

A  
PICTURE *of*  
LOVE



ZONDERVAN®

# ONE

OCTOBER  
MONTGOMERY, INDIANA

“I THINK HE’S DEAD.” LIZZIE CRINKLED HER NOSE AS SHE eased closer to Gus Owens. She bent at the waist and leaned down to within a few inches of his face. Loose strands of gray hair fell from beneath her prayer covering as she shook her head.

Esther rolled her eyes at her sister and swiped at her own silvery tresses escaping in the cool breeze. “He isn’t dead.”

“Wishful thinking on *mei* part.” Lizzie sighed.

Their grumpy English renter was slumped in a rocking chair on the front porch of his cottage. His gray hair was pulled back in a ponytail, the way he always wore it, and his beard needed grooming. Gus reminded Esther of the Santa Clauses she’d seen in malls, but when the English took their children

A PICTURE OF LOVE

to sit on Santa's lap, the man in the red suit was always jolly and smiling. There was nothing jolly about Gus Owens, and he never smiled.

Gus had rented the cottage for the past ten years, but the only reason he was still there was because of a promise Esther and Lizzie made to their dying mother—that Gus would be allowed to live in the cottage for the rest of his life.

Lizzie straightened and slapped her hands to her hips. Esther's younger sister scowled, deepening the lines of time that feathered in every direction on her face. Those same wrinkles stared back at Esther each morning when she looked in the mirror. And that was where their similarities ended. Esther was several inches taller and a bit stouter than Lizzie, whose frame was much more petite. Esther still had all of her own teeth, crooked as they were. Lizzie boasted a set of straight pearly white dentures—when she actually wore them. They were new and she often shifted them back and forth in her mouth, saying they didn't fit well, despite three trips back to the dentist. He'd said it would just take some time for Lizzie to get used to her new teeth.

"He's breathing." Esther had trekked across the field and past the pond to reach the cottage. Barely visible from the main house, the small home had been on their family's property for as long as Esther could remember. When she and Lizzie were children and it wasn't rented out, the cottage had served as their playhouse.

"You don't think he got into our cough medicine again, do you?" Lizzie's nostrils flared as she glared at Gus.

“*Nee*, I don’t think so.” Esther pulled her black sweater snug, then cleared her throat. “Maybe if you didn’t put so much rum in the honey mixture, he wouldn’t be drawn to it.” She scratched her face, the soft skin covering cheekbones that used to be much higher than they were now.

“I use the same amount *Mamm* used.” Lizzie pulled back one of her small legs and, before Esther could stop her, she kicked Gus in the shin.

“Lizzie!” Esther loved her sister, but sometimes she acted like a child. “We do not kick people!” *Not even Gus.*

When the elderly man still didn’t move, Esther’s chest tightened. She couldn’t rule out the fact that Gus might be drunk. He didn’t make a habit of it, but it had happened before. Not in a long time, though.

“Maybe we need to get him to a doctor.”

“Nah. Ain’t nothing wrong with Gus that a good swift kick in the—” Lizzie pulled her leg back again.

“Stop it!” Esther yelled this time, and Gus opened his eyes just as Lizzie’s foot made contact with his shin again.

“Woman, are you out of your mind?” Gus slowly lifted himself from the chair. He had recently celebrated his seventy-fourth birthday, making him only two years older than Esther. He looked bigger each year—taller, broader, and rounder. He towered over Esther, but since Lizzie was so tiny she looked like a child standing next to him.

“We thought you were drunk or something.” Lizzie straightened her prayer covering and backed away from Gus—Grumpy Gus, as they called him.

“I haven’t drank in years, and you know it.” Gus’s jowls jiggled like small water balloons on either side of his face. “Can’t a fellow just take a nap on his front porch?” He waved a dismissive hand at Lizzie. “Get on back to your house and leave me alone.”

Esther had been playing referee between Lizzie and Gus since before their mother died four years ago. The man was unpleasant to most everyone, but he and Lizzie butted heads the most. Gus had always treated their mother with respect when she was alive. Maybe because he needed a place to live and their mother didn’t charge him much to rent the cottage. Esther wished Gus didn’t know about the promise they’d made her. He seemed to think he could treat her and Lizzie any way he wanted. Some days he was downright nasty. Other times Esther swore she saw a tiny glimpse of what Gus might have been like at another time—almost kind.

“We just came to tell you that we have overnight guests coming.” Lizzie’s mouth thinned with displeasure. “So don’t come calling for anything.”

Gus groaned as he stretched and yawned. “I ain’t got no business at your place.” He grinned before he winked at Lizzie. “I think you just make up excuses to come see me.”

Esther covered her mouth with her hand, attempting to stifle a giggle. Lizzie was sure to go off on him now.

Lizzie clenched her fists at her sides, her nostrils flaring. She opened her mouth to say something, but slammed it shut. After staring at her bare feet for a few seconds, she slowly lifted her chin and stretched to appear taller.

“The Good Lord is punishing me for something.” She shook her head again. “Because not a day goes by that you don’t irritate the daylights out of me.” Spinning on her heels, she marched down the porch steps.

“You gonna head over to John and Mary’s place now?” Gus had a deep voice, and whether he was angry or not—and he was usually angry—his voice had an air of authority that didn’t fit the man he was. “You gonna go kick them too?”

John and Mary Lapp had moved to Montgomery for a job opportunity recently and were renting the third house on the property. They were a sweet young couple who had been married for five years. They stayed to themselves a lot, but they waved and were friendly to guests who came to stay at the main house. The same couldn’t be said about Gus. Folks would wave or call out a pleasant greeting if Gus was on the porch and awake. He would wave them off, grumbling as he stood up, then he’d slam the door when he went in the house. It wasn’t the impression Esther and Lizzie wanted for their guests.

Lizzie didn’t answer as she continued walking back to the main house.

“Have a *gut* evening, Gus.” Esther had learned that it was better not to engage Gus in conversation, but she refused to let her manners slip just because he didn’t have any.

Growling, Gus went inside the house and slammed the door.

Esther followed the worn path back to the house she and Lizzie had grown up in. A few months ago they’d turned the hundred-year-old home into a bed and breakfast. Business was slow so far, but word was spreading. Some of their

patrons were Amish folks visiting friends or relatives. Others were English tourists who said they wanted to “live like the Amish.” Esther hoped the cooler temperatures October brought would also bring more guests. July and August had been unusually hot, and while the English might think they want to live like the Amish, they don’t want to live without air conditioning.

Esther didn’t see what all the fuss was about with outsiders showing such an interest in the way they lived. But Lizzie insisted Montgomery was slowly bringing in more and more tourists.

As Esther walked up the porch steps, she wondered if they’d ever have much business. Turning the house into a bed and breakfast hadn’t been about the money. After their mother died, the home sat vacant for almost four years. They paid a caretaker who tended to the house and yard since they hadn’t been able to face selling it. They both thought Gus should do the work, but he insisted he had a bad back that prevented him from strenuous activity. In truth, the man was just lazy. Esther had seen him carry huge armfuls of chopped wood into his house for the fireplace. His back seemed just fine when it suited his own needs.

But when Esther’s and Lizzie’s husbands died within a few months of each other last year, they sold their houses and moved back into their family home. It was Lizzie’s idea to have the house remodeled to accommodate guests.

Esther shared her sister’s passion for the project. It provided a reprieve from their grief—and opportunities to play

matchmaker. Single Amish visitors from other communities could be introduced to the unattached young people in Montgomery, which was too small to offer many options for courting. Esther and Lizzie had been known to dabble in people's love lives, but now it was like having a full-time job, a sense of purpose again. If there was a downside, it was Grumpy Gus. He hadn't been happy when the renovations started, or when the sisters moved back into the house. Esther and Lizzie could have done without Gus on the property too.

When the caretaker was no longer physically able to tend the yard or house, Esther and Lizzie began looking for help. Naomi Byler applied for the position of housekeeper and cook, and Esther and Lizzie were excited for her to live in the spare room they'd set up for such a person.

More importantly, Naomi was a young woman nursing a broken heart and had sworn off men. Esther and her sister couldn't let that continue. Lizzie was as crazy as a rabid coyote and often took things to the extreme, but Esther tolerated her sister's over-the-top antics. Sometimes young people just needed a little coaxing to find true love.

The sisters had each lived their own love stories. Esther was married to her beloved Joe Zook for fifty-two years before he passed. Lizzie had shared her life with Rueben Glick for fifty-one years.

No one should miss out on the blessing of true love. Especially Naomi Byler.



A PICTURE OF LOVE

After the dining room table was set for four, Naomi stood back and eyed each place setting. An Amish woman and her son from Ohio were coming to town for a wedding and staying through Sunday, and two Englisch ladies had left a message saying they would like a room for this evening only. The bishop allowed phones for business purposes, but he preferred the devices be installed away from the house. Esther and Lizzie kept their telephone and answering machine in the barn, but it was the only electricity in use on the entire eighty acres.

Naomi went back to the kitchen just as Esther and Lizzie came into the house. After dropping their shoes by the front door, the women crossed through the living area and met Naomi in the kitchen.

“Everything is ready,” Naomi said. “The pot roast and vegetables are keeping warm in the oven, along with a loaf of bread. And there is a fresh pitcher of tea on the counter, next to the shoofly pie I made earlier in the day.”

“Everything looks *gut*, Naomi. *Danki*.” Esther folded her hands in front of her. “I suspect our guests will be hungry after their travels, but we’ll give them the option to get unpacked and settled before they eat, or vice versa.”

Lizzie’s lips were puckered with annoyance, an expression that surfaced any time she’d been around Gus. She walked over to a cabinet, lifted up on her toes, and began to inspect the medications they kept on hand. She pulled out the homemade cough syrup and held it up to the window.

“Unless one of you developed a cough and chugged a third of this bottle before I got up this morning, Gus has been up to

no good.” Her glare ping-ponged between Esther and Naomi, who each shook their heads.

Esther sighed. “Lizzie, I think we would have heard Gus come into the *haus*, and he surely doesn’t get moving in the morning until well after sunrise. Someone is usually up here by five o’clock. He’s not nipping on the cough syrup.”

“If you say so.” Lizzie put the bottle back in the cabinet and turned to lean against the counter. She wiggled her teeth back and forth in her mouth a few times, eventually spitting them out in her hand. “Stupid teeth.”

Naomi stifled a grin. Esther was always calm, predictable, and polite. Lizzie was the complete opposite. Naomi had known the women all her life, and she loved them both. They’d been like family since her parents died five years ago. Esther and Lizzie had been married to wonderful men who had also embraced Naomi like a daughter or granddaughter until their deaths. Maybe they had endeared themselves to Naomi because neither couple had been able to have children of their own. The offer to work at the inn and live with Esther and Lizzie couldn’t have come at a better time. Naomi’s fiancé had suddenly broken off their engagement and left town four months ago.

“Lizzie, please keep your teeth in your mouth when our guests arrive.” Esther frowned as she reached for jars of chow-chow and jam from the refrigerator, which reminded Naomi that she needed to check how much propane was left in the tank. “And keep your tongue in check.”

“I know, I know.” Lizzie tapped her bare foot as she spoke with a lisp. “No telling inappropriate stories. No making fun of

what the two *Englisch* women might be wearing. No sarcasm when they ask about our way of life. No telling them to mind their own business. And no asking the Amish woman and her *sohn* if they like their bishop, then sharing all the reasons why I don't like our bishop." She folded her arms across her chest. "Did I miss anything?"

Esther smiled at her sister as she headed to the dining room with the jams. "Nee, I believe you've got it."

Naomi turned away from Lizzie and smiled to herself as she recalled how all the things Lizzie listed had happened at some point over the past few months. Each time Esther reprimanded Lizzie for her behavior, she promised to do better next time. Naomi knew Lizzie didn't mean to lie, but those promises were usually forgotten.

Naomi could tell Lizzie made Esther nervous, but Naomi found the younger of the sisters to be a welcome distraction from the sadness that had wrapped around her. And to Lizzie's credit, she'd been kind and caring to a lot of their guests, especially those who had recently lost a loved one. It was as if God placed the words in Lizzie's mind, told her exactly what to say to help someone who was grieving. Esther had once mentioned that it was worth the trade-off. If Lizzie helped one person for every person she'd angered, how could Esther forbid her to interact with their guests? Naomi wished God would give Lizzie His wisdom regarding her own situation—that He'd tell Lizzie, or someone, how Naomi would ever recover from her breakup with Thomas.

They heard a car pull into the driveway, and Esther made

her way to the window. “It’s Anna Mae Lantz and her son, Amos. They’re here for Suzanne and Isaiah’s wedding on Thursday.”

Lizzie shuffled to the window and pressed her nose to the glass. “We don’t know them, do we?”

“*Nee*. Distant cousins of Isaiah’s, I think. Anna Mae told me on the phone that they’d be hiring a driver to pick them up from the bus station. They’re planning to stay through the weekend.”

Lizzie gasped before hurriedly placing her teeth back in her mouth. “Her *sohn* is a grown man. Look how handsome he is.” She nudged Esther, then looked over her shoulder and smiled at Naomi.

*Oh no*. Naomi had no interest in a romantic relationship. She’d never love anyone the way she loved Thomas, but that didn’t stop Esther and Lizzie from constantly trying to play matchmaker for her. Lizzie had even told Naomi she was practically an old maid at twenty-five. Their people married young, sometimes as young as seventeen or eighteen, but Naomi didn’t think she should be labeled an old maid just yet. Maybe in a few years she would have to accept the title since she had no plans to marry anyone else. Unless it was Thomas, returning home to tell her he’d just had cold feet and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Naomi was losing hope that was going to happen. But what haunted her most was that she didn’t understand why he’d left her.

Lizzie and Esther were both widows, and it was unfortunate that neither woman had been able to have a child. They’d

already told Naomi they were bequeathing their property to her and that they considered her their granddaughter.

Naomi was honored, humbled, and incredibly grateful. Otherwise, as a single orphan, she wasn't sure how she would continue to support herself. The little bit of money her parents had left after the accident was long gone. That small chunk of cash and funds from the sale of their family home had been spent paying creditors Naomi hadn't even known about. Financially and emotionally, Esther and Lizzie's timing with a job couldn't have been more perfect. She'd only had to stay with her cousin for a week before Esther extended the offer. Her cousin had eight children in three bedrooms, so it was already a tight squeeze without Naomi, and she didn't know the family well. They lived in Orleans, a town too far to travel to by buggy.

Someday Naomi would be an old spinster running The Peony Inn. She would never change the name in honor of Lizzie and Esther. The sisters had chosen the name because the peony is the state flower of Indiana, and it was also their mother's favorite.

At least they had their memories of long, happy marriages to reflect on. And they'd been blessed to have their mother until she passed a few years ago at ninety-four. Naomi wondered what she would have to reflect on when she was their age.



Amos helped his mother out of the car, then paid the driver, who'd already gotten their two suitcases out of the trunk.

“This is a lovely property, *ya?*” Anna Mae turned to Amos and smiled. “I’m excited to see *mei* cousins I haven’t seen in years. You’ve never even met some of them.”

Amos forced a smile and nodded. He could have done without this trip, but his mother insisted a change of scenery would do him good. His two brothers worked several different jobs and hadn’t been at them long enough to earn vacation time. Amos owned a small construction company that gave him the flexibility to take off when he needed to. His father’s back problems would have made a trip like this difficult. Amos just wished the event were anything other than a wedding.

When they reached the porch, his mother knocked on the door, and an older woman pushed open the screen door. She was almost as tall as Amos, probably pushing six feet.

“Welcome to The Peony Inn. I’m Esther.” She stepped aside, then motioned for them to follow her toward the stairs. “You have the two rooms at the end of the hall on the right. Supper will be served in about thirty minutes, or we are happy to keep it warm in the oven until you’re ready.”

“I think we are ready to eat. *Danki,*” his mother said. “It smells delicious.”

Amos was glad to hear his mother’s response. His stomach had been rumbling for hours.

He followed his mother as they crossed through a spacious living room. It was simply furnished with two tan couches, a couple of rocking chairs, and an oak coffee table. There was a large hutch against one wall, but it was the fireplace that stole his breath. It was enormous and enclosed in white rock with

a mantel that spanned its entirety. He wondered if they would have a fire later as the temperature cooled down. His boots clicked against the wood floor as he followed his mother up the stairs. At home they dropped their shoes by the door, but Esther hadn't said anything or given them time to do so.

He set his mother's red suitcase just inside the first room, a no-frills space with one exception. The quilt on the bed was bursting with enough color that it practically reflected the sunrays streaming into the room. There was a small writing desk and chair, the traditional hooks on the wall for hanging clothes, and a gas heater in the corner. A bookshelf graced one wall, filled with a variety of reading options. Even in its simplicity, the room was charming. Lace doilies sat atop the desk and nightstand, and the lanterns gleamed as if freshly polished.

"This is perfect," his mother said as she took in her surroundings. Amos knew she'd been looking forward to this trip for months.

He carted his own suitcase to the next room. The setup was similar, except there was a trunk propped open in the corner next to a rocking chair, instead of a bookshelf like in the other room. The weathered trunk held blankets, throw pillows, and a few books tucked to the side. For a few long moments, he eyed the beautifully crafted wedding quilt. The pastel colors would have a calming effect on most people. For Amos, it was just another reminder of all he'd lost.

His mother peeked into the room. "Are you ready to head downstairs?"

Amos nodded. “*Ya*, I am.” The alluring aroma would be a welcomed reprieve for his hunger pains.

The same woman—Esther—met them at the bottom of the stairs and directed them through the living room and into a large dining room. Two middle-aged English women were already seated at the dining table set for four, although the large oak table could have easily accommodated twelve guests. A small woman, in comparison to Esther, introduced herself as Lizzie, Esther’s sister. She began filling glasses of tea just as a much younger woman entered the room.

Amos locked eyes with her and couldn’t seem to look away. She was beautiful with dark brown hair and big doe eyes that reeled him in like a fish on a hook. He couldn’t remember a woman looking at him like that in a long time, nor had he relished the thought of anyone doing so.

His reasons for staring at her went beyond her outward beauty. It was her eyes—the gateway to the soul, he’d heard—and this woman seemed to be looking right through him. What did she see? The truth?

Amos recognized her expression of an internal pain that was hard to hide. Whatever her story was, she suffered from the same ailment as Amos.

A broken heart.

## TWO

NAOMI FORCED HERSELF TO LOOK AWAY FROM THEIR MALE guest. Her heart had briefly flipped when she laid eyes on him, a reaction she hadn't experienced since her breakup with Thomas. She wouldn't be human if she didn't notice the Nordic blue of his eyes, the way his dark hair framed a square jawline, and his broad shoulders, proof of a man who did physical work. His fading summer tan shone on his face, but that wasn't all she could see. There was pain in the lines that ran across his forehead, and somehow she sensed a raw hurt that hadn't healed. Or maybe she was completely off the mark because of her own situation.

Most of the available men in their small district, and even some from surrounding communities, had tried to court Naomi since Thomas had left. Each time she politely declined. She had no interest in pursuing a relationship with anyone.

Thomas had stolen her heart like a thief who took a part of her—maybe all of her—when he'd broken off their engagement and left town.

Amos Lantz possibly found her attractive, but this man wasn't in the market for love either. And unless she was wrong, that meant she wouldn't have to put up with his pursuit of her affections. He felt safe, even if it was due to a loss in his life. Such suffering tended to recognize company.

Naomi stood in the corner of the dining room in case anyone needed a tea glass refilled. Esther fielded questions from the two English women, which included the usual inquiries from outsiders. Since Lizzie had been instructed to behave, she stood quietly beside her sister. Naomi was glad to see she had her teeth in this evening.

"But if a person hasn't been baptized, then they can't be shunned, right?" One of the English women, a plump woman wearing too much makeup, posed the question to Amos's mother, Anna Mae, who nodded.

"*Ya*, that's correct," Esther injected so Anna Mae could finish chewing her food.

From there Esther suggested several places for the women to visit since they wanted to do some sightseeing.

"Stop 'N Sea is run by Amish folks." Esther folded her hands in front of her. "They have a variety of things on the menu, but they are most popular for their hot fish sandwiches."

Esther told them about other eateries and shops in the area. Thankfully Lizzie remained quiet. Naomi loved both the women equally, but Lizzie's unpredictable behavior had

made for some interesting dining experiences in the past. Particularly when an English family had shown up with their fifteen-year-old daughter wearing very short pants and a low-cut sleeveless blouse. Lizzie brought the girl's attire to her attention right away, telling her that she looked like a walking advertisement for— Luckily Lizzie had stopped mid-sentence, but the damage was done. The mother defended her daughter, saying it was a hundred degrees in the house. Lizzie had responded by saying, "It's July and you're staying in an Amish *haus*. What did you expect?" That couple and their daughter left first thing the following morning.

Naomi drifted in and out of the conversation, hearing bits and pieces as she sneaked glances at Amos. The more she tried to feel something other than physical attraction for this handsome fellow, the more defeated she felt. She didn't have even the tiniest interest in getting to know him, but how nice it would be to entertain the possibility of love again. He was handsome, and though he barely smiled, when he did, the ground probably shook beneath most women's feet. Not Naomi's. Without a beard, he was obviously unmarried. Why?

*It doesn't matter.* Thomas had been her one true love. She'd waited for years until she was old enough to date. Her father had a strict rule against dating before she turned eighteen. Naomi was an only child and thought the rule was unfair. Most girls were allowed to date when they turned sixteen. Thomas was three years older than Naomi. He'd found someone to court before she turned eighteen. She dated a few other young men, but no one she could imagine sharing her life with. When

Thomas broke things off with his girlfriend, Naomi's heart had sizzled with the prospect that maybe he would ask her out. And he did. After six months he proposed. Then he left her broken, like scattered pieces of a life she'd never have an opportunity to live.

Later, after the kitchen was cleaned, Naomi walked onto the porch to feel the crisp fall air as she eyed the orange-and-yellow hues settling in around the house. October was her favorite month. The heat of summer was past, and the busyness of the holidays hadn't arrived yet. It was a peaceful time of year since most crops had been harvested, and it was also beautiful. There were a few cornfields—like the one behind their pond—where the stalks still stretched high.

Someone cleared his throat behind her, and she jumped as she swiveled to face him. “*Ach*, I'm sorry. I didn't see you.”

Amos sat alone in one of six white rocking chairs on the front porch.

“Can I get you anything?” Again she hoped for a tinge of excitement, a swirl in her stomach, or the nervousness of being in the presence of someone she found incredibly attractive. *Still nothing.*

“*Nee*, I'm just enjoying the view.” He grinned, and for a moment Naomi wondered if he was talking about her, but he pointed to the hill on the other side of the pond. “That's quite a display of color.”

“*Ya, ya*. It's a lovely time of year.” Naomi wanted to know if her speculations about this man were right. She was sure Esther and Lizzie were already scheming ways to set her up

with him. If Naomi knew Amos's sad story, she could halt the sisters' efforts.

"May I join you?" She pointed to one of the rocking chairs, two spots down from where he was sitting.

He nodded. "Ya, sure."

Naomi wasn't good at small talk, and now that she had an opportunity to ask him why he looked so sad, she realized how nosy and inappropriate that would be.

"Are Esther and Lizzie your aunts, or is one of them your *grossmamma*?" He twisted slightly in the rocking chair to face her.

"Nee, we aren't blood related, but I still think of them as family. *Mei* parents died five years ago." Naomi paused, pushing away the images of the crushed buggy next to a blue car that she'd seen when she'd arrived at the scene. "It was an accident. They were hit and killed instantly by an oncoming car. The driver is actually in jail." Although that hadn't done anything to quell the pain she'd suffered at the time, it saddened her that a young woman, who was only nineteen at the time, would spend a long time in prison because she'd been drinking and driving. That woman's life had been taken from her as well, but at her own doing.

Amos didn't take his eyes off her. "I'm so sorry."

She could tell by that single expression, the way he reacted with such sincerity, that the loss he'd suffered was the passing of a loved one.

"*Danki*," she said as she kept her eyes fused with his. "It was five years ago, and I miss them every day, but time does

lessen the pain. The hurt doesn't feel as raw and unmanageable now. I'm able to reflect on the *gut* memories more often." She didn't understand how, though time had lessened the blow of her parents' death, she couldn't shed her sorrow about Thomas leaving. If anything, it just got worse as the days went by. She had to hope that time would eventually make a difference and open her heart to love again. But hope had very little room to breathe, not much room to grow, and was constantly snuffed out by doubt and self-pity.

"I understand that type of loss." He finally pulled his eyes from hers and stared somewhere into the distance, maybe eyeing the colorful foliage again. But still lost somewhere. "I was engaged to be married until *mei* fiancée was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer and died almost a year ago."

Naomi wasn't sure what to say. She was feeling sorry for herself daily because Thomas had left her. The woman this man loved had died. "I'm sorry for your loss," she said, barely above a whisper.

"*Danki.*" His eyes found their way back to the distant place he must retreat to when memories so unbearably tragic threatened to overtake him. Then he turned back to her. "Somehow I knew you were in mourning as well." He shrugged. "I'm not sure how, but I suspected you had gone through a difficult time."

She tried to smile. "You picked up on that even though we just met?" It was an ironic thing to say since she'd read the sorrow in his expression too.

"I was hoping I was wrong." He smiled a little, sympathetically, and Naomi thought she needed to fess up.

“In a way, you were wrong.” She swallowed hard as she stared at her bare feet for a few seconds before looking back at him. “Please understand how much I loved *mei* parents. But it was five years ago, and over time, I’ve learned to function again.” She took a deep breath. “I will always miss them, but the source of *mei* current pain is more recent. I feel badly even saying anything because it’s not nearly as tragic as what you’ve been through.” The weight of his pain pressed down on her shoulders. At least Thomas hadn’t died.



Amos struggled to read her expression, but it had shifted and changed so much in a matter of minutes that he was confused. He waited for her to go on.

“*Mei* sadness stems from a bad breakup.” She lowered her head again. “I know that’s not like a death, but . . .” She blinked, and Amos hoped she didn’t cry. If she did he’d have no choice but to pull her into his arms, or comfort her in some way, and she might mistake his kindness as something other than sympathy. “We were engaged.” She finally looked up at him, and there were tears in the corners of her eyes.

“I suspect it felt like a death in much the same way,” he said, unsure if that was true or not. He’d had breakups before, but nothing could have prepared him for Sarah’s death.

Naomi looked at him as her jaw dropped briefly. “You are the first person who has ever said that to me. Again, your situation must be so much worse, but I appreciate that you do

understand how I feel.” She paused, biting her lip. “In so many ways, I do feel like he died.”

But he didn’t die, so maybe there was hope for her. “Is there any chance of a reconciliation?”

She shook her head vigorously, her face drawn into another confusing expression that portrayed a mixture of hurt and anger. “*Nee*. I don’t think so. He broke off our engagement and left town.” She pressed her lips together, and her eyes seemed to fill more. *Please don’t cry*. “I feel like he took a part of me with him, a slice of *mei* heart that I’ll never get back, and I don’t ever want to feel that way again. I don’t want to ever fall in *lieb* again.”

Now she was speaking his language. “Nor do I.”

They sat quietly for a while. This woman was convicted in her desire to never fall in love again. It was sad since she was incredibly beautiful and seemed like a nice person. But he was relieved that she wouldn’t be flirting with him. Even as he had the thought, he realized how arrogant it sounded. But he was so tired of people trying to fix him up with their eligible friends, and women bringing pies and casseroles in hopes Amos would want to court them. No one wanted to talk about how horrible he still felt. As a man he felt he should keep those emotions inside. But sometimes he wanted to talk to someone other than God. He’d relied heavily on the Lord to get him through that difficult time, but not long after Sarah’s funeral, friends stopped mentioning her name. He wanted to shout to the world sometimes that she had existed, that she’d been real, the only person he’d ever loved, a life not to be forgotten but remembered.

“Do you want to take a walk?” He quickly jerked his head

in her direction. “This is not me coming on to you. This is me feeling very grateful that I find you so easy to talk to about a subject we both seem to understand.”

She smiled a little. He probably shouldn’t have said that, but how could they be friendly with each other over the next few days unless Amos laid his cards on the table? No pretenses. No prospect of romance.

“No one ever wants to talk about it.” She lifted her shoulders and lowered them slowly. “Sometimes I want to talk. But I must warn you . . . I can be fairly unpleasant when I do. Lots of self-pity.” She chuckled a little. “No wonder no one wants to listen.”

Amos smiled. There was something very real about this woman. “Did I see a pond on the back of the property when we were driving in? I bet the view of the sunset is wonderful. And I can deal with your self-pity as long as you don’t get mad and punch me or something.”

She laughed. “I promise not to hit you.”

“Okay, then.” He stood, and so did she.

“Just let me put on *mei* shoes.” She scuttled to the other end of the porch and slipped on a pair of black loafers.

Then they set out across the front yard and toward the setting sun.



Esther stood at the window with Lizzie, watching Naomi and Amos walk across the yard toward the pond.

“Going on a walk doesn’t necessarily mean anything, Lizzie.” Esther tried to tame her sister’s overly optimistic opinion. From the time she saw Naomi and Amos looking at each other in the dining room, Lizzie had them married off.

“Don’t be so negative.” Lizzie spit her teeth in her hand and pressed her nose to the glass. “Didn’t you notice how handsome that fellow is? If anyone can mend Naomi’s broken heart, it’s him.”

“Looks aren’t everything, and you know that.” Esther prayed for Naomi every day, that the girl would find love again. “You know I love a *gut* love story as much as you do, but we don’t know a thing about that man.”

“Well, here comes someone who does,” Lizzie said in a whisper as she nodded toward the stairs. The two English women had gone out after supper, so it could only be Anna Mae.

“*Wie bischt*,” Lizzie said before she dropped her teeth, picked them up quickly, and forced them back into place.

Esther cringed, glad Naomi had swept the wood floors before their guests arrived.

“Would you like to join us for *kaffi* and shoofly pie?” Lizzie attempted to smile, but she obviously didn’t have her teeth in correctly again, which gave her a lopsided smile that was comical. Thankfully Anna Mae was gracious and didn’t stare.

“I don’t think I can eat one more bite of food. Supper was wonderful, and I overdid it.” Still smiling, she said, “But *kaffi* would be nice.”

Lizzie motioned for her to follow them into the kitchen

where they had a small table and four chairs. It was where she, Esther, and Naomi ate most of their meals. The dining room was for guests and decorated fancier than anywhere else in the house. Naomi had a knack for arranging lovely place settings. Their kitchen was cozy and functional, and Esther felt sure Anna Mae would feel comfortable.

After they were seated and each had a cup of coffee, Lizzie sliced herself a large piece of pie. Like Anna Mae, Esther couldn't eat another bite. She didn't understand how Lizzie stayed so tiny. The woman ate all the time.

"Your *sohn* is a fine-looking fellow." Esther opened the conversation since Lizzie was shoveling pie into her mouth as if she hadn't just eaten a huge meal.

"*Danki.*" Anna Mae took a sip of coffee, then circled the rim of the cup with her finger. "He's had a hard time." She glanced at Esther, then back down at her cup as she frowned. "His fiancée died of cancer about a year ago, and the boy can't seem to get over it." She paused before she looked at Esther again. "Sarah was a wonderful young woman, and he loved her so much. But unfortunately, he's cut himself off from available women and says he will never love anyone but Sarah." She shook her head. "His *daed* and I are hoping time will heal his heart. But for now, he just isn't interested in a romantic relationship."

Lizzie stopped chewing and shook her head. Esther shared her sister's disappointment. "I will pray for his heart to mend," she said. "Our Naomi is going through a similar situation. She was also engaged until her fiancé broke up with her and left

our community. Naomi isn't blood-related to us, but we think of her like a *dochter*, more like *grossdochter*, I suppose. And we hate to see her so sad all the time."

Anna Mae glanced out the kitchen window and the hint of a smile played on her lips. "Naomi is lovely. Perhaps there is a friendship brewing at the very least. It's not like Amos to take off on a walk like that with a woman. I'm afraid that back home he's practically stalked by women who consider him quite a catch."

Esther caught the pride in Anna Mae's statement, but she had to admit, if the man was half as nice as he was attractive, she could understand him having a lot of female admirers.

"Naomi is as beautiful on the inside as she is on the outside." Lizzie had finished her pie, wiped her mouth, and managed to get her teeth straight. "It's a shame you and your *sohn* won't be here longer than a few days. Maybe those two would get to know each other and . . ." Lizzie raised both eyebrows and smiled.

Anna Mae blinked her eyes dreamily. "*Ach*, how I would love for Amos to find love again." She shook her head. "But I just don't see it happening. At least not any time soon." Smiling at Lizzie, she said, "But I wish we could stay longer, too, just to give them a chance and see what happens."

"Then stay." Lizzie straightened in her chair, grinning. "We won't charge you for any extra days," she said in a whisper, almost as if she was trying to keep Esther from hearing, even though she was right across the table.

"*Nee*, I couldn't do that. If we stay longer, I will pay."

Anna Mae spoke with enthusiasm, and hope found its way into Esther's heart as well.

"Please stay as long as you'd like." Esther glanced out the window. The young people were out of sight.

Lizzie pressed her palms together and lightly clapped her hands. "Watching the sunset is romantic."

Anna Mae nodded in agreement. "Ya, it is. Even if those two don't take to each other, I'd love to spend more time with *mei* family I haven't seen in a long time."

Esther was afraid to be too hopeful. But fear blocked the voice of God and was never a good emotion to cart around. She would try to pray her doubts away. It sounded like she and Lizzie had an ally, someone equally as interested in playing matchmaker. But then Anna Mae frowned.

"I'm afraid Amos won't want to stay longer than we agreed on. He owns his own construction company, and it's a slow time of year for him. I could only get him to commit to the trip if we returned Sunday." Anna Mae sipped her coffee. "It's a shame. Naomi seems like a lovely *maedel*. But, in truth, Amos just isn't ready yet."

Esther's hope fizzled, but Lizzie strummed her fingers on the table, lips pressed together and eyebrows drawn inward. Lizzie's hope hadn't floundered one bit. If anything, she was already plotting ways to get the young couple together. Esther admired her sister's determination, but Anna Mae knew her son. And she sounded certain he wasn't ready for love. Still, Lizzie's compassion for someone who had lost a loved one was always well received. Maybe she could help Amos with

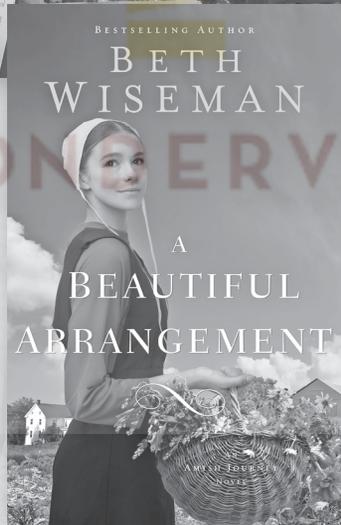
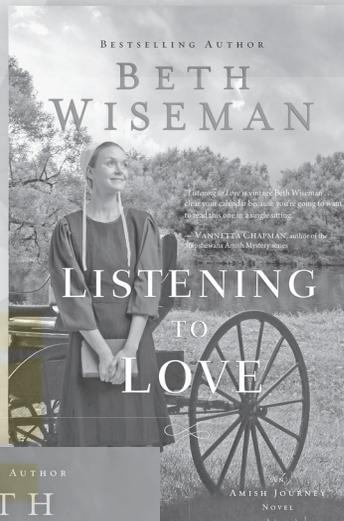
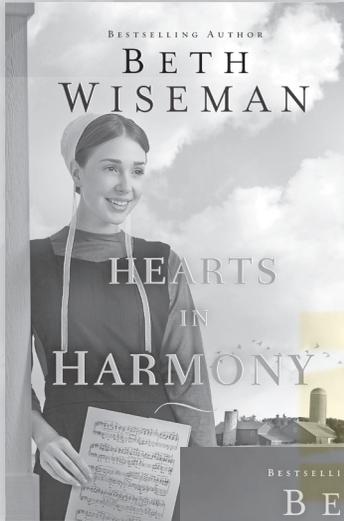
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his healing process. That could be God's only plan for Amos right now. But Esther was going to try to keep her cup half full with hope that maybe a romance was on the horizon as well.



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BESTSELLING AND AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR Beth Wiseman has sold over two million books. She is the recipient of the coveted Holt Medallion, is a two-time Carol Award winner, and has won the Inspirational Reader's Choice Award three times. Her books have been on various bestseller lists, including CBD, CBA, ECPA, and *Publishers Weekly*. Beth and her husband are empty nesters enjoying country life in south-central Texas.



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