior. Didn’t she realize the boy was only four years old? Besides, if Josh was supposed to be quiet, then why was it all right for Mom to raise her voice?

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Lydia grimaced as she thought about how many times Mom had been critical of her when she was a child. She had never been able to do anything right, and whatever she'd done, Mom had usually ended up redoing.

I need to remember that this isn't my house and that Mom and Grandpa are doing us a favor by letting us live here, Lydia reminded herself. As long as we're staying in this house, we'll need to do things Mom's way, or there won't be any peace.

When Josh returned to the kitchen with his head down and shoulders slumped, Lydia gave him a hug and quietly said, "Why don't you go back outside and play with the katz?"

Josh nodded and scurried out the door.

Mom took a sip of tea and released a lingering sigh. "*Der grossdaadi hot net genunk scholof grickt lescht nacht.*"

"I'm sorry Grandpa didn't get enough sleep last night. I'll make sure that Josh doesn't disturb him when we get home from shopping this afternoon."

"I appreciate that. Dad's not doing well, and he isn't used to having little ones in the house running around, making noise."

Lydia stared into her half-empty cup and blinked back tears. So much for her resolve to remain positive and ignore the things she found irritating. If Josh had to keep quiet all the time, she wasn't sure how long they could stay here. What Lydia needed most was to find a job so that she and Josh could eventually have a place of their own.



Menno Troyer stepped into the kitchen and groaned. Not only were the cabinets old and in need of repair, but the rest of the kitchen looked messy, as well. A stack of dirty pots and pans from last night's supper had been piled up in the sink, and the dishes they'd used for

breakfast this morning still sat on the table.

He flung open the cupboard door under the sink and grimaced. The garbage can was heaped with even more trash than it had held last night. Since it was late spring and there'd be no school for the next few months, his boys would be home by themselves most of the time while he was at work in his woodshop behind their house.

This morning before Menno had headed to the shop, he'd given the boys a list of chores to do. Here it was almost noon, and they hadn't completed anything.

Menno moved into the living room. It needed a fresh coat of paint, and the cracked windows had yet to be replaced. He frowned when he saw his two dark-haired boys, five-year-old Kevin and seven-year-old Carl, sleeping on the floor. Nine-year-old Dennis, who had reddish-blond hair like his mother's, sat in Menno's recliner with his scruffy-looking mutt, Goldie, draped across his lap. Ike, who'd turned twelve a few weeks ago, was sprawled on the sofa, reading a book. This was ridiculous!

Menno clapped his hands, causing Dennis and Ike to jump, but the two younger boys slept on. "Get yourselves up and be quick about it! I'll be heading to Kiem Lumber soon, and if you want to go along, then you'd better get with it."

"You don't hafta shout, Papa." Ike sat up and yawned. "We ain't *daab*, ya know."

"I know you're not deaf, but you sure do act like it sometimes." Menno pointed to the kitchen door. "Doesn't look as if you heard a word I said this morning about doing your chores."

"I fed and watered the horses," Ike said.

"And I fed Goldie." Dennis stroked the golden retriever's ears and offered Menno a freckle-faced grin.

"That's fine, well, and good, but no one cleared the breakfast table or did last night's dishes."

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Ike motioned to his sleeping brothers. “That was *their* job.”

Menno’s patience was beginning to wane. “Who said?”

“Ike said so,” Dennis spoke up before his older brother had a chance to reply. “He thinks he’s the boss when you ain’t home.”

“Ike’s supposed to be in charge when I’m working in the shop.” Menno turned to Ike and snapped his fingers. “Being in charge means you need to see that everyone gets his chores done before I come home from work every day. It doesn’t mean that you get to lie around while your brothers do all the work.”

“But you’re home early today,” Ike said. “So you didn’t give us a chance to get everything done.”

“I’m home early because I’m goin’ to Kiem’s. I told you this morning that if you wanted to go along, you’d need to have your chores done by noon.”

Ike frowned. “Sorry, Papa, but my lazy brothers won’t listen to anything I say.”

Menno felt overcome by a sense of guilt. Ever since Sadie had died, he’d put a lot of responsibility on the boys—especially Ike. It was either that, or he’d have to hire someone to come in and do the household chores, and he really couldn’t afford that right now. He’d just gotten Sadie’s hospital bills paid off and had been trying to put some money away for future needs they might have. With the tourist season starting up again, Menno figured he might sell more furniture and that would help their finances. But he had two employees he needed to pay, not to mention four growing boys who had to be fed and clothed. At the rate things were going, he’d never get this old house fixed up like he’d promised Sadie when they’d first moved to Charm.

Menno glanced at the rocking chair he’d made for Sadie soon after they were married. A wave of sadness washed over him. She’d used that chair to rock each of their sons.

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As much as Menno hated to think about it, he really needed a wife—a mother for his boys. But the only widowed women in the area were much older than him. A few younger women weren't yet married, but they seemed so immature. What Menno needed was someone who'd had experience raising children. The question was, who?



CHAPTER 2

Do you like your new *schtiwwel*?" Lydia asked Josh as they left Charm Shoe and Boot.

He grinned and pointed to the pair of shiny black boots on his feet. "*Sei nett.*"

"*Jab*, they're very nice." As Lydia helped Josh into the buggy, his stomach growled noisily. "Are you getting hungry?" she asked.

He patted his belly and gave a nod.

"All right then, we'll stop over at Grandma's Restaurant and get some lunch."

Josh's eyes widened. "*Grossmammi* has a restaurant?"

Lydia chuckled. "No. That's the name of the restaurant where we'll be eating. It has nothing to do with your grandma."

As they traveled the short distance to town, Lydia noticed that the picturesque landscape looked the same as she remembered it: Same curving, hilly roads with many Amish farms scattered along the way. Some had been built close to the road, while others were set farther back. Some had their place of business connected to their homes, and some were in separate buildings.

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As they continued along County Road 70 with Buttercup behaving herself quite nicely, Lydia noticed that the roots of several old-looking trees were exposed along the edge of the road. They'd probably been there for a good many years, just like the little town of Charm, which had been founded in 1840. It was originally named Stevenson, but when the first post office was opened in 1885, the town's name was changed to Charm. Lydia remembered her father saying that some folks had given the town the nickname of *Putschtown*, which meant "a small clump."

A bird fluttered from one of the trees and swooped in front of the buggy. Josh let out a whoop and ducked his head.

"It's all right, son," Lydia said. "The *voggel* can't get in our buggy. I think he's just trying to make it to one of the trees on the other side of the road."

Josh flashed Lydia a grin that nearly melted her heart. Oh, how she loved spending time with her precious little boy.

As they came down the hill into Charm, she spotted the building for Kiem Lumber, which had been built a few years ago and was more modern than the last one had been. She was anxious to see what it looked like inside.

Across Highway 557, she spotted Grandma's Restaurant. When she pulled Buttercup into the restaurant's parking lot, she was surprised to see so many cars. Since it was a weekday and an hour past noon, she hadn't expected so many people would still be having lunch. She hoped they could get a table right away, because she had a couple more stops to make before they headed back to Grandpa's place, and she wanted to get there in plenty of time to help Mom with supper.

When they entered the restaurant, Lydia was disappointed to see several people standing in the entryway, waiting for a table. She thought about leaving, but Josh was really hungry. As she recalled

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from her last visit several years ago, this was the only restaurant in the center of town. Of course, there was the Chalet in the Valley, but that was farther out. Also, she'd never eaten at the Chalet and wasn't sure if they'd have anything on the menu that Josh would like.

Lydia stepped up to the counter and told the hostess that they needed a table for two; then she took Josh's hand and stood off to one side. While they waited, Josh alternated between playing with the lever on the gumball machine and watching out the window, while Lydia read the names and comments in the guest book. One comment in particular caught her attention: *I'm glad we came to visit this charming little town. There are so many quaint and unusual shops here; no wonder they call it Charm.*

Lydia had never really thought about the quaintness of Charm or heard anyone who lived here refer to it as charming. She supposed that most people who lived in a certain area for any length of time took everything about it for granted. People from outside the area, especially tourists, no doubt viewed traditional Amish towns like Charm in a much different way.

They waited about twenty minutes and were finally shown to a table. Several more minutes passed before a young English woman came to take their order.

"Sorry about the wait, but we're shorthanded right now and didn't expect such a big lunch crowd this afternoon." The dark circles under the waitress's eyes and the perspiration glistening on her forehead gave indication of her obvious fatigue.

Lydia smiled, hoping to encourage the young woman. "It's okay. We didn't mind waiting."

The waitress offered a faint smile as she looked at Josh, sitting on a booster seat with an expectant look on his face. "What can I get you to drink, little fellow?"

"A glass of milk." Lydia spoke for Josh, since he wasn't proficient

in English yet. That would come after he started school in a few years. "And I'd like a glass of iced tea, please," she quickly added.

The waitress left the table, and when she returned with their beverages, she took their order: a hot dog for Josh and a turkey sandwich for Lydia.

While they waited for their food, Lydia looked at her shopping list. They still needed to stop by the general store to pick up a few things Mom had mentioned she needed at the last minute, and then they'd go to Kiem Lumber to buy some paint. Shortly before Lydia and Josh had left for town, Lydia had told Mom that she'd help her paint the kitchen tomorrow morning. Lydia was more than willing to help because Mom wouldn't have time to do the painting on her own.

"How come that little Amish girl looks like a lady in her face?" Josh asked in their Pennsylvania-Dutch language.

Lydia took a sip of her tea and nearly choked when Josh pointed at a woman who had just entered the restaurant. She was dressed in Amish clothes and couldn't have been more than four feet tall.

Lydia noticed that the little woman's chestnut brown hair was sprinkled lightly with gray, and soft wrinkles framed her lips and eyes. She was definitely not a girl. More than likely, she was in her early fifties.

"How come that little Amish girl looks like a lady in her face?" Josh repeated as he continued to point.

Lydia shook her head sternly. "Put your hand down, Josh. It's not nice to point."

"But how come she looks—"

"Not now, Josh. I'll explain things to you later."

When the little woman followed the hostess past Lydia and Josh's table, Lydia held her breath, hoping Josh wouldn't say anything more. To her relief, he kept quiet, but he continued to stare at the

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little woman.

Lydia was glad when the woman was seated near the back of the restaurant, out of Josh's sight. She didn't want to deal with any more of his embarrassing questions, at least not until they were in the buggy where no one else could hear.

Lydia managed to keep Josh occupied by talking about other things until their food was brought to the table. Then, after a silent prayer, she told Josh to enjoy his hot dog.

When they finished their meal, Lydia took the bill to the counter to pay. They were almost to the front door when she spotted a sign in the window that read: *WAITRESS WANTED*. Could this be the job she'd been hoping to find? A job this close to Grandpa's house would be perfect, because she could walk or ride her bike to work.

Lydia was so excited about the prospect of working here that, if Josh hadn't been squirming and tugging on her hand, she might have inquired about the job right then. Under the circumstances, she figured it would be best to leave Josh with Mom and come by in the morning to put in her application. Hopefully, the job would still be available. If it wasn't, she would have to accept it as God's will and trust that He'd provide something better for her.



When Lydia and Josh entered the general store, a nice-looking Amish man with reddish-brown hair and dark brown eyes greeted them with a cheery smile. He was of average height with muscular arms, and his cleanly shaven face let Lydia know that he wasn't married.

"Can I help you with something?" he asked as Lydia turned toward one of the aisles.

"I just need some toothpaste and a few other things, but I think I can find them," she replied.

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"I'll be at the front counter when you're ready to pay for your purchases." He disappeared around the corner, and Lydia moved up the aisle with Josh.

She'd only been looking a few minutes when Josh tugged on her hand. "*Schpielsach.*"

Lydia looked down at Josh and shook her head. "I don't have enough money to buy you a toy."

"*Zuckerscheifli?*"

"No, Josh. You just had lunch. You don't need any sugar candy."

The corners of his mouth turned down, and his eyes filled with tears.

Lydia sighed. She wished she could have left Josh at home with Mom. It would have saved her the embarrassment of him pointing at the little person at the restaurant, and she'd have been able to shop without him begging for things. But if she'd left him at home, they couldn't have shopped for new boots.

Guess I should be grateful for the time I get to spend with my boy, she chided herself. *Once I get a job, I won't be with Josh nearly as much as I'd like.*

Lydia lifted the corner of Josh's straw hat and ruffled his hair. "Why don't you look at the toys while I finish shopping? If I have enough money left after I pay for my purchases, I'll buy you some gum or a piece of candy."

Josh grinned and scampered away.

When Lydia finished shopping and stepped up to the counter, she was surprised to see the Amish man kneeling on the floor next to Josh.

Wearing a contented smile, Josh held a red lollipop in his hand. "*Zuckerscheifli.*"

Lydia was about to reprimand him for taking the candy without asking, when the man spoke up.

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“I hope you don’t mind that I gave him a lollipop. He was eyeballing the candy, and I couldn’t resist.”

“I don’t mind. That was kind of you.” Lydia tore her gaze away from the man’s handsome face. “Did you say thank you?” she asked Josh.

“*Danki.*” Josh swiped his tongue over the lollipop and grinned at the man.

“You’re welcome. Are you finished shopping now?” he asked Lydia.

She nodded and placed her purchases on the counter.

“Are you new to the area? Don’t believe I’ve seen you in our store before.”

Lydia introduced herself, as well as Josh, and then explained how she’d come to live with her mother, Mae Weaver. “Mom used to live in Wisconsin, but she moved to Charm a year ago to care for my grossdaadi, Wilbur Hershberger,” she added.

“Oh yes, I’ve met your *mamm* a couple of times, but not Wilbur yet.” The man extended his hand, which was nearly twice the size of Lydia’s. “It’s nice to meet you. My name’s Levi Stutzman. My family moved here a few months ago from Geauga County, in the northeastern part of the state, and we bought this place.” He motioned to the other end of the store. “My *daed* and two sisters are in the back room, unpacking some pots and pans we just got in. My younger brothers, who help out in the store on occasion, are at home, and my *mamm*’s out running some errands right now.”

“Maybe I’ll get to meet some of your family the next time I come in.” Lydia paid for her purchases and picked up the paper sack. “We have one more stop to make, so I guess we’d better be on our way.”

Lydia and Josh were almost to the door when it swung open. The same little Amish woman they’d seen at the restaurant entered the store.

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Josh tugged on Lydia's dress, and she held her breath. She hoped he wouldn't say anything that might embarrass her. She really should have taken the time to explain about little people after they'd left the restaurant.

The little woman looked up at Lydia and smiled; then she moved on past. Lydia thought about introducing herself, but with Josh standing there wide-eyed and mouth hanging open, she decided it was best to make a hasty exit.

"How come that little Amish girl looks like a lady in her face?" Josh asked as Lydia was putting the paper sack in the buggy.

"I'll tell you in a minute." Lydia hoisted Josh into the passenger's seat, untied the horse from the hitching rail, and took her seat on the driver's side. She'd better give Josh an explanation right away, because if the little woman lived nearby, there was a good chance they'd see her again.

"Listen to me, Josh," Lydia said, carefully choosing her words. "You know how some *bopplin* are born with a lot of hair and others have none?"

He gave a slow nod.

"Some bopplin have blue eyes, and some have brown."

"Jah."

"Well, most bopplin grow up to be tall, but some are short."

"Ich katzbehnich."

Lydia bit back a chuckle. "You're short-legged now, but someday when you grow up, I'm sure you'll be tall just like your daed."

Josh blinked and stared at Lydia as though he had no idea what she was trying to tell him. Truth was, she wasn't exactly sure how to explain dwarfism to Josh. If she told him that some babies were born with a genetic defect causing short stature, he'd never understand. She needed to keep her explanation simple.

She reached across the seat and touched Josh's arm. "Some people,