



Love's Dwelling



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Chapter 1

A ROBIN PERCHED ON TOP OF THE EMPTY BIRD FEEDER OUTSIDE the kitchen window. Cassie Weaver paused, a package of pork chops in her hand, to study it. Didn't the dandy with his red-breasted plumage know he was early? Spring wouldn't show its face in southern Kansas for another month. February was an in-between month when Mother Nature couldn't seem to make up her mind. Five inches of snow had fallen since dawn, and the fluffy wet stuff continued to accumulate.

Working for Dinah Keim, who was fast losing her eyesight, made Cassie acutely aware of the blessing of sight. Not to be able to see a ruby-throated hummingbird clothed in delicate, shimmering greens and blues, sipping nectar from purple, pink, and red pansies, would diminish her world. Having seen it and now to be bereft of it only made matters worse. Cassie stopped to count her blessings. She could see, which meant every day was a beautiful day, beginning with a brilliant sunrise and ending with her sister sunset.

Life was good.

"Cassie? Are you there?"

Dinah's arrival signaled that the time for gathering wool had ended. Cassie forked the pork chops into a cast-iron skillet on the

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stove and turned. "I'm here. I'm making pork chops and fried potatoes for lunch. Did you check your blood sugar?"

Her wooden walking stick making a *thunk, thunk* on the oak floor, Dinah trotted to the kitchen table with a sure step. Every piece of furniture in the house remained in the same resting spot it had occupied for years, so she never had to worry about colliding with a misplaced chair or table. "I feel light-headed."

"The potatoes are done. The slaw is on the table. All I have to do is fry the pork chops. Check your blood sugar while I finish." Cassie turned up the gas flame under the skillet and strode to the propane-powered refrigerator. The never-ending balancing act between too high and too low blood sugar had become more difficult as Dinah's frail body failed her. "I'll get your shot ready."

When she started working for Dinah and Job Keim six years ago, Cassie had been squeamish and then timid about the shots. Not anymore. Were she not Plain, she might have been a nurse or even a doctor. Snorting under her breath at the fanciful thought, she took a tiny bottle of insulin from the box on the refrigerator shelf, placed it on a saucer, and added a syringe. The cotton balls and alcohol were already on the table.

"Something smells *gut*." Job barged through the back door and stamped snow from his enormous work boots on the rug. Her employer had the biggest feet Cassie had ever seen. But then, he stood well over six feet tall. The feet matched the man. "I shoveled off the walk, which makes no sense, I know, fed the animals, fixed that hole in the fence, and chopped wood. Now I could eat an elephant."

"No elephants on the menu today." Cassie smiled as she set the saucer in front of Dinah. "But I can see if the meat market offers it next time I go into Yoder. It's probably more tender than the last chuck roast I bought from them."

Job's belly laugh always made Cassie laugh with him. His smile wide over a long black beard shot through with silver, he slapped his broad chest and let one rip. "You tickle my innards, girl."

"Someone's coming." Her head cocked, forehead furrowed, Dinah leaned forward in her chair. Her thick-lensed black glasses magnified her blue eyes. Failing eyesight had amplified her hearing. "Sounds like a van or an SUV coming up the drive."

"Somebody has gut timing, *fraa*." Job squeezed his wife's shoulder as he walked past her. "They managed to arrive just in time for lunch. I'll meet them at the front door."

If they wanted lunch, Cassie was in trouble. Six thin pork chops wouldn't go far—especially with Job's insatiable appetite. The man didn't have an ounce of fat on his sixty-seven-year-old frame, even though he inhaled all the food Cassie put in front of him.

"I wonder who it could be." Dinah took care of her finger poke, used the test strip, and handed it to Cassie to read. "How am I doing?"

"Time for the shot and then some food. Guests or no, you need to eat." Cassie administered the shot with an ease that her sixteen-year-old younger self would not have thought possible. "There you go. I have some sugar-free banana pudding with vanilla wafers and banana slices for dessert."

That drew a delighted whoop from Dinah, who barely seemed to register the injection anymore. The dessert was a favorite. Her sweet tooth seemed to grow in direct proportion to her disease. She preferred chocolate-frosted brownies or apple pie with ice cream, but even those made with sugar substitutes had to be saved for special occasions. Her thin body was just what the doctor had ordered.

"Fraa, come out here." Job no longer sounded jovial. "Now."

"She just had her shot," Cassie called back. She shook her finger

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at Dinah. “I’ll go. Start with a roll. They’re in the basket on the table, along with the butter.”

She turned off the stove and moved the skillet to a back burner.

“Dinah, you need to get out here.”

Something akin to bewilderment mixed with panic reverberated in Job’s deep voice. He didn’t rattle easily or at all. Cassie raced down the hallway to the living room. Job stood in the foyer. He’d taken off his black wool hat. He kept running his big hand through curls more silver than black so they stood up all over his head.

Lined up in front of the fireplace stood five English children in stair-step fashion. The oldest one, a boy, held the youngest one, a girl whose red cheeks and wet face told the story of recent tears. A gray-haired lady in a green pantsuit, a worn leather satchel in one hand, joined them.

In the doorway loomed one more visitor. A tall, muscle-laden man with charcoal-black hair and blue eyes who methodically wiped his muddy work boots on the rug. He wore faded jeans with holey knees, an untucked red plaid flannel shirt, a fleece-lined jean jacket two sizes too big, and a Kansas City Royals baseball cap. Everything about his stance said he’d rather be sitting on a doctor’s exam table than standing in the Keims’ living room.

“I only have six pork chops.” The words came out of Cassie’s mouth of their own accord. Embarrassment flooded her. “I mean, I can heat up the leftover roast from last night’s supper—”

“They’re not here for lunch.” Job settled his wide-brimmed hat back on his head. His cheeks were damp and his face ashen. “They’re—”

“Perry? *Suh?*” One wrinkled hand outstretched, Dinah tottered past Cassie, heading for the man standing on the welcome mat. “Is that you, Suh? Where have you been? I’ve missed you so much. Where’s Georgia? Is she with you?”

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"I'm not Perry. He's my uncle. I'm Mason. Mason Keim." The man's big hand sought the doorknob. He took two steps back. "I'm Georgia's son."

"Georgia? Our *dochter's* suh? *Gott* has answered our prayers." Dinah's face brightened as if a lamp's oil had been replenished and light restored. "Where is she? Where's my *dochter*?"

Mason Keim's jaw worked. His gaze went to the children who stood oddly silent, too still for kids. The girl with a tangled dark-brown ponytail that reached her waist grabbed the smaller boy's hand. Finally, Mason spoke. "She died."

Confusion clouded Dinah's face, extinguishing the light. "Died?"

The smallest girl buried her head in the boy's shoulder and sobbed.

The walking stick clattered to the floor. Dinah crumpled in a heap beside it.

Chapter 2

THE GIRL DRESSED IN AN OLD-FASHIONED DRESS AND APRON directed a troubled frown at Mason. That said it all. He'd messed this up big-time. Just like he did when he told his half brothers and sisters. At twenty-two he had no experience delivering death news. The police officer who'd told him about his mom and Clayton's deaths had been kind but quick. *"Better not to beat around the bush,"* he'd said, with a quick man-pat on Mason's hunched shoulders. Apparently that didn't work with everyone.

Mason dropped to his knees next to the prostrate woman—his grandmother, Dinah Keim, according to the caseworker. Dinah and Job Keim were his grandparents. He'd never had grandparents before and he'd practically killed one of them already. He dug his cell phone from his pocket. "Is she all right? Should I call 911?"

The girl in the dress and apron shook her head. "She fainted, that's all. It was a terrible shock. You should've waited until she sat down to give her such grievous news."

"Let me at her." Job scooped up Dinah—Mason's brain couldn't cope with calling them Grandpa and Grandma—like she weighed no more than a baby. He carried her to the couch and sat down beside her. "It's okay. You're fine."

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The naked love on his grizzled, whiskered face was too much to bear. It only existed in cheesy movies, didn't it? His mom and her one-after-the-other husbands sure never stared at each other like that. Leastways not where others could see. Mason stood.

The girl brushed past him. "I'll get her some orange juice, Job. She already took her shot. Her sugar is bound to be low."

Dinah stirred and moaned. "My *bopli*, my bopli."

What was a bopli?

"I know." Job wiped tears from her face with the back of his hand. His thin cheeks seemed to crater under high cheekbones, and his blue eyes shone with unshed tears. Those brilliant blue eyes had been passed down to Mason's mother and to all of his siblings. "But she was gone long ago for us. Dead to us."

Such harsh words. Did he really mean that?

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset her—"

"When?" Dinah strangled the single syllable. "When did she die?"

"Three weeks ago." Mason cleared his throat. "January nineteenth. Just before midnight."

"Where is she now?" Job's arm slid around his wife. She leaned into him. He stared at Mason with despair in his eyes. "When was the funeral?"

A dark, cold, snowy landscape and the images of kids standing around two holes in the ground haunted Mason's dreams. Jennie was so heavy in his arms. Her screams visited him at night. How did a person explain to a four-year-old that Mommy's body had to be put in the ground?

"*She's not in her body anymore. She's in heaven with Jesus,*" he'd whispered over and over again as he stroked the little girl's silky dark-brown hair and tried not to lose his mind.

Bobby's doubtful scowl almost undid Mason. *Yeah, right,* it

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said. Mason's knowledge of heaven and a guy called Jesus was garnered from the occasional excursion to the closest church with a candlelight service on Christmas Eve.

A white lie to comfort a child. Surely God understood that. "She's in a cemetery in Wichita, close to where we live. Her and Clayton both."

The bills kept coming—ambulances, ER, doctors, two burials. Every effort had been made to save his mother and Clayton. For which Mason was deeply grateful. But they had no insurance and had made no arrangements in event of their deaths.

"We would've liked to have been there." Job's arms hung slack at his side. Bleak sadness made his face ancient. "She was our daughter."

"We didn't know about you then." They hadn't even known the Keims existed until Mason found a safe-deposit box key in Mom's jewelry box. That led to the living will. But that was another story. "We thought Uncle Perry was our only family."

He might be their only family, but Perry hadn't let that influence his decision not to take them into his home. His reasons had been plentiful—not enough money, not enough room, not enough experience with children. "*You can handle it, Mason. You've been taking care of them for years.*"

He'd actually been able to say that sentence with a straight face.

"Maybe I should take it from here." Delores Blanchard, the caseworker assigned to his half siblings by the Kansas Department of Child and Family Services, made a *tsk-tsk* sound. Her doughy double chin shook like it always did when she was stressed. Which was most of the time. "Mrs. Keim isn't the only one who's upset. Why don't you calm down your brothers and sisters?"

Mrs. Blanchard was right. The kids huddled together in a tight cluster, faces worried, full of fear and uncertainty. They'd lost their

parents. Now they were being forced from the only home they'd ever known to live with strangers. They were perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. As Uncle Perry had pointed out, they'd been doing it for years.

Mason trudged over to them. Bobby, the oldest at sixteen, shushed Jennie, the youngest at four. Even though they were the product of two different fathers, his siblings had a strong family resemblance—blue eyes and various shades of dark-brown to black hair. Like their mother, when she didn't treat herself to one of a rainbow of hair colors.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Jennie. You didn't do nothing wrong." Bobby rubbed his sister's back with a practiced hand. Like Mason, Bobby had a lot of experience parenting. He scowled at Mason. "Can we go home now?"

"This is what Mom wanted." Mason took Jennie from him. She immediately wiped her runny nose on his coat and wrapped her arms around his neck in a stranglehold. He smoothed her tangled brown curls. "It's okay, sweetie. She'll be okay. She was just surprised to see all of us. Like a really big surprise birthday party."

"I want to go home too. I promise to be good." Donny, who was six, tugged at Mason's arm. "I'll remember to put my dirty clothes in the basket, and I'll wash all the dishes every night. I'll be good, I promise."

"You're not being punished. These folks are family. Mommy wanted you to get to know them." Mason sucked in a breath. Why hadn't she introduced them to the Keims years ago? It would've been nice to have family. To have grandparents. Finding that living will had been the sucker punch that kept on giving. "You'll be better off here."

A six-year-old couldn't begin to understand the logistics of single parenting five younger kids. The cost of day care, food,

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clothing, medical bills, utilities, and rent. Mrs. Blanchard and the advocate appointed by the judge to make sure the kids' best interests were safeguarded had helped him fill out mountains of paperwork to get government assistance. Otherwise he'd still be drowning in red tape. Until he found the will, he'd had everything under control. Almost.

"Mason's right. We need to honor your mother's wishes." Mrs. Blanchard's head bobbed in agreement, which meant her double chin bobbed too. She'd made it clear from the get-go that the will gave the Keims legal standing with the children—whether he liked it or not. "You'll love it here out in the country with all this fresh air and farm animals."

As an adult, he could sue for custody. If he could afford to hire a lawyer, which he couldn't. The bigger question—the one he'd wrestled with every day since he'd discovered the will—revolved around what was best for them. He hadn't wanted to show it to Mrs. Blanchard, but it didn't seem right to hide it or destroy it. To deny them the chance to have grandparents would be wrong. "That's right. I saw horses when we pulled into the yard, and chickens and a cat."

Mrs. Blanchard edged closer to the couch. She settled in a straight-back chair on the other side of a thick, homemade coffee table. "Mr. Keim—"

"It's Job."

"Mr. and Mrs. Keim, I'm sorry we had to come to you in such unfortunate circumstances. Your daughter left a document that specifically stated that she wanted you to have custody of her children should anything happen to her."

The girl was back with a glass of orange juice. She turned and smiled for the first time. She had dimples. She didn't dress like any girl Mason had ever known. No makeup, no bling. Every bit of her

arms and legs was covered by her long dress. Yet this girl was far prettier than most. "Welcome, Georgia's children, welcome."

Her face still lit up like she'd just received a new car for her sixteenth birthday, the girl helped Dinah with the glass of juice. "Drink it all up, Dinah. You'll need your strength. You have five new grandchildren to get to know." Her smile tentative, she glanced at Mason. "Or is it six? Dinah thought you were her son, Perry."

Stop staring. She wasn't much bigger than a kid herself. She had dark-cocoa-brown eyes and fair skin. The little bit of hair showing outside the white covering on her head was a shiny brown. She didn't resemble his mother at all. Besides, she was too young to be one of the Keims' kids. A grandkid maybe. His uncle Perry had never married, and his mother said he was her only sibling.

"Mason? The young lady asked you a question." Mrs. Blanchard's thin eyebrows rose. "Don't be rude."

"Sorry . . . I was . . . Yeah, Georgia was my mother. Who are you?"

"I'm Cassie Weaver. I keep house for Job and Dinah. I'm sorry for your loss. Both your parents in one fell swoop. That's so sad."

"Clayton wasn't my father." Mason couldn't let it go, even though it might be easier. "He wasn't father to any of us. He was Mom's third husband."

Their sudden frowns said it all. He might as well have said she was a polygamist or a prostitute. Did they know she had never married Mason's father? Probably not. That might induce a stroke for the two older folks. Cassie's smile melted into sad disbelief.

"Jake Caldwell is Bobby and Kevin's dad. They don't remember him, but I do." Enough to know he was an okay guy who sold used cars and mostly held down a job. But he drank too much. "Mom ran him off after she caught him kissing a sales associate behind the counter at Buck Doolittle's Used Cars." Why had he shared all that?

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Mason gritted his teeth, sucked in air, and forced himself to keep going. “Deacon Spencer is Kathy, Donny, and Jennie’s dad. He’s in the army. He’s stationed in Germany now.”

“He’s nice,” Kathy volunteered. She slung her waist-length dark-brown hair over her thin shoulders, dug around in a ratty backpack, and produced three tattered paperbacks. *Little House on the Prairie*, a Nancy Drew mystery, and an Amelia Bedelia book. All of which she’d read to Jennie and Donny at least twenty times. “He brought me these. He knows I like to read.”

“Reading is good.” Dinah’s smile looked determined. “He sounds like a good father.”

“He is.” Kathy sighed and rubbed her small hand over the covers. “I miss him.”

Mom had married Deacon after knowing him for two months. Kathy came along eight months later. By that time Deacon was doing a two-year tour in Afghanistan. When he was around, he was a stand-up guy who bought presents for all the kids—not just his. After he returned to the States, Donny made an appearance, followed by Jennie two years later. Deacon’s request that Mom follow him overseas for a six-year stint in Germany had resulted in a sudden divorce. Jennie was two when Clayton entered the scene.

Not to think ill of the dead, but no one would miss Clayton. He was a mean drunk with a foul mouth and a wandering eye. The two did nothing but fight and make up from day one.

“So now you know all the parties involved.” Mrs. Blanchard pulled a folder from her satchel and opened it. “We’ve been unable to find Mr. Caldwell thus far, but we’ll continue to search for him. Mr. Spencer has been notified of your daughter’s death. We haven’t received a response from him. Either or both could contest your daughter’s will and seek custody of their children.”

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"They're not coming forward." Mason fought to hide his bitterness. "They've never been real parents."

Mrs. Blanchard gave a long-suffering sigh. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Mason."

Mason waited. Surely one of them would ask. There was a hole in the story. Or maybe they knew and didn't want to talk about their daughter having a baby out of wedlock. Did anyone even use that phrase anymore? Not in the real world. In the Amish world, it was probably the ultimate sin. Maybe it didn't matter anymore. He was an adult and no man had ever come forward to claim his role as father.

He certainly wouldn't do it now that the one person who could confirm his story was six feet under.

"In the meantime, Job and Dinah always wanted a house full of children." Cassie clapped her hands and smiled so big her face had to hurt. "What a gift from God that they have this big house with plenty of bedrooms for their grandchildren. There's a big yard and a pond for swimming and fishing. You would like that, wouldn't you?"

That last part was directed to the kids. Donny nodded and grinned. Kathy chewed her lip, her hands clasped as if in prayer.

"I don't know."

Job and Mrs. Blanchard spoke at the same time.

They stared at each other. "Go ahead." Job gestured at the caseworker. "You first."

"It seems like Mrs. Keim is in poor health. If that's the case, she may not be in a position to care for five young, rambunctious children. Cook meals, buy clothes and other provisions, supervise bathtime, bedtime, make sure they go to school . . ." Forehead wrinkled, Mrs. Blanchard studied Job and Dinah as if seeing them clearly for the first time. "You folks do send your children to school, don't you?"

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“Yes, we do.” Job didn’t seem affronted by the question. He leaned forward, hands on his knees. “Through eighth grade—”

“I won’t go to school?” Bobby’s incredulous shout filled the small living room. “I have to graduate high school to go to the police academy. I’m not staying here. This sucks.”

“Language, Bobby.” Mrs. Blanchard swiveled to shoot a frown at him. “I know you’re having a rough time, but that’s never an excuse for being rude.”

Maybe this was an out. Maybe the family court judge would see this as a valid reason to set aside the will. Mason kept that thought to himself. “Chill out, Bobby. Let the man finish.”

“We share a grade school with English families in Yoder. Our kids attend first through eighth. After that our teenagers receive what the state likes to call vocational training. They learn to farm, raise food, take care of livestock. Some learn carpentry, dairy farming, or other skills.”

Job propped his elbows on his knees and steepled his long fingers. “We can give these children, our grandchildren, everything they need as far as clothes, food, and such, but my wife’s health does worry me a bit. It’s a hard thing you’re asking. I can see our daughter’s face in every one of these precious children. We prayed for years to have children. God gave us two and they both chose to leave the faith. Now to have grandchildren . . .”

Bobby clamped his mouth shut and wiped at his face with both hands.

No one spoke for a second. Kathy released Donny’s hand. She trotted past Mason, scooted around Mrs. Blanchard’s chair, and stopped in front of Job. “Don’t be sad, Grandpa. We’ll stay if you want us to.” She patted his knee. “When I’m sad I sing songs. That’s what Mommy told me to do. Do you want me to sing you a song?”

"Maybe another time." Job took her hand and squeezed. "What's your name?"

"I'm Kathy. It's really Katherine, but nobody calls me that unless I'm in trouble. I never get in trouble. I'm eight." She pointed at the others. "Should I introduce you to the rest of my brothers and sisters?"

"Give us a minute, Kathy," Mrs. Blanchard intervened. "Please, honey. Go sit with Mason, why don't you? The grown-ups need to work some things out before you get too comfortable."

Kathy appeared puzzled, but she did as she was told. She was like that. Mason put his arm around her and hugged her. "You did good."

She smiled up at him. "That's our grandpa. We never had a grandpa before."

"I know."

Whether Job Keim would claim the title still remained to be seen. He might simply be another in a long line of disappointments for Kathy and the rest of Georgia Keim-Carter's kids.

"Maybe they could come visit, you know, like grandchildren do." Job rubbed already-red eyes. "If they could be placed in a home nearby—"

Dinah set her juice glass on the coffee table with a bang. Her hands flailing, she jabbered a string of words in a language Mason had heard on his construction jobs in Wichita that included Amish workers. Once he'd heard Mom singing a song in that language while planting flowers in their front yard. When he asked her about it, she shrugged and said it was made up. *"My own special language from when I was a kid."*

At least part of it was true. "What's she saying?"

"She wants the children here. She insists that they be allowed to stay." Cassie sounded as if she approved of her employer's stance.

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“She says she’ll block the door if someone tries to take them away. I believe she would too.”

Dinah still had plenty of get-up-and-go in her skinny body. She wanted the kids. That was a nice change.

Job’s gruff response came more slowly. His hands reached for his wife’s. She accepted his offering, but her words came faster, seeming to fall over each other in an effort to be heard.

A person didn’t have to know the language to understand what was happening. Two people who’d been married forever were pouring their hearts out to each other over something important, something that would change everything. They were in it together.

Mason had never seen such a sight in his life, but he still recognized it. He still wanted it. If the Keims took the kids, he might be able to have it, if the right girl came along at the right time.

No, that was selfish. Stupid and selfish. The kids needed him. “It’s okay. If they don’t think they can do it, the kids can stay with me. I’ll become their guardian. I can take care of them.”

“Mason, we’ve been over this. Your mom’s wishes were specific. And you can’t support six people on what you make in construction.”

“I’ll get a second job.”

“And who’ll supervise the children?”

“Me.” Bobby’s bellowing didn’t help Mason’s case. “Just like always. Nothing will have changed.”

Bobby was a shorter version of Mason. His hair was lighter, more of a burnt-wheat-toast color, but his eyes were just as blue. His shoulders were broad, which was good because he served as Mason’s second in command. He was the master of the microwave. Corn dogs, fish sticks, bagel bites, frozen pizzas, mac ’n’ cheese. His arsenal of easy-to-fix meals was almost as good as Mason’s.

“No sixteen-year-old high school boy should be responsible for

four younger brothers and sisters if there's another option. In this case there is and it's one the court recognizes." Mrs. Blanchard's no-nonsense approach to the world was born of much experience—or so she'd told Mason a dozen times. "Dinah, you thought Mason was your son. Were you confused? Cassie mentioned a shot. Are you on medication?"

Dinah straightened and withdrew her hand from Job's. "I've had diabetes since I turned twenty-six. My mother and my great-aunt both had it. It runs in the family. I take insulin shots, sometimes twice a day." She adjusted her glasses and smiled firmly. "It has taken its toll. My eyesight is affected and my kidneys, and I have numb hands and feet, but I'm not a doddering old fool. I know Perry is much older now. It was a shock, that's all."

Mrs. Blanchard didn't seem convinced.

"I can help Job and Dinah take care of the children." Cassie ran the words together in her obvious excitement. "I'll move in. I'll do the cooking. I do it now. It's just a matter of cooking a lot more." Her cheeks turned pink as she picked up speed. "Kathy can help. The other kids will help with the cleaning and the laundry and the garden. That's how Plain families work. Most of them have more children than this. We can do it. That is, if you want to have them stay here at the house, Job."

Breathless, she stopped, her hands clasped as if in prayer.

Job's frown deepened. He shook his head. "There's no money to pay you more than we do now, Cassie."

"No need. I'll receive free room and board in exchange for my services. My pay remains the same. It's a perfectly good arrangement for all of us."

Mason swallowed the retort that rose in his throat. He didn't want to do anything to jinx the offer, but the girl was crazy. Cassie obviously had no experience taking care of children. Stay-at-home

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moms, childcare workers, teachers, and nannies should be paid more than pro basketball players and celebrity actors combined. Anybody who'd spent any amount of time taking care of kids deserved a fat paycheck, a vacation in Aruba, and a presidential medal of honor.

Job squinted as if trying to see the future. He scratched his forehead and studied his boots. Dinah's hand crept back into his. He studied their hands for a while. Finally, he took a long breath. "I reckon if it's what Georgia wanted and it's what my wife wants and with Cassie's willingness to help, we should give it a try. We'll see if we can do it. If that is okay with you, Mrs. Blanchard?"

All nine pairs of eyes in the room turned to stare at Mrs. Blanchard. She nibbled on her lower lip. Her fingernails, painted a pearly white, tapped on the file folder in her lap. "I agree with Job that **this** is a challenging situation. Let me ask this. You say you can provide for them. You are probably in your sixties, Job, retirement age. How do you plan to pay for the needs of five children? It's a chunk of change. What exactly do you do for a living?"

"The Amish don't exactly retire. Usually the children take over the farm or business and the grandparents move into the *dawdy haus*—a little house attached to the main house. We don't have that option, obviously. I still build furniture to be sold on consignment in a Yoder store. With the snow, you probably didn't notice our big stand out at the road, but when the weather's good we sell vegetables, jams, canned goods, baked goods, and some of my wooden toys. Some get sold in stores in town. Tourists love Yoder. We make our clothes and grow much of our food. Our district will help with whatever we need. Including paying for medical care."

"You no longer farm, as such."

"No. It's not possible to make a living from farming here on such a small piece of property. I plant alfalfa, milo, corn, and such

for my needs and to sell to some of the other farms around here, but that's all."

"Understood. This information helps." Her lips pressed together in a thin line, Mrs. Blanchard furiously took notes. Everyone seemed to hold their breath, watching her. Finally, she lifted the pen and used it to shove her glasses up her nose. "Given your daughter's wishes, I have no choice but to agree to this placement. I'll let the children's advocate know. She'll want to visit as well. We'll both want to keep an eye on the situation. Expect visits."

"Yay!" Kathy clapped. "It'll be fun."

Jennie mimicked her big sister. So did Donny and Kevin. Only Bobby seemed gloomy.

Mrs. Blanchard held up her hand. "We had a preliminary hearing in Sedgwick County since that's where the children lived. You live in Reno County. Every Kansas county has different procedures for handling placements in these situations. I'll get back to you on next steps. There will be another hearing at some point for permanent custody. Regardless, it's usually a formality where the parent's wishes are known, the children aren't at risk or in danger, and there are no special needs."

"We don't go to court." The lack of emotion in Job's words matched his stony profile. "It's not our way."

"You'll want legal standing to make decisions about your grandchildren's medical care, and what if the fathers do enter the picture? You'll want to be able to defend your custody. That requires a court hearing."

Job didn't seem convinced, but he nodded. "I'll talk to the bishop about it."

"I have a question." Bobby crossed his arms over his chest. "Does that mean I have to be Amish? No way I'm wearing those clothes."

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A good question. Bobby might only be thinking of the clothes, but Mason knew more about it than his little brother did. Amish was a way of life, but it was also a religion. Mom had taken him to church a few times in the early years, mostly at Easter and Christmas. For all her craziness with booze and men, she still seemed to find comfort in it.

If the kids didn't want to convert to the Amish religion, maybe they would still end up with Mason.

It might be what he wanted, but the same question remained: What was best for them?

